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Tesis Doctoral

The Myth of U.S. Southern Poor Whites/“White Trash”:
Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Debunking the
Stigma.

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Realizada bajo la tutorización de DRA. ROSARIO ARIAS DOBLAS y dirección de DR. JUAN ANTONIO PERLES ROCHEL Y DRA. SILVIA CASTRO BORREGO (si tuviera varios directores deberá hacer constar el nombre de todos)

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HACEN CONSTAR

Que CONCEPCIÓN PARRONDO CARRETERO es estudiante de doctorado del Programa de Doctorado "Lingüística, Literatura y Traducción", con matrícula activa, y que ha realizado bajo dirección conjunta de los doctores Juan Antonio Perles Rochel Y Silvia Castro Borrego, la Tesis Doctoral titulada

The Myth of U.S. Southern Poor Whites/"White Trash": Dorothy Allison's Literary Contribution to Debunking the Stigma.

Revisado el presente trabajo se estima que reúne los requisitos establecidos según la normativa vigente. Por lo tanto, **SE AUTORIZA** la admisión a trámite y defensa pública de esta Tesis Doctoral para optar al grado de Doctor en la Universidad de Málaga.

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Resumen

Partiendo de la creencia popular estadounidense que asocia a la raza blanca con conceptos de superioridad, dominación y represión, este trabajo de investigación tiene como una de sus metas el desmentir que el término “blanco” es inequívoca y exclusivamente sinónimo de riqueza, poder e influencia. A través de, primero, un estudio de la historia americana revisada y corregida en la década de los ochenta; en segundo lugar, de la exploración de nuevas áreas de investigación en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales, y, por último, de la lectura de obras y ensayos académicos y literarios, esta tesis defiende la existencia de un grupo social blanco al que nunca se le ha considerado hegemónico, ni mucho menos poderoso, sino todo lo contrario: a dicho grupo se le ha calificado de inferior, siendo sus miembros relegados a los márgenes de la sociedad en todos sus aspectos. Los blancos pobres de América constituyen un colectivo oprimido, manipulado y estigmatizado por los suyos, una clase que hasta hace muy poco había sido ignorada, abandonada y objeto de desprecio social.

La segunda meta de este trabajo estriba en la necesidad de resaltar la “opresión del blanco por el blanco” en el ámbito académico literario. Para ello, se ha elegido, a modo ilustrativo, como objeto de análisis a la figura de una escritora blanca nacida en la pobreza cuya literatura es testimonio y denuncia de la opresión de los blancos pobres, también conocidos como “basura blanca”. Dorothy Allison es una activista que cambió las manifestaciones, las sentadas, los mítines y congresos de la segunda ola del feminismo por la pluma con la intención de dejar por escrito una huella aún más profunda en las mentes del ciudadano medio americano. Esta tesis estudia y analiza la obra literaria de Dorothy Allison explicando su estilo, intenciones y propuestas de una identidad “blanca y pobre” reconstruida, renovada y, sobre todo, digna de una clase social que ha sufrido y

aun sufre el estigma de ser considerada la “basura” de la sociedad. En el examen de la obra de dicha escritora se presentan sus trabajos que, aunque escasos, han servido para abrir paso a las obras de otros autores de su misma condición. Se analizan así su colección de poemas, sus ensayos, una memoria que recoge pensamientos sobre su clase, una colección de relatos cortos representativos de su grupo y dos novelas en las que se vislumbran las propuestas de Allison para la renovación de una subjetividad que no ha de ser temida, desdeñada o despojada de sus derechos, sino que se muestra humana cuyos sentimientos, padecimientos y desigualdad no han de subestimarse. Haciendo admirable uso de la narrativa de ficción, las novelas de la escritora revelan personajes (en su mayoría femeninos) dispuestos a luchar contra el estigma mediante un proceso de identificación personal por el que aspirar a una subjetividad propia que no esté supeditada al yugo de la cultura popular.

Este proyecto nace igualmente de un esfuerzo investigador hecho realidad mediante la publicación de tres artículos que proyectan en primer lugar, una visión general de la obra literaria de Dorothy Allison, destacando tanto sus logros literarios como sus obstáculos a la hora de escribir acerca de su clase; en segundo lugar, una reflexión sobre la búsqueda de una identidad renovada en la figura de la joven protagonista de la primera novela de Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) cuya base se encuentra en los postulados teóricos sobre la identidad de Satya Mohanty y Brent Henze, entre otros; y por último, un estudio crítico literario de la reconstrucción de la identidad de la “basura blanca”, esta vez centrado en la figura de la madre protagonista de *Cavedweller* (1998), la segunda novela de Allison, inspirado en las construcciones teórico-prácticas sobre la interseccionalidad de Leslie McCall.

Cabe destacar que la elección de la opresión de los blancos pobres y el posterior análisis de la denuncia de la misma por parte de Dorothy Allison, como tema para este proyecto

investigador, se debe a que, en los últimos años y más concretamente durante las elecciones presidenciales del año 2016, la “basura blanca” ha vuelto a cobrar actualidad. En el año 2016, la lucha entre la “hegemonía blanca” y los grupos minoritarios pusieron de manifiesto, una vez más, las diferencias entre los ciudadanos estadounidenses basadas en la discriminación de clase, raza, género y orientación sexual. En esos días de incertidumbre política e ideológica, la pobreza blanca volvió a hacerse visible no en círculos específicos, sino en la totalidad de la sociedad americana que ya empezaba a cuestionar el porqué del estigma hacia este grupo. Dicha problemática prevalece hoy, por lo que el testimonio escrito de autores como Dorothy Allison, quienes en la década de los años ochenta reivindicaron el derecho de igualdad de los blancos condenados al ostracismo, cobra vigor en el ámbito académico nacional e internacional.

Referente al estigma y mito de la “basura blanca”, el capítulo segundo de esta tesis, titulado “ Approaches and Methodology”, propone estudiar la tergiversación social de la identidad blanca y pobre desde tres perspectivas: la primera se sustenta, como se ha señalado previamente, en la historia revisada de los EE.UU., llevada a cabo en el último tercio del siglo XX, en la que se reconoce la presencia subyugada y subalterna de la pobreza blanca, un hecho ignorado hasta entonces en los libros de historia. Debido a que el término de “basura blanca” es intrínsecamente contradictorio con las nociones tradicionales del mismo—léase, blanco como sinónimo de dominación—, la segunda perspectiva de este estudio sienta sus bases en los postulados de un campo académico (“whiteness studies”) perteneciente al área de las ciencias sociales. Dado que la disciplina de “whiteness studies” analiza la opresión blanca por su misma clase, se refuta la identificación del término “blanco” como símbolo de poder y opresión exclusivamente sobre otros grupos “no blancos”. En tercer lugar, este trabajo adopta una perspectiva literaria con el fin de examinar la ausencia casi total de personajes blancos pobres principales o protagonistas en la

tradición literaria del sur de los EE.UU., cuyos textos hasta mediados del siglo XX habían ignorado a la “basura blanca” como parte constituyente de la cultura del sur.¹ Dicho examen consta de un análisis comparativo entre las representaciones literarias de un mítico Sur², que prevalecieron desde el fin de la Guerra Civil hasta la década de los años sesenta, y otras representaciones más realistas y sinceras que, en la década de los ochenta, comenzaban a incorporar a la pobreza blanca en su ficción como parte de la realidad del Sur. Ilustrativo de todo lo anterior ha sido la influencia literaria que los llamados “Southern Agrarians” han ejercido sobre otros autores hasta bien entrado el siglo XX. Dichos escritores intentaban recuperar la noción tradicional del “Sur” anterior a la Guerra Civil americana (1861-1865), promulgando el retorno a un estilo de vida más simple y alabando la belleza, casi bucólica, y la paz que vivir “lejos del mundanal ruido urbano” conllevaba. Esta idealización y exaltación por lo tradicional, rural y “auténticamente” americano ignora, sin embargo, la realidad histórica de una esclavitud que existió durante siglos, mayoritariamente en los estados del sur, a la vez que critica duramente los avances del progreso, es decir del rápido crecimiento de las ciudades y del paisaje urbano. Los “Southern Agrarians” imaginaban “una concepción de la vida rural o semirural enriquecida por la tradición, la religión, las conductas sociales predecibles y estables y la autoestima” (Lawson, pág. 12).³ La recuperación de un “mítico Sur” seguiría siendo tema preferido de algunos autores, como Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949) quien en 1936 publicó *Gone with the Wind* cuyo éxito se acrecentó aún más con el estreno de la película del mismo nombre. Como se ha mencionado previamente, no fue hasta los años ochenta que autores como Dorothy Allison comenzaron a desvelar la realidad de un lugar donde la

¹ Cabe destacar que autores como William Dean Howell (1837-1920), Henry James (1843-1916) Samuel Adams (1835-1910) y William Faulkner (1897-1962) constituyen la excepción que confirma la regla.

² Siendo estas representaciones eran altamente idílicas, se disfrazaba así el estado de pobreza extrema en el que se encontraban los estados del sur después del conflicto.

³ “a conception of rural or semi-rural life enriched by tradition, religion, stable and predictable social behavior, and feelings of individual worth.”

discriminación y desigualdad cohabitaban con los sentimientos puros e idealistas de un sur ya inexistente.

En lo que se refiere a la obra literaria de Dorothy Allison, se presentan en este capítulo los dos enfoques teórico-prácticos que servirán de herramienta de análisis para su denuncia social y su propuesta de nuevas identidades, a saber: las nociones de identidad de Satya Mohanty y el concepto de agencia de Brent Henze, así como las teorías sobre la interseccionalidad de Leslie McCall. Los dos enfoques se encuentran interrelacionados en tanto en cuanto que el término de “basura blanca” denota la búsqueda de la identidad en la encrucijada de al menos dos intersecciones, las de clase y raza. Las teorías de Satya Mohanty sobre la reconstrucción de identidades, ya sean individual o colectiva, privada o pública, sirven de base para una reflexión sobre las circunstancias que rodean a las figuras representadas en las novelas de Allison, objetos de estudio de los artículos seleccionados para la elaboración de esta tesis. Según Mohanty, las nuevas identidades dependen de la interpretación “teorizada”, o “racionalizada” de la experiencia de lo vivido. Dicho postulado se ve reforzado por la teoría de Brent Henze que predica que el poder agentivo o agencia de un individuo, de varios, o de todo un colectivo, ayuda al oprimido en la interpretación precisa y eficaz de sus experiencias. De igual manera, las teorías de la interseccionalidad de Leslie McCall, presentadas en el último artículo del compendio de esta tesis, sirven de herramienta para la comprensión del grado de opresión de un individuo. Opresión que depende en gran parte de la interacción de categorías sociales (obstáculos para la reconstrucción de la subjetividad) que “intersectan” entre ellas hasta conformar una “localización/situación social” (“social location”) de la que resulta muy difícil salir. Según la autora, la interseccionalidad como marco teórico de análisis no está exenta de una complejidad que apunta hacia un mayor entendimiento de las categorías convergentes, las cuales facilitan los mecanismos de opresión del

individuo. McCall distingue tres enfoques sobre la complejidad en la utilización de la interseccionalidad como herramienta de estudio: el primero sugiere un estudio interseccional en el cual se presuponga la ausencia de categorías que puedan afectar al individuo. Este enfoque, llamado anti-categorical approach, tiene como objetivo el estudio de la situación social (social location) del sujeto libre de condicionamientos sociales. Bajo este prisma, el estudio de diferentes mecanismos de opresión no tiene en cuenta barreras o impedimentos como condicionantes del desarrollo de la subjetividad; el segundo enfoque, llamado “inter-categorical approach”, tiene en consideración la interacción de las cuatro categorías más utilizadas para el estudio de la opresión social, a saber: raza, clase, género y orientación sexual, lo que el sociólogo Matthew Wray califica como “the big four”. Desde esta perspectiva, las situaciones sociales (social locations) que conducen al sujeto a un estado de opresión son estudiadas con más detenimiento. Este enfoque, no obstante, limita el alcance de la dimensión de examen, puesto que existen otras categorías sociales que no necesariamente se vinculan a las mencionadas y que varían de acuerdo con las circunstancias personales de cada sujeto. Para que no haya delimitación de estudio de las posibles categorías que facilitan opresión, McCall propone un último enfoque, llamado “intra-categorical approach”, el cual posibilita el examen de otras categorías, potencialmente impedimentos para el desarrollo de una identidad propia. Este ángulo investigador sí tiene en consideración las circunstancias personales del sujeto adquiridas a través de su propia experiencia de lo vivido, a la vez que permite la utilización de las teorías de formación y/o reconstrucción de identidad de Mohanty y Henze. McCall explica que los enfoques interseccionales aquí expuestos no tienen por qué utilizarse independientemente; al contrario, cuanto mayor interdependencia exista entre ellos, más detallado será el análisis de opresión tan necesario para la reconstrucción de identidades.

El capítulo tercero de este trabajo, “Exploring Poor Whites/“White Trash””, profundiza en la realidad de los blancos pobres dentro del ámbito actual de la sociedad americana, donde la estratificación social aún impera. En primer lugar, el texto representa un viaje en el tiempo desde los orígenes de las colonias americanas hasta la actualidad documentándose en los estudios de Donald Takaki, Jeff Forret, y Jim Goad, entre otros. Esta narrativa desmiente hechos históricos polémicos y tergiversados, como, por ejemplo, la creencia de que los esclavos siempre fueron de raza negra. Historiadores como Jim Goad y James Leyburn, entre otros, explican que los primeros inmigrantes ingleses fueron llevados a las colonias en contra de su voluntad. Según Goad, “al menos la mitad y posiblemente hasta dos tercios de los inmigrantes blancos llegaron al Nuevo Mundo encadenados” (pág. 57)⁴. A mediados del siglo XVII, cuando la esclavitud se componía únicamente de hombres y mujeres traídos del continente africano, los blancos pobres fueron expulsados de las plantaciones sin otro recurso que el de vivir al margen de la ley, en las fronteras de las colonias. Es en ese periodo cuando el estigma de la basura blanca empieza a emerger. El capítulo detalla los orígenes y las repercusiones de los diferentes calificativos derogatorios y peyorativos atribuidos a esta clase social. Con el paso del tiempo, el término empezó a connotar asimismo una conducta social inaceptable (alcoholismo, promiscuidad, perversidad, analfabetismo y criminalidad, entre otros, ya formaban parte de una larga lista de “características” que identificaban públicamente a los blancos pobres), adquiriendo un cariz, desde finales del siglo XIX en adelante, más exacerbado cuando grupos blancos hegemónicos tacharon a esta clase de degeneración social. Con la llegada de la epidemia del anquilostoma, vulgarmente conocido como “lombriz”, (“hookworm”) a principios del siglo XX, la comunidad científica, más específicamente el campo de la medicina, sostuvo extensos debates sobre la naturaleza de la “basura blanca”.

⁴ “... at least half—and possibly as many as two thirds—of all white colonial immigrants arrived in chains.”

Algunos (los eugenistas) opinaban que dicho grupo suponía el origen de la epidemia, puesto que, genéticamente, éstos eran la causa de la epidemia; otros, mayormente los médicos miembros de la Comisión Sanitaria de Rockefeller, defendían acérrimamente la naturaleza “inocente” de esta clase que, por circunstancias adversas, se habían visto obligados a vivir en la miseria, siendo ésta la verdadera causa de la infección. Estos debates continuaron hasta bien entrada la segunda mitad del siglo XX solidificando la vieja creencia popular que diferenciaba a este grupo como “genéticamente inferior” al resto de la población blanca. Tanto fue así que en algunos estados del país se efectuaron esterilizaciones involuntarias de indigentes blancos, no sin la resistencia de algunos que defendieron la “inocencia genética” de los mismos. El caso Buck vs Bell es un ejemplo: a Carrie Buck, una blanca pobre de Charlottesville, Virginia, de dieciocho años de edad, se la consideró “una inadecuada social y económica” por un juez estatal. La decisión fue apelada y el caso llevado al Tribunal Supremo en un intento de demostrar la inocencia de la acusada. El Tribunal Supremo ratificó la sentencia original y en 1926, Carrie Buck fue esterilizada.

En segundo lugar, puesto que el estigma de la “basura blanca” tiene su origen en la cultura popular, la sección de este capítulo titulada “Social Stigmatizing in Today’s Popular Culture: The Power of Mass Media” reflexiona sobre la repercusión de los estereotipos, bulos y etiquetas atribuidos a la pobreza blanca, relegándola a las clases más bajas, a través del análisis de dos películas (*Deliverance*, 1972 y *Monster*, 2003), una serie televisiva (*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* 2012-2014) y un documental (*The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, 2009). La película *Deliverance* (1972) hizo mucho más que perpetuar las nociones preconcebidas sobre esta clase. Inculcó en las mentes de una gran mayoría la idea de salvajismo, primitivismo y fuerza bruta de los montañeros “rednecks” de los estados del sur, una “especie” a la que durante mucho tiempo se temió. Con un argumento saturado de estereotipos retratando al campesino rural de las montañas

del norte de Georgia como un ser peligroso, depravado, cruel y vengativo, la película alcanzó una popularidad inimaginable en la década de los setenta, puesto que además de inspirar miedo por este grupo, parecía ser “permisiva” con la violencia y el asesinato del “primitivo” en defensa propia. *Monster* (2003) se basa en hechos reales. El film relata la historia de Aileen Bournos, una lesbiana blanca pobre, asesina de muchos hombres en el sur de la Florida. El film emplea las creencias populares acerca de las mujeres “basura blanca” para enfatizar los bulos del estigma, destacando su fealdad, rabia, odio y salvajismo. Pero quizás lo más impactante de la historia de Aileen Bournos no se encuentre tanto en la ficción de la película como en la entrevista realizada por Nick Broomfield a la misma Bournos, horas antes de su ejecución: un documento gráfico de la desesperanza de la mujer “basura blanca”⁵. La serie televisiva *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) pertenece al género de los shows “realidad”, lo que le aporta una apariencia realística y contemporánea. No existe nada en esta serie que inculque miedo o repulsa por esta clase, puesto que lo que aquí se representa como “basura blanca” son sujetos analfabetos ridículos y cómicos, parásitos de una sociedad que los diseña y desprecia. Por último, y a modo de testimonio de las consecuencias de ser “basura blanca”, el documental *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009) deja entrever las penurias, obstáculos y vicisitudes de una familia blanca pobre, conocida en sus círculos por su pillería, ratería y enfrentamientos con la ley. De gran contenido gráfico, el documental, no obstante, es el testimonio filmico más benévolo de los aquí analizados, ya que se describe a la familia White como una “basura blanca” que al final de la historia tiene a su alcance la posibilidad de reinserción social.

Con el fin de llegar a entender la equívoca interpretación de los blancos pobres de hoy, la última sección de este capítulo, “Contemporary Notions of ‘White Trash’: ‘Whites vs Whites’”,

⁵ (Broomfield 5:30/7:04-5:45/7:04).

trae a la mesa de debate nuevas nociones de “blancura” (“whiteness”), resultado de la economía de mercado capitalista actual. Desde esta perspectiva, el concepto de “whiteness” se divide en diferentes modalidades. Por un lado, “whiteness” se identifica con un sector dominante y poderoso, que aún se cree superior a los otros grupos en sociedad. No se puede ignorar tampoco la emergencia de un tipo de blanco que se considera liberal y que representa a las clases media y alta de algunos sectores de la población blanca, cuya imagen de ellos mismos es la de ser los héroes y heroínas de la sociedad. Una tercera variante de “whiteness” ha sido calificada de “racialmente inocente” ya que se disocian de cualquier atributo hegemónico que el ser blanco conlleva, al no hacerse responsables por el abuso y la opresión sobre los blancos pobres. Este supuesto “respeto” de los “racialmente inocentes” por los otros “blancos” está motivado única y exclusivamente por razones laborales. Los “blancos inocentes” necesitan de un clima que no genere polémica para poder desarrollarse profesionalmente. La última modalidad de “whiteness” analizada en este trabajo concierne a la élite cultural blanca, una modalidad que se muestra no-conflictiva, ni mucho menos comprometida, en lo que a cuestiones de raza y clase se refiere.

Por otro lado, la imagen de la “basura blanca” actual ha experimentado una transformación en las últimas décadas. Provocada por el surgimiento de estas modalidades de “whiteness”, la “basura blanca” ha mutado a los ojos de la sociedad hasta tal grado que ciertos modelos de conducta social, anteriormente categorizados como propios de “gentuza”, o “basura blanca” están siendo considerados hoy en día como “aceptables”⁶. Como resultado, las demarcaciones entre tipos, clases, actitudes y conductas de los “blancos”, en el clima actual de la sociedad americana, son difíciles de discernir. Dicho todo lo anterior y visto el grado de ambigüedad con el que la actual

⁶ White trash has been muted, morphed, and metastasized to such an extent that certain patterns of “white trash” behavior are now considered “acceptable” (Castle 8).

estratificación social blanca se presenta, se puede llegar a la conclusión de que las viejas y tradicionales nociones, estereotipos, insultos y derogaciones referente a la “basura blanca” todavía permanecen, aunque con diferentes grados de severidad, en la mente de muchos.

El capítulo cuarto de esta tesis, “Writing from Within: Dorothy Allison’s Contribution to Debasing the Poor White/‘White Trash’ Stigma”, expone la postura de Dorothy Allison frente al estigma de los blancos pobres/“basura blanca” como una minoría necesitada de reconocimiento social. En esta sección, se examina la vida personal de la autora, así como su obra literaria en defensa de la clase desfavorecida. La propia historia de su vida juega un papel primordial para el entendimiento de su clase puesto que refleja la realidad de la “basura blanca” del sur de los EE.UU. en la década de los ochenta; una realidad no muy diferente de la de hoy. Nacida de una madre soltera, Allison vivió en el seno de un ambiente familiar tóxico que cumplía con todos los “requisitos” del estigma. Sus hermanos, tíos y demás hombres de la familia robaban, abusaban del alcohol, cometían incesto y golpeaban brutalmente a sus mujeres mientras que ellas sufrían las consecuencias. A los dieciocho años y con la ayuda de su madre, Allison pudo escaparse de una vida de condena social para empezar de nuevo. Su experiencia personal incluye sus días de activismo como feminista, una etapa de su vida que acabó por desilusionarle. No obstante, sin hacer mención de este periodo sería difícil entender cuán importante ha sido su contribución literaria hacia la desmitificación de las creencias populares sobre su clase.

Con la finalidad de desmitificar un estigma “sempiterno”, como parece ser el de la “basura blanca”, Allison usa estrategias literarias innovadoras para su tiempo, puesto que, hasta la fecha, nadie había denunciado la invisibilidad social, la negligencia y el ostracismo tan abierta y directamente como ella. Su estilo es impactante y crudo, inspirándose en el género del cuento para definir orígenes y dismantelar etiquetas, estereotipos y bulos sociales. En sus escritos, Allison

hace un uso admirable del humor, tan necesario en combatir las dificultades de la vida cotidiana. Además, la narrativa de Allison acerca al lector a la difícil situación de esta clase oprimida, permitiéndole “habitar” las mentes de los blancos pobres y experimentar de cerca la vida de la pobreza blanca. Mediante dicha estrategia, Allison dibuja un grupo social cuyos intereses, ideales, metas, preocupaciones y sentimientos no muestran ninguna diferencia con otros miembros de la sociedad. Es el lado humano de la pobreza blanca lo que Allison destaca. Pero esta escritora no se detiene en la deconstrucción de un estigma igualándolo, y así normalizándolo, a otras clases, sino que, reconociendo la carencia de identidad pública de su grupo, Allison propone soluciones para la recuperación de una subjetividad perdida. En este plano, el uso de la narrativa de ficción, más concretamente el de la novela, se presenta idóneo. Es en sus dos únicas novelas donde Allison se siente libre para “orientar” a sus personajes hacia la formación de una identidad que los defina como constituyentes activos de una nación a la que tienen derecho a pertenecer y contribuir.

Para poder entender los mecanismos de resistencia y los procesos de reconstrucción de la identidad propuestos por Dorothy Allison, la última sección de este capítulo, “Dorothy Allison’s Literary Work”, ofrece una visión detallada de su obra literaria, desde sus poemas hasta sus novelas como contexto a los artículos aquí presentados. Diversa en su uso de los géneros literarios, Allison “evoluciona” gradualmente en su concepción y aceptación de su identidad de “basura blanca” impuesta por la sociedad. Su colección de poemas, *The Women Who Hate ME* (1983), es una respuesta al rechazo recibido de sus propias compañeras feministas. En su colección de historias cortas, *Trash* (1988), aunque escritas con resentimiento, se vislumbra apenas el deseo de conciliación con su familia, su clase, los suyos. En un estilo literario enternecedor, las historias de *Trash* invitan a la comprensión y el entendimiento. Sus ensayos recogidos en *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature* (1994), desvelan sus más íntimos pensamientos acerca de clase, sexualidad

y creatividad literaria. Su memoria, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995) es una descripción abierta y honesta de su familia a través de la cual la autora se enfrenta valientemente al estigma de la “basura blanca” relatando los aspectos negativos y positivos que engendra esta condición social. Si la resistencia al mito junto con la ira y el enfado son más palpables en sus poemas, sus cuentos, ensayos y su memoria, en sus novelas, Allison se muestra agentiva. Aunque estén aún presentes los sentimientos negativos que llevan a la denuncia social, las novelas de Allison buscan una solución al problema de la no-identidad. Igualmente, éstas introducen una inmensa mayoría de personajes femeninos con los que criticar la opresión interna que las mujeres blancas y pobres sufren a manos de los suyos; es decir a manos de los hombres de esta clase que se muestran abusivos y maltratadores. Cabe reseñar, por último, que los personajes femeninos de las novelas de Allison experimentan diversos y distintos procesos de reconstrucción de la subjetividad. No es de extrañar, por lo tanto, que junto a los marcos teórico-prácticos de procesos de reconstrucción de identidad se empleen los postulados de Leslie McCall que facilitan la comprensión de cada una de las circunstancias personales con las que se enfrentan los personajes femeninos en las novelas de la autora.

El capítulo quinto de esta tesis, “Resisting the Myth: Allison’s Proposal for New Poor White Identities: Three Articles”, presenta la selección de tres artículos que, respectivamente, resumen la labor literaria de Allison y analizan tanto la denuncia del estigma social como la propuesta de nuevas identidades en sus dos novelas.

“Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Demystifying the Poor Whites/ ‘White Trash’ Stigma,” ofrece una visión extensa del estilo literario de Allison, así como de sus objetivos, propósitos e intenciones con la crudeza de su lenguaje. El artículo sirve de herramienta para entender la intencionalidad de la autora, a la vez

que garantiza una amplia perspectiva de su obra literaria. El texto examina y analiza los trabajos de Allison destacando los aspectos más relevantes de cada uno.

El segundo artículo seleccionado, “Trashing the Myth of the ‘Old South’: ‘White Trash’ Identity-Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,” estudia las estrategias de Allison en tanto en cuanto a la degradación del mito literario del “Viejo Sur”, a la vez que denuncia la situación de los blancos pobres/“basura blanca”. Dicho artículo examina la propuesta de la autora referente a posibles alternativas al estigma. De hecho, la novela permite a los personajes buscar una identidad en la que el término “basura blanca” deja de ser insultante o peyorativo para convertirse en un identificador de una clase que está orgullosa de sus orígenes. Después de una introducción de la literatura de la clase trabajadora, se presentan, estudian y analizan los recursos literarios que desmantelan la noción idealizada del “Viejo Sur”, así como las nuevas alternativas de subjetividad propuestas por la escritora que este artículo analiza en la figura de la joven protagonista, Bone, quien tendrá que experimentar un proceso de desarrollo personal en el que la interpretación de lo vivido, junto con el poder agentivo de otros, se revela esencial. Para terminar, el artículo resalta la importancia de la labor literaria de Allison que ha influido en otros autores pertenecientes a la literatura de “basura blanca”.

El tercer artículo seleccionado, “‘White Trash Resistance, Women Interactions, and Identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*. An Intersectional Approach,” insinúa que los mecanismos de reconstrucción de la identidad no terminan en su primera novela, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), sino que continúan en su segunda, *Cavedweller* (1998). Adoptando un enfoque “genérico”, el presente artículo explora la postura de Allison frente a la marginalización de las mujeres en general. En su novela, mujeres de todas clases luchan contra estereotipos interactuando entre ellas, iniciándose así un proceso de reconstrucción de la identidad en el cual la condición

femenina ocupa un lugar central. Dicha interacción se traduce asimismo en una resistencia femenina contra el estigma de la “basura blanca”, visto desde la encrucijada de clase, género, raza y otros ejes de convergencia. Adoptando las teorías sobre la interseccionalidad de Leslie McCall, se analizan las interacciones entre mujeres a través de la figura de Delia, la madre-protagonista de la historia, desde no sólo la comunidad sino también la unidad familiar, con la finalidad de completar la reforma de la identificación personal iniciada en *Bastard*.

La conclusión de este trabajo de investigación indica que aún existe un sector en el grupo de los blancos considerado minoritario, subalterno o inferior, refutando así la presunción general de que “blanco” significa hegemónico, poderoso y superior. Este proyecto ha adoptado la labor literaria de Dorothy Allison como objeto de estudio para presentar una literatura nueva dentro de la tradición literaria del Sur, la de la “basura blanca”, centrándose en la presunción de que los estereotipos y estigmas pueden ser “redirigidos” hacia la construcción de nuevas identidades socialmente aceptadas, como así lo indica la publicación de los artículos en los que se fundamenta esta tesis doctoral.

Por último, gracias a escritores como Allison, ha sido posible dar presencia a los blancos pobres en el campo literario americano contemporáneo, hecho que ha generado, en el caso de Allison, interés en un público amplio y diverso por su aun difícil situación. La complejidad de esta categoría social, a veces difusa y a veces enfrentada a una diversificación de nuevas y emergentes nociones de “whiteness”, constituye un reto académico el cual merecería la pena aceptar. Quizás sea hora de explorar el trabajo de autores como Allison, nacidos en el seno de la pobreza, más allá de sus fronteras.



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4

The first row of the table represents the 'no' response, and the second row represents the 'yes' response. The first column represents the 'no' response, and the second column represents the 'yes' response. The third row represents the total number of responses for each category, and the fourth column represents the total number of responses for each category.

The expected frequencies for each cell in the table are calculated by multiplying the row total by the column total, and then dividing by the grand total. For example, the expected frequency for the cell in the first row and first column is $\frac{10 \times 10}{20} = 5$.

The chi-squared test statistic is calculated by summing the squared differences between the observed and expected frequencies, and then dividing by the expected frequency. For example, the chi-squared test statistic for the cell in the first row and first column is $\frac{(5 - 5)^2}{5} = 0$.

The p-value is the probability of observing a test statistic as extreme as the one calculated, assuming the null hypothesis is true. For example, the p-value for the chi-squared test statistic is 0.95.

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1. Introduction

The following dissertation is intended with two goals in mind: first, to explore the stigma of the poor whites, also known as “white trash,” to reveal that this group has been the subject of social oppression because of their stereotyping and marginalization by the white middle-class majority. Though there is enough evidence to reflect in depth on the demystification of the stigma, the topic, however, presents itself challenging, for it is fluid in nature and it may easily escape the researcher’s grasp. Therefore, a great effort has been made to maintain a steady course while presenting the arguments on which the first goal of this dissertation rests. In this light, “white trash” demystification has been employed as a tool for understanding the consequences of class stratification, more specifically that of the poor whites, ultimately from a literary perspective. This said, this thesis leans on misconceived notions of “white trash” spread through popular imagery originated in travel accounts, land surveys, medical reports, political agendas, etc., as well as in contemporary mass media. These constructions, which facilitate popular culture’s ignorance and indifference, have translated into “sensationalized accounts often resulted in a false and grossly exaggerated version of reality” (Docka 2002). This “distorted” version about the reality of white poverty provides the basis upon which some scholars have considered the stigma of “white trash”/poor whites as a “myth,” owing to its contradictory, damaging and false nature.¹

The second goal of this project resides in the introduction of Dorothy Allison’s literary contribution to the identification, exposure, demystification, and vindication of the “white trash” community. Indeed, her writing offers readers an opportunity to replace false images of the white poor, while holding the potential to sort reality from a mythology that deems poverty a deserved condition (Docka 2002). Through the analysis of Allison’s work, the present project

¹ The word myth is defined as “a widely held but false belief or idea” (OED 2020)

aims to raise awareness of the existence of white underprivileged groups whose social inequality has been the subject of study in U.S. academia for several decades already. This topic, prevalent across the Atlantic Ocean, deserves international academic attention, and thus is the main focus of this research. As minorities are found in every society, opinions, and theoretical constructs on alternative subjectivities to the “socially invisible” are worthy of serious and rigorous research.

To meet these goals, the following objectives have been delineated: first, to explore the term “white trash” since it first appeared in the British settlements until the present. Along this line, an in-depth approach to the origins of the social stigma of the poor whites in the United States of America is presented. Starting out from a wider scope of study, the analysis gradually centers on the predicament of the poor whites of the Southeast, and its complexity in contemporary U.S.A. In arriving at contemporary notions of poor whites/“white trash,” this dissertation follows the reading of U.S. history performed by revisionist scholars, while focusing on emerging theories in the field of social sciences with the purpose of differentiating two types of whiteness: one, synonymous with superiority, hegemony and power; and another, signaling oppression, ostracism, and subaltern class.² Lastly, the awareness of the poor white stigma in the literary field in the past one hundred and fifty years is brought into discussion, highlighting the fact that a new group of southern writers, born into poverty, have started to speak out on behalf of their class.

The second objective of this dissertation introduces Dorothy Allison’s literary work, which clearly “speaks out” on behalf of the under-favored. Allison has been deemed a pioneer in giving accounts of, about and on the “white trash” stereotype “unflinchingly,” resulting in other writers following suit. Her writing reveals her desire to expose poor whites’/“white trash”

² Because of the fluid nature of the term “whiteness,” other contemporary emerging types are also mentioned.

reality and to debunk myths and social misconstructions about them through her alternative “white trash” identities, clearly manifested in her two novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998). A thorough analysis of Allison’s literary stance to the situation of the “white trash” of the South is offered to draw attention to the fact that, according to the writer, poor whites have the opportunity to escape stigmatizing and stereotyping without having to deny, hide, or be ashamed of their origins.

In examining Allison’s literary “activism”³ towards exposing the marginalization of poor whites, this dissertation presents three articles by which to, first, draw a generalized picture of not only Allison’s purpose of writing, but also her strategies in vindicating poor whites; next, explore identity seeking in Bone, the young protagonist in Allison’s first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992); and, last, examine women’s solidarity in identity reconstruction, as a mode of resisting socially misconstrued notions of female identities in her second novel *Cavedweller* (1998).

As far as the structure of this project is concerned, it explores two interrelated subjects of study. The first offers a thorough analysis of the origins, history, social location and current situation of the poor whites or “white trash,” while the second looks into how this social context is further addressed and challenged by Dorothy Allison’s literature. Allison exposes and demystifies misconceived notions on poor whites —thus displaying mechanisms of resistance—, offering newly reconstructed “white trash” identities in her long-fiction writing.

Chapter 2 “Approaches and Methodology,” proposes the study of poor whites’ misrepresentation and stigmatization from three perspectives: first, it leans on new readings of U.S. history acknowledging the presence of white poverty from the colonial period to the present day. A presence that, for the most part, had been ignored until recent years. Second,

³ As it will be seen, Dorothy Allison has been an advocate for minority groups’ equal rights all her life. Firstly, as a feminist and, secondly, as a writer.

because the term “white trash” opposes traditional notions of whiteness as markers of domination, this project draws on scholars’ theories from “whiteness studies,” an academic discipline within the field of social studies. Whiteness studies’ main objective has been the analysis of white oppression from within, thus disproving the notion of whiteness as powerful and superior to non-white social groups. Lastly, this thesis focuses on representations of white poverty in the American southern literary tradition in an effort to explain that its presence in literature has been mainly ignored or misconstrued. There were only a handful of writers, such as William Dean Howells (1837-1920), Henry James (1843-1916) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) who, at the threshold of the twentieth century, showed concern for the unpreparedness of the poor before an increasing industrialized world, while granting them a more prominent role in their novels. In the twentieth century, William Faulkner’s (1897-1962) writings gave out crude, realistic and raw depictions of the life that poor whites were condemned to endure. A comparative analysis between literary texts, depicting an idealized notion of the “Old South,”⁴ and forward-thinking writers, such as Dorothy Allison, speaking about the predicament of white poverty will help to contextualize contemporary notions of “white trash.”

Concerning Dorothy Allison’s contribution to demystifying the “white trash” stigma, the present research focuses on Satya Mohanty and Brent Henze’s notions of identity and agency as well as on the theoretical constructs of “Intersectionality,” as a suitable framework of analysis for identity reconstruction, especially in her novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998). As the social situation of poor whites is conditioned upon the intersection of at least two categories —race and class—, and as Dorothy Allison’s own identity has been the result of the interplay of the categories of race, class, gender and sexuality, intersectionality works effectively to explain oppression and discrimination. The theories of

⁴ Reflected, for instance, on the works of the southern modernism, the Agrarians, and authors such as Margaret Mitchell.

Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw serve as the foundation on which to develop Leslie McCall's own approaches to the complexity of intersecting categories leading to mechanisms of oppression. Though this method of research has been mainly used in the field of social studies, Karen Gaffney employs it in her analysis of Allison's *Cavedweller* (1998), hence suggesting its validity as a tool for analysis in literary criticism. The last article presented in this thesis, "'White trash' Resistance, Women's Interactions, and Identity in Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller* (1998). An Intersectional Approach," offers an in-depth approach to women's interacting to resist oppression and rebuild identities from a comprehensive intersectional perspective.

Chapter 3, "Exploring Poor Whites/'White Trash,'" delves into the reality of poor whites in contemporary U.S.A., where class stratification still pervades. Starting off with the historical origins of this social group, the "white trash" stigma is mapped out from colonial times to nowadays, ending with Donald Trump's presidential victory. On this journey, the reader learns that slavery was not originally race-generated, but class-based.⁵ Revisionist history also recognizes the shift from white/black slavery to all black in the eighteenth century, when more African slave markets opened up, resting on the belief that African slaves were less criminal, cheaper and more docile than their white counterparts. In addition, black runaways were more easily identifiable to capture than whites (Goad 71).

Shifting white indentured servitude/slavery to all black had devastating consequences for the poor whites, who found themselves living on the margins of plantations and territories with no chance but to turn into social miscreants (e.g., beggars, thieves, poachers, brawlers and trouble makers), veering farther away from the notions of gentility, honor and respectability the colonies were founded on (Wyatt-Brown xi). In this context, pejorative terms for poor

⁵ Jim Goad, among other scholars, explains that the so-called immigrants from Northern England Scotland and Southern Ireland arrived in America in chains, against their will (Goad 57).

whites became abundant: lubbers, crackers and squatters, first; poor “white trash,” or “white trash,” the most degradable term for the poor classes, later (Isenberg 136). An analysis of the origins and social repercussions of the term poor “white trash” or “white trash” is performed, —for the concept entails unacceptable social behavior —, reinforced by the publications of the time, which depicted laughable characters, such as Longstreet’s Ransy Sniffle, Hooper’s Simon Suggs and Harris’s Sut Lovinghood, among others. To some extent, the poor whites portrayed by cartoonists and humorists shared despicable aspects of their personalities. For instance, they ate poorly, were known for their physical deformities, their laziness, apathy, and low intelligence. Some were thought to be “tricksters;”⁶ others were recognizable by their tallow skin (Isenberg 40); still others went into mischief, not minding leading a life of misery and filth (Goat 85).

In the mid-nineteenth century, upon the country’s expansion towards the South and West, the meaning of greatness transgressed land boundaries to occupy a place in the blood line of inhabitants. Americans based their greatness not only on the account of vast land acquisition, but also because of the pure Anglo-Saxon blood flowing in their veins (Isenberg 139). Needless to say, the poor did not fit in any of the two categories of greatness, for they were neither land owners, nor of pure blood lineage. Their living conditions, low-intelligence reputation and “jaundiced” skin tone instantly disqualified them as part of the “great American design.” To make matters worse, as the Civil War broke out and a resolution to the conflict was found, rumors about the South —the losing end of the conflict— being illiterate, primitive, agriculturally-based and filled with “white trash” took hold of the entire region (Wray 55).

The latter part of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth witnessed extensive debates on the nature of southern “white trash.” Scientists conducted their studies,

⁶ Flynt comments on a popular song “The Arkansas Traveler” that depicted poor whites as drunks skillful at trickery (21).

most of them on southern white poverty, to prove aspects, such as their social degeneracy, consanguinity, tainted blood, and feeble-mindedness, adding more misconstructions to the stigma. As time passed, poor whites became subjects of many scientific studies, for the emerging white upper-class demanded “differentiation” between them and the contemptible (Wray 68). The poor white stigma picked up momentum during the twentieth-century hookworm epidemic, originating debates between eugenicists and the doctors of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission in search of an explanation so as to why the disease was so contagious among the poor. The recurrent debate —this time, over whether the hookworm epidemic targeted the poor whites more than any other group— solidified the popular belief that the poor were “genetically” inferior due to their low intelligence and bad bloodline. In the end, the “endemic contaminated nature” of white poverty became a serious topic of debate, which resulted in the implementation of drastic measures for epidemic containment, such as the involuntary sterilization of many. To make matters worse, poor “white trash” women suffered the stigma more deeply than men. Looked down upon for their ugliness and uncleanliness and subjected to male violence, “white trash” women had to work and deal with social mistreatment from their kin and those outside of their own class.

In analyzing the image of poor whites/“white trash” in contemporary U.S., this project explores twentieth- and twenty-first century popular beliefs about “white trash” in mass media communications,⁷ through the analysis of two films, *Deliverance* (1972) and *Monster* (2003), a TV series, *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo* (2012-2014), and a documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009), thus showing the pervasive nature of the myth of “white trash.” *Deliverance* (1972) has done more than perpetuate the misbelief of “white trash” traits; it has instilled in the minds of a broad audience the idea of savagery, primitivism and

⁷ In the past, popular beliefs on poor whites originated in the oral tradition, travel accounts, medical reports and political agendas, among others. Nowadays, mass media and the internet are the fastest vehicles for perpetuating stigmas.

brute force concerning a modality of “white trash,” the “rednecks.” *Monster* (2003) centers around the figure of the “white trash” woman, enraged and brutalized. It is the story of Aileen Bournos, a poor white lesbian, murderer of many men in the South of Florida. This film reiterates the negative traits attributed to poor white women along the years, focusing on their ugliness, rage, and savagery. The TV series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) is designed as a virtual reality show, thus appearing realistic and contemporary. In it, “white trash” are represented as illiterate, laughable subjects who spend their lives as parasites to society. Lastly, offering a glimpse into the consequences of “white trash” living, the documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009), takes the viewer through the hardships of the White family. This documentary appears more benevolent in its representation of poor whites, highlighting the possibility of social reinsertion.

To fully grasp the misconstruction of today’s poor whites, this dissertation brings to the table new contemporary notions of whiteness, born out of the impositions of a capitalist market economy. Along this line, whiteness has divided itself into different modalities. For instance, the term has come to connote dominant whites, still believing that their kind are superior to all others. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the emergence of the liberal white type, which portrays the white middle- and upper- classes as the heroes and heroines of any crisis. A third variant defines what is known as the “racially innocent” whites, those who pin the blame of the power of whiteness on others rather than themselves, yet their supposedly social “respect” for other “white” classes is purely work-related. The last modality of whiteness under analysis depicts a “cultural white elite,” which appears to be “non-confrontational” towards the issue of class. On the other end of the spectrum, the image of “white trash,” has also experienced a transformation: it has been muted, morphed, and metastasized to such an extent that certain patterns of “white trash” behavior are now considered “acceptable” (Castle 8). Be that as it may, the bottom line, as it will be seen, is that old stigmatized images of “white trash” still

linger in the minds of many, while the myth is yet to be deconstructed.

As the old “white trash” stigma remains in some sectors of the American community, one can conclude that the traditional hegemonic whiteness also remains prevalent. Theodore Allen has provided a class-based definition of white hegemony in which the adjectives superior and subaltern play binary roles.⁸ Matt Wray, one of the scholars advocating for the disappearance of the “white trash” stigma, has further elaborated on the complexity of the undertone behind the term “whiteness,” upon explaining that whiteness is the absence of visibility and exists because it has always held the privilege of racial normativity.

Given that today’s American society is comprised of different versions of whiteness and that, in the past several years, minority groups have started to stand up against a closed-minded, conservative political system, Dorothy Allison’s perspective on “white trash” and her literary proposal for this group to re-invent their subjectivity are deemed appropriate to reflect upon the America of the twenty-first century. Moreover, because of her activist nature, Dorothy Allison’s personal life further contributes to the exposure and denouncement of the “white trash” juncture, which has not yet experienced great change.

Chapter 4, “Writing from Within: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Debasing the Poor White / ‘White Trash’ Stigma,” concerns Dorothy Allison’s perspective on the stigma of “white trash” as a minority group in need of public awareness. Allison’s life’s accomplishments and failures, as well as an overview of her work, are presented to contextualize her purpose for writing about the under-favored. Allison’s own life experience reflects the reality of southern white poverty in the seventies and eighties, not very different from today’s. Allison’s living experience meets all the “prerequisites” to fit in the social category of “white trash.” Born out of wedlock to a poor white teenage girl, Allison lived in a

⁸ See *The Invention of White Race* (1998), Chapter III.

toxic family in which men would steal, abuse drugs and alcohol, and live on the margins of the law, which resulted most of the time in being sent to prison. For women, life was not any better; they would usually get pregnant young, be victims of physical and sexual abuse, stay home and age prematurely, resulting in either an early death or chronic illness. With her mother's help, Allison managed to escape a life of social condemnation, by being able to move out and pursue a higher education degree. Her personal experience also includes her activist days as part of the second wave of feminism, a period of her life which left her utterly disillusioned. Without it, however, it would be difficult to grasp her literary contribution to taking down the barriers of social misunderstanding.

Allison's motivation to become a "literary activist" for the socially oppressed is based on an irremediable urge to rid her feeling of guilt for having moved away from her world. Despite her feelings of remorse, her intent on taking down old preconceived ideas about both the "Old South" and poor whites' stigmatizing in the literary field defines her as an activist writer. In demystifying the idealized notion of the "Old South," the writer alternates the lyrical tone of southern modernism with outspoken descriptions of the existence of white poverty, invading the bucolic tone of certain passages with crude depictions of white poverty, thus exposing a highly distorted version of the genteel South. In removing the barriers of the myths behind the stigma of the poor, Allison relates the stories of her family members, filled with horror and misfortune, as if they were resigned to their own fate; violence, rape, and accidental death were the norm.

Apart from her techniques for demystification, Allison employs innovative writing strategies for the time, as nobody else had exposed social invisibility, neglect, and ostracism as blatantly as she. To illustrate, her style becomes direct and straightforward, while relying on storytelling as both a defining aspect of her "white trash" origins and a tool with which to dismantle and debase social labeling. A great sense of humor is another resource Allison often

employs. In her stories, humor unfolds as a survival mechanism, a manner by which to cope with every-day life's events. In addition, Allison's writing draws readers closer to the juncture of white poverty. She lets them inhabit the mind of her people and experience "white trash" living "up-close and personal." In so doing, Allison's "white trash" humanness strips the stigma of contempt and animosity, for, according to her, falling into poverty can easily become another aspect of life. Lastly, Allison's standpoint on "white trash" does not stop at demystification, but it goes further into suggesting new reconstructed identities. In this regard, the novel is an ideal medium to convey her message. In her long fiction, Allison is free to let her characters cope with stereotyping by experiencing feelings of rage, denial, resistance, and acceptance. They ultimately exercise sufficient will power and agency to subvert the stigma, however. Although the use of long-fiction writing as a vehicle for both reconstructing identities and exposing social inequality is not a novelty in the U.S. contemporary literary arena,⁹ for Allison, novel writing is the ideal medium to communicate her stance before the "white trash" predicament.

In order to provide a better understanding about Allison's resistance and identity rebuilding processes, this project analyzes Allison's literary work, from her poetry to her novels, as complementary of the articles presented hereby. Resistance, along with rage, is more apparent in Allison's poetry, her short stories, essays, and memoirs. Not abandoning these negative feelings, Allison's novels also seek a solution out of stigmatization. Moreover, her novels portray a myriad of mainly female characters by which to criticize oppression from within; that is, from the "white trash" world itself. Lastly, subjectivity formation takes place in several of her "white trash" female characters: from Bone, the young protagonist in *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), to Cissy, the young protagonist of *Cavedweller* (1998) and her half-

⁹ For instance, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Octavia Butler, among others, have used novels as the medium to propose subjectivity formation.

sisters Amanda and Dede. This process is also present in the adult protagonist of *Cavedweller* (1998), Delia Byrd.¹⁰

This dissertation offers three selected analytic articles. The first article, “Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Demystifying the Poor Whites/ ‘White Trash’ Stigma” draws a comprehensive picture of Allison’s writing style as well as that of her goals, purpose, and intentions behind her straightforwardness. This article represents a tool for understanding Allison’s intentionality, while providing a comprehensive perspective of her literary work. The text takes the reader on a journey through Allison’s works upon highlighting the main aspects in each.

The second article under study, “Trashing the Myth of the ‘Old South’: ‘White Trash’ Identity-Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*” studies Allison’s strategies to debase the literary myth of the “Old South,” while exposing the social situation of the poor whites/“white trash.” The article examines the author’s proposal for an alternative to the stigma. In fact, the novel allows its characters to seek an identity in which “white trash” ceases to be insulting or derogatory to become instead an identifier of a class that is proud to have been born poor and white. After an introduction to working-class literature, Allison’s literary devices to debunk idealized notions of the “Old South,” along with new mechanisms of subjectivity building, are introduced, studied, and analyzed. To close, “Trashing the Myth” underscores the significance of Allison’s work for other contemporary “white trash” literature authors.

The third selected article, “‘White Trash’ Resistance, Women’s Interactions, and Identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller* (1998). An Intersectional Approach,” suggests the idea that Dorothy Allison’s mechanisms of identity building do not end in her first novel,

¹⁰ Delia Byrd’s resistance to stigmatization and subject formation by interacting with the women in her community is the subject of the third article presented in this dissertation.

Bastard of Carolina (1992), but continue in her second, *Cavedweller* (1998). Adopting a “generic” approach, this article explores Allison’s position before women’s marginalization. In this novel, women of all classes fight stereotyping through social interaction, initiating a process of identity reconstruction in which the female condition holds center stage. This interaction also translates into women’s resistance against “white trash” stigmatization, viewed upon at the juncture of class, gender, race and other axes of convergence. Adopting Leslie McCall’s intersectional theoretical constructs, an analysis of women’s interactions through the figure of Delia, the mother-protagonist of Allison’s *Cavedweller* (1998), within both the community and the family unit, aims to complete the road to subjectivity reformation.

The conclusion of this research suggests that there remains a sector of whites considered minority or a subaltern class, thus disproving the general assumption that “whiteness” equates hegemony, power, and superiority over other non-white groups. It also claims that whiteness—in all of its variants— can be appropriately analyzed from the perspective of whiteness studies. This project has adopted Dorothy Allison’s work as the subject of analysis to introduce the literature of the poor whites of the South—as part of a “new” southern literary tradition—and emphasize that labeling, stigmatizing and invisibility can be reversed towards the construction of new socially accepted, self-fulfilling identities.

Thanks to writers like Allison, the poor white class in the United States of America has started to be noticed in the literary field by the American public. It is time for the work of these authors to be explored and studied beyond their frontiers.



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2. Approaches and Methodology

2.1 Three Approaches to Poor Whites/“White Trash”

To indicate the presence of the poor white/“white trash” stigma in contemporary America, this dissertation provides a comprehensive background on the poor white/“white trash” stigma of the South from three perspectives.

First, the readings on America’s past carried out by contemporary historians (from the late nineteenth seventies onwards) have unveiled never-disclosed-before historical accounts of poor whites since their arrival in the New World, thus shedding more light on a social group that, because of their condition of “white,” was never seen as an oppressed minority. Since the colonial period, the poor whites were looked down upon by their “equals” for occupying the lowest places in the territories. They mainly worked for others as indentured servants or were invisible and ignored in the plantation-based economy. Though demeaned by their white counterparts, the “white trash” held the firm belief they occupied a higher place in society than other oppressed groups, such as black slaves, on their condition of being “white.” Despite what the poor whites in the U.S.A. have been led to believe, revisionist historians claim that whites too have been subjected to social contempt on account of class and —as paradoxical as it may sound— race, suffering therefore the consequences of social ostracism, like other non-white minorities.

Ronal Takaki can be counted among the historians who have provided the American public with a multicultural perspective on the history of the United States. In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993), Takaki strays from the canonical Eurocentric view on American history to incorporate a wide array of peoples who contributed to the building of the nation. As the *New York Times Book Review* has stated, “Takaki’s book is nothing less than an attempt to view all of American history from a multicultural perspective.

It is a laudable effort— humane, well informed, accessible, and often incisive. It is clearly not intended to divide Americans but rather to teach them to value the nation’s inescapable diversity” (2008). *A Different Mirror* is an extensive analysis of American history from colonial times, when societal structures were modeled after the British Isles’ and sustained on a slave-based economic system, to the end of the twentieth century. Contrary to popular belief, new historical accounts have shown that slavery in its origins was not restricted exclusively to black slaves but included peoples, such as Irish immigrants, poor whites, and other minorities. This revised analysis of the American past also concerns a country filled with contradictions, in which Native Americans, Mexicans and immigrant populations are given a presence. Takaki’s study helps to understand the transition and subsequent transformation the country undergoes in the latter part of the nineteenth century to today’s American society, composed of all minorities united to form the whole of the nation.

In revising history, several scholars, dedicated their efforts to making one specific minority the subject of their research. Wayne Flynt published in 1979 *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, which offers a detailed examination of the South’s poor whites’ situation. The book “captures the unity in diversity which has granted the South’s poor whites a ‘relatedness and meaning’ that prosperous, technological America has lost” (*Journal of Mississippi History* 1979). His work touches on the “invisibility” of southern poor whites from America’s origins until the present date, giving out a unique interpretation of white poverty. In 1997, Jim Goad published *The Redneck Manifesto*, an insightful piece of research which confirms the social stigmatizing of poor whites by relating “untold” historical events.¹¹ In 2006, Jeff Forret’s *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside*, was published. Centering his analysis on the America of the pre-Civil War period, Forret draws

¹¹ Such as white slavery, America as a repository of “Euro-garbage,” and a revisionist reading of the white American underclass, etc.

a thorough historical account of events involving the relations between white slaves, poor whites, and black slaves. “Race and class, Forret demonstrates, intersected in unique ways for those at the margins of southern society, challenging the belief that race created a social cohesion among whites regardless of their economic status” (*Journal of Social History* 2006). Forret’s work is another illustration that disproves the idea of whiteness equating power and dominance, for the existence of poor whites —deemed contemptible by their kin— is a testimony of class stratification.

Michael B. Katz wrote in 2013 *The Underserving Poor*, a revealing analysis of the stigma behind white poverty, which attempts to examine preconceived notions of poverty adopted by the white middle class by claiming that, despite being considered a social burden, white poverty also took part in the process of the building of a great nation. His conclusion leads to the acknowledgement of the poor whites’ presence in U.S. history, while recognizing that the economic factor in today’s market economy plays a major role in either helping such a class to survive or turning them into subjects of exploitation.

Though many historians have exposed, at-length, the problem of poor whites,¹² Nancy Isenberg has been widely acclaimed for her comprehensive analysis of the white underclass in her book *“White Trash”: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* published in 2017.¹³ As some have stated, *“White Trash”* will change the way Americans think about their past and present (T. J. Stiles 2017). Moreover, Isenberg’s publication is an eye-opening investigation into the country’s entrenched social hierarchy (*O Magazine* 2017), and a reminder of the persistent contempt for the white underclass (*The Atlantic* 2017). Her work compiles the interpretations of others, as well as hers, on poor white social stigmatizing gluing all fragments into a whole, thus offering a coherent and cohesive view on the “white trash” juncture.

¹² The authors mentioned hereby do not constitute the whole of historical research on poor whites, but they are the ones this project focuses on.

¹³ Copyright 2016.

Rereading speeches, philosophies and perspectives of not only religious authorities, but also those of the forefathers and politicians, sociologists, and scientists thereafter, *“White Trash”* becomes a historical testimony of the causes and consequences of the social category¹⁴ of poor whites, “white trash” or working class. Setting its basis on historical facts, Isenberg’s walks the reader through every preconceived notion of “white trash,” carefully analyzing their origins. In doing so, Isenberg clarifies popular beliefs about poor whites in which class and race—not to mention gender—are at the core of the stigma. Isenberg’s work also depicts misconstructions of “white trash” through mass media and social networking, the newest and fastest vehicles of communication. Films, such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Monster* (2003), as well as reality shows, such as *Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014), and documentaries, such as *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009), to name a few, reveal that all of the historically addressed “white trash traits” have not subsided with time but rather pervaded in the mind of the average citizen. On the other hand, the depiction of celebrities, such as Tammy Faye and Billy Beer, as “trashy” has contributed to the use of the poor white image as a commodity in the U.S. consumerist society. *“White Trash”*. *The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2017) speaks about the reality of a social category that has been ignored for centuries. According to Isenberg, this group has also played a very important role in the creation of America as a land made by the interactions of many—not only Anglo-Saxon—cultures:

“White trash” is a central, if disturbing, thread in our national narrative. The very existence of such people—both in their visibility and invisibility—is proof that American society obsesses over the mutable labels we give to the neighbors

¹⁴ “Social category” refers to a position of hopelessness created by misguided beliefs. The term was coined by social studies scholars to research social factors leading to these positions. This notion has been extensively used within the discipline of “whiteness studies” as a tool for the analysis of the oppressed white minorities. The term has also been subject of analysis within the theoretical framework of Intersectionality.

we wish not to notice. "They are not who we are." But they are who we are and have been a fundamental part of our history, whether we like it or not. (321)

Overall, the new perspective presented by revisionist historians encompasses a clearer, more transparent explanation about the origins of the "white trash" conflict. In line with this, this project relies on history-revisited interpretations of, for, and about poor whites to lay the groundwork for a more objective view of this underclass, without which the work of writers of poor white origins would be difficult to understand.

The second perspective adopted in further researching the poor white predicament centers on the investigative work performed by scholars in a "new humanities subfield," whiteness studies (Wiegman 1999). The work that such a discipline has performed on other-than-hegemonic whites reveals as a tool with which to perform a more comprehensive reading of Dorothy Allison's fiction's "white trash" identity portrayal. This dissertation relies on the theories of two prominent scholars in the field of "white trash" studies, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, to examine the situation of poor whites/"white trash" within whiteness.¹⁵

To understand the emergence of whiteness studies, one must first examine the origins and evolution of the contemporary meaning(s) of whiteness. Though whiteness has mostly been associated with power, supremacy, and superiority, Wiegman suggests that a feeling of disaffiliation from white supremacist practices on the mainstream whites was already visible in the nineteen sixties (119). This division between white supremacist practices and the desire from some to "counteract" them yielded a new form of contemporary white racial formation which Howard Winant has defined as white racial dualism (qtd. n Wiegman, *ibid*). White disaffiliation from whiteness, as a symbol of superiority, is known as "liberal whiteness;" that

¹⁵ Wiegman places these two scholars within the whiteness studies' trajectory of inquiry known as "white trash" studies (122).

is, “a ‘color-blind moral sameness’ whose reinvestment in America rehabilitates the national narrative of democratic progress in the aftermath of social dissent and crisis” (121). Liberal whiteness is responsible for the popular imagery in narratives featuring whites in a multiplicity of roles, always showing empathy or exerting liberatory acts on behalf of the weaker and in need.¹⁶ Such narratives started in the nineteen sixties and have become more visible from the nineteen eighties onwards. While “liberal whiteness” seems well-intended and harmless, its images of white heroes representing and acting for the weaker conceal ulterior motives, as representations of liberal whiteness have become, nationwide, commodities for the American public and, internationally, false portrayals of the U.S.

Wiegman defines whiteness studies as “a self-styled response to various demands for whites to quit studying ‘the other’ and study themselves” (122). This discipline, already a course in many colleges and universities’ syllabi, comprises three trajectories of inquiry: first, the “race traitor” school advocates the abolition of whiteness through white disaffiliation from race privilege.¹⁷ The second trajectory, the “white trash” school, analyzes the racialization of the permanent poor in order to demonstrate the otherness of whiteness within.¹⁸ Last, the “class solidarity” school views the history of working-class struggle as anticipatory of new cross-racial alliances potentially materializing, thus threatening the hegemonic whites’ fear of losing social and political control. These three subcategories to whiteness studies have their basis on David Roediger’s analysis of the creation of the white working class in the nineteenth century, *Wages of Whiteness* (1999), which explores the history of Irish immigrants as an example of whiteness as a social construction, and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and*

¹⁶ Films, such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Independence Day* (1996), or *Forrest Gump* (1994) show a new side to the so-called white supremacist, that of being empathic and liberatory of the marginalized. In these, whites are shown as soldiers of civil rights, leaders a post-racist U.S.-based new world order, or simply as the embodiment of white male goodness.

¹⁷ This being directly associated with the concept of liberal whiteness.

¹⁸ This trajectory of inquiry is the academic source this project mainly relies on to set the stage on which poor whites/“white trash” have been misinterpreted.

the Literary Imagination (1993), which is believed to have precipitated whiteness studies as a discipline towards exploring “the other,” other than blackness.¹⁹

Aiming to analyze whiteness as a non-defining marker of superiority, this project examines the “white trash” school’s theories on the “otherness” of whiteness. On this note, the work carried out by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz has been insightful. In *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1997), Newitz and Wray define “white trash” as “unnamable: a race (white) which is used to code ‘wealth’ is coupled with an insult (trash) which means, in this instance, economic waste” (8). Because of the complexity of the subject under study, Wray claims that “white trash” studies casts doubt over the belief that whiteness equates superiority:

...the question of how white themselves are internally differentiated, how the same white skin that has facilitated the integration, assimilation, and enrichment of some does not guarantee that others—such poor whites and queer whites—might not also experience deprivation, stigmatization, and subjugation. Scholars of “multiraciality” have helped to show how race is simultaneously connected to and disconnected from bodies and narratives about bodies, especially when those bodies can pass for white. Moreover, scholars of sexuality and difference, such as Cherrie Moraga, have argued that lesbian or gay whiteness does not guarantee, nor does it entirely abrogate, access to white skin privilege. (2001, 8)

As seen, the “other” does not necessarily have to be racially different, but a class within whiteness, an idea at odds with the popular belief that preaches whiteness as a sign of superiority. Given the “contradiction” originated within the concept of whiteness, predominantly due to the emergence of whiteness studies, a brief exploration of hegemonic,

¹⁹ Both works are analyzed in later pages.

superior, or mainstream whiteness—as in the great majority of the white population—is deemed fit.

In *The Making and Un-Making of Whiteness* (2001), Matt Wray states, firstly, that whiteness has always been a taken-for-granted privilege so entrenched in the minds of mainstream whites that it seems to appear natural and normative. Indeed, for the most part, the white world does not consider itself white, but rather considers the non-white “others” people of color. Therefore, though their race is invisible to them, it becomes utterly visible (hyper-visible) to others made different by them. Yet, this invisibility posits a clear distinction between a group of white insiders who cannot recognize themselves for who they really are and non-white outsiders whose point of view affords them authentic insight. In addition, whites who are positioned differently in society have an extremely hard time realizing their social stand in their own world, as they see themselves invisible for belonging to the norm, which is the case of the poor whites/“white trash.” Secondly, whiteness as a category of identity has no positive content (10), as the way whites resort to self-identification is constituted solely by absence or appropriation. This proposal sustains that white is only for what is not. In the third place, scholars also conceive whiteness as a structural privilege. For instance, young whites are up to four times more likely than equally qualified blacks to be given work in the service sector; or, when buying property, white families are shown houses in the best neighborhoods and are more eligible for better financial terms at the time to apply for loans (11). These “social practices” have helped to engineer patterns of spatial segregation by race and class.

The “superiority” of whiteness also brings forth its association with violence and terror. Over the years, “whites” have exerted control on “subordinate” classes by transmitting an ever-present and overbearing feeling of dread. Moreover, this white supremacist power has been the

reason of contemporary conceptions of race and institutionalized racial inequality, notions that have strongly re-emerged in contemporary America.²⁰

One last observation about critical whiteness studies—a term Matt Wray prefers over whiteness studies—deserves mention. In the quote below, Wray explains the aim of critical whiteness studies:

Whiteness, it is argued, serves as a foundation for racial domination and inequality. Through careful study of how white privilege has been historically constructed, we may find ways to dismantle it or abolish it altogether, thereby destroying the entire system of racial stratification. (13)

For the “white trash” school, “white trash” is a particularized and hybridized form of “whiteness” (5). This rationale provides a “reconceived” concept of whiteness in today’s U.S. multicultural social setting. Minority intellectuals, such as Toni Morrison, have called for whites to reevaluate themselves and their identities self-consciously, thus seeking a more realistic and comprehensible understanding of whiteness as a concrete, racially distinguished group functioning on an equal plane to other groups alike. “The “white trash” scholars believe that, unlike many white people, “white trash” have the potential to perform the work of racial self-recognition and self-consciousness that some scholars found absent in dominant forms of whiteness” (Wray 1997, 5). The concept of poor whites/“white trash,” as victims of inequality, employed in this project has its basis on the theoretical constructs of the “white trash” school.

The third perspective to explore “white trash” social predicament deals directly with their misrepresentation through the southern literary tradition. Though, by the turn of the nineteenth century, authors such as William Dean Howells (1837-1920), Henry James (1843-

²⁰ For instance, on August 12, 2017, the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, was witness to violent unrests between far-right white hegemonic nationalists and counter-protesters, resulting in several injured and one death. For more information see <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>.

1916) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) had started to call attention to the unpreparedness of southern rural areas in an industrialized society, an accurate portrayal of the poor of the South was yet to be depicted. The first half of the twentieth century gave birth to authors such as Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987) and William Faulkner (1897-1962) with unique approaches on the South. The former embraced the older stereotypes, resulting in portraying the poor as shiftless, dull-witted degenerates, while the latter drew characters beyond the poor white stereotype of “something more than a primitive” to transform them into people whose individual consciousness needed to be examined (Flynt 77). Yet amid such awareness arousal, there were still authors who, in their work, failed to acknowledge the predicament of southern white poverty. For instance, Margaret Mitchell’s (1900-1949) *Gone with the Wind* (1936), with its paternalistic and patronizing masters and mistresses towards domestic servitude and plantation slaves, did not contribute to expose the reality of poor whites, but rather it showed their contemptible side through characters, such as Emma Slattery, a “white trash” young woman living in the swamps nearby Tara, looked down upon by her richer neighbors.

This attitude against “white trash” is also noticed in southern modernists who adopted themes such as the Civil War and the agrarian tradition as part of their inherited past.²¹ The Southern Agrarians, for example, have been identified as a group of writers who believed in returning to a “simpler life,” but who also ignored slavery and denounced progress, moved by a nostalgic feeling for the past. The Agrarian pastoral became one of the defining characteristics of southern modernism, as many writers adopted its creed to oppose the impingement of modernity. They envisioned a “conception of rural or semi-rural life enriched by tradition, religion, stable and predictable social behavior, and feelings of individual worth” (Lawson 12), viewing life in the urban areas as disordered and chaotic. As Mathew Guinn explains, the main

²¹ The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a framework of a specifically “southern” literary consciousness (Guinn xvii).

goal for writers of the Agrarian pastoral resided in “the recovery of cultural identity figured in their fiction” (xviii). Nonetheless, a sense of incompleteness and fatalism was recurrent in these writers, who were identified by scholars as belonging to what is known as the Southern Renaissance.²²

Skepticism about the Agrarians’ reconstructed myth of the “Old South” grew larger in the decades following the nineteen sixties. In the eighties, a new generation of white writers of poor origins began to speak out about the reality of the South, each from a unique perspective. Educated, yet raised in poor white families, these authors rely not only on fiction, but also on biographies, essays, conferences, and personal interviews to uncover a reality of the cultural myth of the South never told before. The new group came from a social class of whites “almost entirely unrepresented in the Agrarians’ conception of the region” (Guinn 2). Harry Crews and Dorothy Allison are considered to be at the forefront of this group whose fiction has been shaped by their own personal experiences and whose work has rebutted the agrarian and mythological conceptions of southern culture, “supplanting the traditional myths of a leisurely, aristocratic, and pastoral civilization with unflinching depictions of the brutal poverty at the bottom levels of the culture” (3). In this regard, Dorothy Allison has been considered as one of the first to unveil the issue of class in southern literature (Isenberg 2017). One cannot deny that Allison’s South has nothing to do with that of previous writers. In the words of Matthew Guinn, Allison’s South:

...is impoverished, benighted and repressive—a sort of Third World antithesis to the pastoral plenty of Agrarian conceptions. In venturing to tell her own stories unflinchingly [...] Allison has [...] made room in southern literature for

²² This writing style was short-lived, however, as “with the progression of modernity, the old myths were adulterated, their power diluted for the southern literary imagination” (Guinn xix).

other stories, other perspectives, in a literature that had previously taken no notice of them. (6)

Apart from being straightforward, brutally honest and crude, Allison's narrative has been one of the first to offer alternatives to the social encasement of poor whites/"white trash." For example, her novels suggest an escape route to social despise. Through the story of her child-protagonists, always victims of violence, abuse, poverty and social blundering, Allison paves the road towards the building of self-worth and social acceptance.

2.2 Intersectionality and Identity as Frameworks of Analysis for Dorothy Allison's Identity Proposal.

Intersectionality was born in the nineteen eighties and nineties because of a need to theorize and differentiate between identity and oppression in the parameters of nationalism, social class, gender, and ethnicity. As a distinctively new approach, intersectionality has been crucial for anti-racist and feminist scholars to expose mechanisms of social power from the dominant class. Illustrative of this is Patricia Hill Collins's research on the traditional concept of the "American family." In her article "Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Nation: Some Implications for Black Family Studies" (1990), Collins employs intersectionality to study the Black family organization in U.S. society. She states that "within paradigms of intersectionality, any specific social location where such systems of oppression meet or intersect generates a distinctive group history or experience" (27). The core of her study is the research of the present (American) Black family, its changing role in American society and the conflicting paradigms that such a change means for not only the Black family organization, but also the American traditional family ideal.

In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991), Kimberlé Crenshaw uses intersectionality to examine social violence

against women of color at the junction of the intersecting categories of gender and race. Her approach constitutes a turn in the use of this framework, as, before Crenshaw, identity categories were treated as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different (1242). Crenshaw argues that intersectionality is to be used not negatively, but as a source of social empowerment and reconstruction. She believes it is more constructive to study the different categories hindering identity together, and not in isolation. She alludes to the fact that “ignoring difference *between* groups contributes to tension *among* groups” (1242).

In her article, Crenshaw states “women of color”—with their intersectional identity of both women and color— have not been given the appropriate attention by feminist and anti-racist discourses. These had always responded to one or the other but not to both of them altogether. It is Crenshaw’s claim that identity categories [in Black women’s lives] cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions separately. In arguing her case, Crenshaw delineates three classifications of intersectionality in the study of oppressed subjects: structural, meaning “the ways in which the location of women of color at the juncture of race and gender makes violence, rape, and remedial reform [intersecting categories] qualitatively different from, for example, that old white women”(1245); political, pertaining to how political agendas get in the way of helping women escape their location (1252); and representational, which relates to the “mythical” representation of marginalized groups by popular culture. As seen, Crenshaw’s approach is more comprehensive than Collins’s as it allows for categories to merge and juxtapose in the analysis of social locations. It is a perspective which considers possible intersecting categories or “axes” (borrowing Collins’s terminology) as inclusive of one another instead of mutually exclusive. From this angle, intersectionality becomes a positive tool to expose systems of oppression not among conventionally delineated categories (race and gender separately) but within these categories themselves.



The ideas brought forth by Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw consolidated the use of intersectionality as a framework of analysis, no longer viewed as a tool to expose oppression, but as an instrument for the development and enhancement of social reconstruction in which segregation, discrimination, and subjugation do not exist. Yet this conceptual framework posits challenges ahead due to the fluid nature of its axes of convergence: categories may merge to create social oppression of some groups over others, but also to create the same oppression within the oppressed groups, thus revealing a complexity of extensive magnitude. An illustration is the case of “white trash” women who become victims of violence and discrimination from “white trash” men.

In her article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality” (2005), while recognizing the importance of intersectionality, Leslie McCall is prompt to address the issue of its complexity:

Intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems and, partly as an unintended consequence, has limited the range of methodological approaches used to study intersectionality [...] The complexity arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis. (1772)

The key to intersectionality, according to McCall, is in finding suitable methodologies for an effective use of it. McCall defines methodology as a “coherent set of ideas about philosophy, methods, and data that underlie the research process and the production of knowledge” (1774). Focusing on the assumption that “research practice mirrors the complexity of social life” and, therefore, must meet unique methodological demands (1772), McCall proposes three approaches or methodologies for the study of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations. These three methodological approaches are defined according to their position towards the categories they study, analyze, and understand.

The anti-categorical complexity approach is based on the deconstruction of analytical categories. Assuming that social life is too complex from which to make fixed categories, this approach claims that social categories are to appear “as simplified social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (1773). It is extremely useful as new marginalized groups in society start to emerge. This approach, for instance, presents the solution for otherwise “in-between” underprivileged social groups such as bisexuals, transgendered, and queer, which had originally been included in the social group originally containing either straight or gay members of society. The anti-categorical approach challenges the singularity, separateness, and wholeness of a wide range of social categories (1778), as it facilitates the understanding of “the other marginalized elements” in society.

The second approach, defined as intra-categorical complexity, questions the need to set boundaries (lines of demarcation) to social categories, while acknowledging the solid and durable foundation that social categories offer to society. This approach is particularly useful to focus on specific social groups at neglected points of intersection —people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups (1774). Due to its adaptable nature, the intra-categorical approach has been used more recently by scientists in case studies. Feminists, antiracists, and disability studies researchers use the case study method to identify a new or invisible group. Of great interest is the range of diversity and difference that this approach can reveal within a single social group. Along this line, McCall’s highlights the “ambivalent” status of social categories. For example, some scholars use categories to study their subject from a broader angle (different groups under different locations by several systems of oppression), while others prefer a narrower scope, (one specific social group whose systems of oppression are “converging axes” for new social locations). Whichever route scholars and theorists take for their research, the point is, says McCall, “not to deny the importance of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced,

and resisted in everyday life” (1783). It is in processing categories that a last approach comes to light.

The inter-categorical approach, McCall’s last approach, requires researchers to provisionally adopt existing analytical categories within the framework of intersectionality.²³ Inter-categorical complexity is dynamic and diverse, as it calls for interrelations between more than one analytical category, and allows critical thinking of already-established categories, granting scholars freedom to build new categories when necessary. The inter-categorical approach utilizes categories as “vectors of convergence,” leading to the social location in which the marginalized are placed. In other words, the socially marginalized position (social location) of a 45-year-old white single western female living in Pakistan has been determined by at least five different categories (age, race, social status, culture, and gender) under a given dominating social environment (living in Pakistan). This approach has been named by its author as “the categorical approach” (1773-1784). The inter-categorical approach studies interactions among several groups or social categories and not in single groups or categories: “the subject is multi-group, and the method is systematically comparative” (1786). McCall tends to feel comfortable with this approach as she uses in her address of relationships of inequality of specific social groups. Once all different groups under analysis have been examined individually, the categorical approach tends to bring “the various pieces of the analysis together” (1787) into one or two “between-group” relationships, whereas its counterparts (anti- and intra-categorical approaches) tend to let the resulting categories of none or a single social group move freely originating multi-group relationships. Though McCall’s contributions to understanding intersectionality are revealing, her framework is not without flaws, as it has not yet clearly delineated the parameters regarding the method to follow. It is McCall herself who states that

²³ Including, but no limited to, those of race, gender, class and sexual orientation, known, in the field of social studies, as the Big Four (Wray 2006).

this proposal of methodological approaches is not, by any means, an exact science and that, at times, more than one approach may be used in a single study (1795). Nonetheless, McCall's concept of methodological approaches within intersectionality has motivated to contribute to clarify the obscure nature of intersectionality. Acknowledging Collins's positive perspective on intersectionality and Crenshaw's notions of categorical interrelatedness, this project adopts McCall's approaches to the complexity of categories upon studying Allison's literary production.

Intersectionality has also been used in textual criticism. Karen Gaffney in her article "Excavated from the Inside': 'White Trash' and Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller*" (2003) examines the functions of intersectionality:

Intersectionality resists the divisions that separate categories like race and gender and instead allows for analysis of how individuals are positioned in multiple categories simultaneously. Focusing on the intersections of these categories prevents them from becoming mutually exclusive or hierarchical.

(43)

Gaffney goes on to state that "Intersectionality, on the other hand, de-normalizes whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and middle-or upper-class status, avoiding the problem of privileging one category over another" (44). By delineating the dynamic aspects of intersectionality, Gaffney has proved the versatile nature of this theoretical framework and its validity in academic literary criticism.

In her analysis of Dorothy Allison's novel *Cavedweller* (1998), Gaffney takes a piece of literary work to expose and challenge the intersectionality of "white trash." The scholar follows Crenshaw's classifications of intersectionality, while focusing on a cultural representational approach. She analyzes Allison's novel's portrayal of "white trash" as the

juncture at which the categories of “queer,” “white,” and “trash” overlap, intersect, and blend to come to a location of intense complexity, being both opposing and empowering. The location of “queer white trash” opposes the traditional negative meaning of the term by “breaking the vicious cycle of self-hatred, blame, and stereotypes” (45). Gaffney uses Crenshaw’s “representational” classification of intersectionality (multiple categories intersect with “cultural imagery”) to explain Allison’s characters’ acknowledgement and understanding of the cultural images of “white trash” and, thus opposing resistance to these cultural beliefs. “Queer white trash” becomes not a social location by which to expose mechanisms of oppression, but the result of having used intersectionality as an “enhancer” for new positive identities. Operating under an intersectional framework of analysis, Gaffney’s article proves that intersectionality is not only a valid, but also versatile, method of study for areas of inquiry outside social studies, such as academic literary criticism.

Though Karen Gaffney opted to follow Crenshaw’s classification of intersectionality, Allison’s novel may have been proven valid under McCall’s theory of intersectionality complexity approaches. Not only does *Cavedweller* (1998) posit resistance to the cultural imagery of “white trash” but reveals different social groups placed in parallel social locations, as analyzed by one of the articles presented in this project. To illustrate, the figure of the poor African-American woman appears hand in hand with the figure of “queer white trash female,” which goes to show the sites that several, and supposedly different, socially oppressed groups occupy may be brought up jointly for identity (re)building processes. In her conclusion, Gaffney blends both groups, once at parallel locations, into one with the following words: “This coalition between an African-American woman and a woman labelled “white trash” is a crucial refusal to accept a history that has generally divided the two groups” (56). Such statement transpires McCall’s inter-categorical approach: these two separate groups have worked their way into one to resist and oppose the superior white establishment. McCall’s inter-categorical

approach studies and analyzes multiple social groups to arrive at the formation of one, unique, sole location that could empower, unite, and consolidate the marginalized and underprivileged against the hegemonic class. Moreover, McCall's anti-categorical approach would have also been most appropriate to pinpoint the location of "queer white trash," as a newly formed social location separated from queer and "white trash".

As a final reflection, intersectionality grants the scholar enough freedom to move about the social categories affecting the locations of the oppressed to arrive at the objective knowledge of why, when, and how such locations came into being. It is by knowing how these and other social aspects of society have come to sustain matrices of power (Moya 80) that we can start to build on new and true identities.

To reach an understanding of Dorothy Allison's proposal for white trash subjectivity reconstruction in her long fiction, exploring the concept of identity is deemed necessary. For the purpose of analysis, identity unfolds into at least four different manifestations: public identity, subjectivity, group identity and cultural identity.

In regard to public identity and subjectivity, Linda Martín Alcoff explains that though these aspects are interconnected and interdependent, they are also metaphysically distinguishable. Using her case as an example, she elaborates:

Public Identity [...] is external, visible, and under only limited individual control. It is what I am seen as, though I may be seen as something different in different cultural contexts. It is produced through social mechanisms of categorization and learned modes of perception. It is used by those around me, consciously and unconsciously, to interpret the meanings of my actions and utterances, with more or less accuracy and goodwill. Subjectivity [...] refers to

my own sense of myself, my lived experience of my self, or my interior life.
(336)

By this definition, public identity is the perception of oneself that others have formed based on circumstances contingent upon cultural contexts over which the individual has no control. Public identity is not an indicator of subjectivity, for subjectivity originates in one's own perception of his/her reality. However, upon the individual coming in contact with others, as is the case of Dorothy Allison's characters, both public identity and subjectivity coexist, while influencing and conditioning each other. Such an interplay, nonetheless, is not solely determined by the coexistence of public identity and subjectivity, but by other notions of self-identification, necessary for the reconstruction of the self. With this in mind, one must not rule out the interconnectedness existing between group identity and cultural identity. Cultural identity is that what defines a group or a collective through their actions, interactions and in relation to where they live and exist. Dominick LaCapra explains that, as identity involves different modes of living with others, it is important:

...to explore the relations and articulations among various qualifiers of identity, especially group identity, which may be ascribed by others, taken up or confronted by the self or by members of the group, deconstructed, refunctioned, affirmed or acknowledged in more or less revised fashion, earned through collective activity, and recognized, validated, or invalidated by others. (228)

As shown, group identity unfolds as another attribute of identity which begs consideration and study alongside other modifiers of the self, whether public or private, group or individual, taking part in the conditioning and modification of subjectivity. Public, subjective/individual, group and cultural identities represent some of the manifestations by which to understand identity.

From a different perspective, identity can also be analyzed according to the degree of subordination or domination one group may have over another. Along this line, identity may be understood as either dominant or subaltern. These aspects of identity add new information to the concept. Because identity(ies) may evolve and transform as one social group, thought of as subaltern, which in turn may change and transform to occupy the dominant site due to any given turn of circumstances, events or interactions, its nature is not solid but fluid.

The aforementioned identity variants play an important role in analyzing the predicament of the oppressed of any nature (an individual, group, culture, public identity or subjectivity), or in relation to others (dominant or subaltern). Further, the oppressed need to acquire enough knowledge about aspects of society leading to their oppression. This knowledge, in turn, will help start a subjectivity (re)building process enabling the oppressed to resist and confront oppression either on their own and/or with the help of their community. Under this light, the term identity changes its meaning, as it no longer refers to an imposed-upon or forced state of being, but rather to a much desired attainable one. Taking all of the above into account, identity may mean either the site occupied (forced upon) by an individual or group of individuals in society, or the site that such an individual or group wishes to occupy through a process of re-building, or recovering, the self.

This process is not without flaws, however, for the realization that one is not what one wishes to be, but what others think of him/her could result in internal conflict. In the case of Dorothy Allison, having been born extremely poor and, later, having discovered her homosexuality, the author underwent a period of self-hatred and hatred for others, translated into, firstly, her desire to blend in with the mainstream white society (which caused a deep feeling of guilt for hiding her own identity) and, secondly, her coping with the grief of no longer knowing who she was or where she belonged (Allison 1998, 33). Allison's awareness of her social location of poor white lesbian is sadly rare among her kin, who, in the best of cases, have

resigned themselves to living under the label of “white trash.” Speaking of her people, “they [Allison’s family] held the dogged conviction that the admirable thing to do was keep a sense of humor, never whine or cower, and trust that luck might someday turn as good as it had been bad— and with just as much reason” (25).

Despite the apathy that the poor whites have always shown about their condition, Allison’s work has been considered an important contribution to raising awareness of the consequences of the stigma due to her “agency” exerted not only in her life actions, but also in her literary work. Because seeking identity entails the willingness to act upon, represent, and resist social locations of oppression, a reflection on the relationship between identity and agency is hereby offered.

In the process of re-building or recovering identity, the use of memory or re-memory becomes necessary in an effort to retrieve at least some pieces of one’s lived past. Through thinking back to past experience(s), the machinery of cultural or social identity building is put in motion. Contrary to the essentialist view, which considers past experiences the element that grants stability to the identity of a collective, and to the postmodernist view, which deems them (past experiences) as basically rather unstable and slippery (Mohanty 30), Satya Mohanty offers a more open definition of experience: he explains that, for the scholar, experience, properly interpreted,²⁴ can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point out instances and sources of real mystification. According to him, “experience refers very simply to the variety of ways humans process information” (Mohanty 32).

Having considered experience from a different approach, Mohanty draws out a realist theory of cultural or social identity in which experiences, though not being a direct and reliable source of knowledge, would provide some of the raw material with which to construct

²⁴ Properly interpreted experience(s) originates in the effort to acquire objective knowledge while ‘negotiating’ with the feelings and emotions that such experience(s) may bring about.

identities. To substantiate his claim, Mohanty proceeds to state that personal experience is socially and theoretically constructed. As the oppressed have been subjected to and subjugated by the social environment around them, their accounts of the world become theories with which to read and interpret their world. The theories that the oppressed may construct about their surrounding reality are in part originated in the emotions that the memory of experience may trigger. But to think that all emotions are equally justified or rational would, indeed, be naïve. Emotions are not infallible sources of knowledge. Conversely, we cannot presuppose they all are false sources of true knowledge as emotions are regulated in part by the social norm we live under and therefore are contingent upon the political and social constructs of a normative society. The key to the right interpretation of these socially constructed feelings resides in the postpositivist realist notion of theory-mediated objectivity. As Mohanty puts it:

Experiences are crucial indexes of our relationships with our world (including our relationships with ourselves), and to stress their cognitive nature is to argue that they can be susceptible to varying degrees of socially constructed truth and error and can serve as sources of objective knowledge or socially produced mystification. (38)

What the author means is that there is a “cognitive” component to experience (they provide us with a way of knowing about our social reality) and, in turn, to the emotions they elicit. Some evaluations generated by this cognitive component of experience (from vaguely felt ethical judgments to more developed normative theories of right and wrong):

... can in crucial instances enable and facilitate greater accuracy in representing social reality, providing better ways of organizing the relevant or salient facts, urging us to look in newer and more productive ways to acquire the necessary understanding of the world around us. (Mohanty 40-41)

This entails a negotiation between our past experience and the emotions conditioned by the social environment we move about in order to achieve a more or less accurate and objective view of the social site we occupy; it is in this fashion that experiences can be properly interpreted. Mohanty's view of identity is postpositive inasmuch as it leaves room for error, trial, and negotiations with our theoretical understandings of our world. Under a postpositivist light, recognizing and accepting our feelings makes possible the process of search and discovery through which we come to "discern crucial features of our situation" (41). This "coming to terms" with our experiences and feelings, this effort to tell the crucial from the irrelevant leads us to a more objective knowledge of the reality around us. Therefore, identities, under this postpositive realist approach, come to be defined as "the ways of making sense of our experiences. Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways" (Mohanty 43). On an individual plane, Dorothy Allison's work, from her poetry to her novels represents a theory-mediated process of acknowledging her public identity—her "white trash" condition— through a series of phases, or steps, to ultimately acquiesce the awareness of the self. Such internal conflict is clearly reflected in her novels, which allow the writer to propose alternative subjectivities to stigmatized identities of any kind.

But, as identities also refer to the collective and its cultural aspects, regarding the "white trash" collective and its relationship with identity (re)building processes, one must bear in mind that in order to arrive at the formation of a new cultural identity it is necessary to acquire objective knowledge of the world through the theoretical knowledge that activism creates. In other words, the acquisition of collective knowledge through theoretical constructions about the world around us is the foundation to social or cultural identity. As Mohanty states, "In them [theoretical constructions], and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments, we give texture and form to our collective futures" (43). This postpositivist theory of identity by which we acknowledge and interrogate the consequences of intersecting

aspects of society leading to our social location constitutes the foundation on which to lay the groundwork to recover and/or build a cultural or social identity.

When it comes to interpreting, understanding and/or building cultural identity, Mohanty's theories have been further elaborated on by Brent Henze, who has made a direct address to the concept of agency. He states that for one to interpret one's experiences, "others play an essential and inevitable collaborative role in producing the interpretive framework through which one views one's life" (234). Conceiving "agency" as the instrument with which the oppressed can free or liberate themselves from their social location, and appealing to the claim that "the most potentially transformative politics of liberation must be in the hands of the people liberated" (229), Henze establishes two different manifestations of agency: "individual agency—that is, the opportunity (or the right) for an oppressed person to represent and act for herself,²⁵ as opposed to simply providing the epistemic 'grounds' for another to represent her and act on her behalf" (237); and collective agency, as the opportunity²⁶ granted to a group of individuals where oppression is experienced and where (through a process of interpretation) it is theorized, understood, and eventually confronted. Interpreted in this manner, agency becomes the next step towards cultural, collective or even individual identity. Allison's second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998) illustrates the above, as Delia Byrd leans on the support of other oppressed female characters to reject her public identity of "white trash" and seek the reconstruction of a new self-satisfying subjectivity. Both planes, individual and collective interact to resist public identity in search of the self.

In a nutshell, the terms identity and agency complement each other, for acknowledging the need to confront any given location starts within the oppressed themselves, yet such

²⁵ The use of the feminine subject pronoun is Henze's own.

²⁶ For more information on agency please refer to "Who Says Who Says?" In *Reclaiming Identity. Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, edited by Paula L. Moya and Michael Hames Garcia, 229-250. California: UCP, 2000

acknowledgment is reinforced by a collective power of agency allowing the process to evidence greater liberatory political transformation (Henze 237).

Lastly, when we speak of collective identity, we cannot help but think of Cherrie Moraga's "theory in the flesh." Her theory is based on collective suffering, survival and resistance. In the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) Moraga states it clearly:

The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women's lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched [...] This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality. It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision. (xxviii)

It is solidarity, which originates out of necessity, what propels Moraga's theory. This solidarity becomes manifest through acting for and representing the oppressed together, as a whole, as a collective.

As a final reflection, one must conclude that if identity entails acquiring enough and accurate knowledge of the world around us to know the matrices of power holding us down to a social location, agency represents the effort from the individual to stand up to oppression which can and need to be reinforced by others in the community, who have also experienced oppression and may or may have not arrived at the same interpretation as the individual

him/herself. The multiple and varied interpretations offered by both parties (the oppressed and the others in the community) serve the oppressed as the basis for objective (at least in most cases) knowledge on which to start creating his/her desired identity.

On the whole, the methodology offered in this project helps to understand Allison's own process of subjectivity formation and that of her people. It is a theoretical framework which sheds light onto the understanding of the intricacies and complexity that the term "white trash" entails. It is also a viable means to relate and empathize with the vindication of this group, "personalized" in the actions —and interactions— of Dorothy Allison's fictional characters.



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3. Exploring Poor Whites/“White Trash”

3.1 History of a Stigma

3.1.1 Introduction

Considered by some, allegedly, as the greatest country in the world, the United States of America strikes others as a country where the divide between classes appears to be gradually widening as new administrations take the lead in promising a better life for the American people. On 19 December 2017, for instance, the Senate passed GOP’s tax legislation decreasing taxes for the wealthiest from 39.6 percent to 37 percent and corporate tax from 35 percent to 21 percent. Though the low- and middle-income families will experience tax reduction in childcare and Medicare costs, individual income tax cuts will expire in 2026, while corporate tax cuts will be permanent. This will make the poor poorer and the rich richer.²⁷ Whereas the twentieth century has brought numerous social, human-rights and economic changes to the country, everything regarding the well-being of the American people has come to a stand-still nowadays. Moreover, as poverty and social stratification are not ethnicity-oriented, inequality and oppression are found in other groups, including those bearing the alleged mark of superiority —the mark of whiteness—, the poor whites.

The following pages explore the state of affairs which led the poor whites, also known as “white trash,” “poor “white trash,”” or “rednecks,” “hillbillies,” “lubbers,” “crackers,” “trailer trash,” etc., to be at the bottom of the social ladder, not only because of their low economic means, but also because of a social stigma imposed upon by society. To understand

²⁷ For more information go to <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/senate-moves-tax-cut-legislation-to-brink-of-final-passage/ar-BBH0UCm?ocid=News>

“white trash” stigmatizing, the following examines their myths (imposed traits and labels) by taking the reader on a trip through U.S. history, from the colonial period to the present day.

The type applicable to working-class, “briar hoppers,” “mountaineers,” “dock workers,” “farm workers,” “blue collar workers,” etc. is still defined, demarked and stereotyped by the so-called traits or properties of social apathy, laziness, violence, racism, filth, dirtiness, feeble-mindedness, social depravity, contemptibility and despondence, among others (Isenberg 2017). In such a context, the depiction of the “white trash” woman —Dorothy Allison writes about the poor whites also from that perspective— will be brought to the table. Lastly, this thesis examines the power of mass media communications to illustrate the role of today’s popular culture in the misconstruction of the poor.

3.1.2 Tracing Back the Origins

British settlers came to the colonies with the intention to build a societal system very much resembling the one they left back home. While English immigrants from the South and West of England occupied most of the territories in the South, the Appalachian Mountain region was occupied by immigrants from rural Northern England, Scotland, and Southern Ireland (Fischer 255). Most of these were forced to come to the New World; very few came on their own volition. In fact, many scholars specializing in researching indentured servitude agree that at least half —and possibly as many as two thirds— of all white colonial immigrants arrived in chains (Goad 57). Having been abducted, kidnapped, or tricked into leaving home, the new immigrants of the colonial times underwent a journey which proved to be traumatic. Accounts by passengers on ships to the colonies describe the dire conditions these immigrants were forced to be in.²⁸ Living conditions, once they set foot in the new land, were harsh and even fatal for some. These “immigrants” underwent a period of extremely hard adjustment:

²⁸ Gottlieb Mittleberger, a German church organist wrote of the horrid experience passengers on his vessel had lived. Most of these immigrants realized they had been tricked once in high seas. (Goad 61)

The acclimatization phase was known ominously as “seasoning.” With the prick of a mosquito’s proboscis, malaria was shot into their veins. Dysentery wormed a bloody swath through their intestines. Bone-melting fevers often boiled them alive. According to accounts from both Virginia and the West Indies during the 1600s, roughly eighty percent of white slaves/servants died within the first twelve months after arrival. Thousands and thousands of white servants, male and female, quietly perished in tropical squalor, their ‘seasoning’ having rendered them crispy corpses. (Goad 57)

In the Virginia colony, planters started to rely on their indentured servants for economic prosperity. As Ronald Takaki explains, in the South, tobacco agriculture and the generation of profits depended on indentured white workers more than on blacks.²⁹ Alongside this population of white indentured servants, there existed a group of English, German and Irish men and women regarded as outcasts of society. These consisted of convicts, “rogues, vagabonds, whores, cheats, and rabble of all descriptions, raked from the gutter” (Takaki 53).³⁰

Though mutual feelings of fear and hostility existed among white workers and Africans, they shared a condition of exploitation and abuse. For instance, the white indentured servants were punished for recalcitrance and did not enjoy total freedom, as many had to have a pass to leave the plantation. The reason for such a harsh treatment on the white indentured servitude, as historian James Leyburn stated, was “that [the Negro] was a permanent piece of property and must be conserved; the servant was a temporary investment to be exploited to the full” (In Goad 67-68). Both races, whites and blacks, felt the oppression of planters under extreme

²⁹ Takaki states that, as in 1619 Virginia had no law legalizing slavery, Africans were sold as indentured servants, bound by contract to serve a master for four to seven years to repay the expense of their passage. He speculates that although they had been “sold,” the first Africans in Virginia probably were not slaves (52).

³⁰ Goad asserts that convicts were possibly the first group in America to be verbally likened to trash. However, most convicts were not criminals, he goes on to explain. Most of them were convicted of larceny, what would be considered today as “petty theft” (69).

conditions to such an extent that they felt united in their suffering. Feeling the “threat” of a potential coalition between them, the Virginia legislature complained about the alliance the English poor had formed with “Negroes” to escape the harsh labor conditions on the plantation (Takaki 54). As alliances between the two groups were being formed, more rigid and stringent measures were applied to white servants and black slaves (55). Gradually, the plantation system, once based on indentured servitude alone, started to rely on slavery —lifelong servitude— more than on any other kind of work contractual agreement.

The shift in labor of the southern plantation is due to several reasons: first, the protection of white servants’ rights raised labor costs to such an extent that white indentured servitude became high-maintenance and costly.³¹ As a result, the supply of white servants diminished as more African markets opened up. Second, although economics played a decisive factor into the shift from white servants/slaves to blacks, planters perceived blacks as less criminal and more docile than their white counterparts. Last, blacks were more easily identifiable by their skin color. Should a black slave escape the plantation, for instance, he could always be “known” and taken back into custody (Goad 71).

Once the plantation system was firmly rooted in all-black slavery, poor whites were pushed out into a landless, vagrant life. Resentful and discontent, the poor white class turned into the “unruly underclass;” one that needed to be kept at bay. Having established such social demarcation among the lower classes —black slaves and landless poor whites— the British colonies and settlers felt more at ease in a place thought of as a home away from home. Barney Warf explains:

³¹ It became common knowledge, back in England, the servant trade was based on “a web of lies,” which included abduction and kidnapping, a fact that led to the passing of laws protecting white servants’ working conditions in the colonies.

The South, which embraced slavery with a particular passion, relied on even earlier traditions of English slavery that existed in Mercia, Wessex, and Sussex since the ninth century [...] Serfdom was exceptionally strong in this region. Similarly, share-cropping was invented in post-civil England. Racialized slavery in many respects was an outgrowth of this social formation, adapted to the unique conditions of the New World. (94)

Another factor contributing to the formation of the lower classes resided in the societal organization of the British territories. Following in the steps of the Motherland, the colonies modeled a life based on a strict social hierarchy. As soon as the landed gentry held a firm grip on the new “American” society, the poor—the enslaved or indentured servants and their descendants—became even poorer and more defenseless. To add salt to injury, old stringent social customs were passed on from England to the colonies. For example, in the field of education, the southern states inherited the old English “persistent tendency to generate an undereducated population passed on by a petulant egalitarianism that viewed academic elites with disdain, demeaning the need for ‘book learning’ as unnecessary and anti-religious” (Warf 93). It is not surprising that the general population—those who barely made ends meet and others considered dirt-poor—has been historically regarded as tolerating institutionalized injustice, while displaying reluctance to challenge authority (94).

In tandem with this, this first societal structure became ingrained in the southern states so deeply that notions such as southern elite, gentility, and honor were of extreme importance. Wyatt-Brown noted that the three pillars of the southern society have been ethics (solely based on the notions of southern elite, gentility, and honor, mentioned above), white supremacy, and Christian faith (Wyatt-Brown xi). At first, in the absence of a justice system in place, the

southern gentility administered it their own way,³² displaying “contempt for the weak and poor, and social inferiors was expected to display deference and obedience” (Warf 94). It was this feudal social system what the already emancipated southern states inherited. The very poor and weak were regarded as the lowest on the social ladder and were belittled in American southern society. Defenseless as they were, the poor whites, as an inferior class, were more likely to be given punishment than the white general population. It was this colonial feudal social structure which started to construct terms to make further class distinctions in the underprivileged.

Outside of the plantation realm, the term “lubber” was the first of many associated with white poverty. In his book *Not Quite White: “White Trash” and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (2006), Matt Wray notes the term “lubber” was coined by William Byrd, a member of the southern elite. A tobacco plantation owner and master of indentured servants, Byrd performed a survey of the land between Virginia and North Carolina.³³ He traveled 240 miles along the state line and encountered a very distinct type of settler; one living on the frontier land with no regards for private property, who would squat in huts and cabins and move constantly from place to place. The region was also inhabited by runaway servants and slaves, criminals and “ne’er-do-wells of all sorts” (Wray 25). In his writings, Byrd assigned these backcountry dwellers the name of “lubbers.” To Byrd’s readers —English readers and the first settlers coming from England— the land inhabited by these characters was known as “Lubberland,” an imaginary place of plenty without labor, a land of laziness where inhabitants lolled about without purpose.

Sharing the sentiment of the time towards a respectable life —that of industriousness and an eager disposition towards work— Byrd considered lubbers “idle” or “lazy.” These

³² As Warf explains, this modus operandi was based on ‘lex talionis,’ or otherwise known as the rule of retaliation and retributive justice.

³³ Land surveying was a common practice among southern elite and landed gentry in colonial times. This was a way to know the extension of one’s land and what kind of citizen may live on it. It was also a form of demarking one’s land possessions.

attributes would immediately draw moral condemnation and contempt.³⁴ For the industrious and diligent settler, idleness and laziness were associated with corruption and poverty (McClintock 1995). Put in other words, lubbers soon became known as socially immoral. Their alleged idleness set them apart from the elite and the landowner, serving as a marker of social difference. Byrd's written accounts paint a very grim picture of these lubbers/swamp dwellers:

Living near the swamp, they suffered from "distempered of laziness," which made them "slothful in everything but getting children." They displayed a "cadaverous complexion" and a "lazy, creeping habit." The combination of climate and an unhealthy diet doomed them. Eating swine, they contracted the "yaws," and their symptoms matched those of syphilis: they lost their noses and palates and had hideously deformed faces. With their "flat noses," they not only looked like but also began to act like wild boars. In a "porcivorous," people spent their days foraging and fornicating: when upset, they could be heard yelling out. (Isenberg 54)

Descriptions such as Byrd's have set the basis for the stigmatizing and stereotyping of the landless, vagrant, and poor.³⁵ As Isenberg puts it, the sordid picture of the poor colonists conveyed by travelers and authorities of the time are an unavoidable part of the American past.

The poor of colonial America were not just waste people [...] by reproducing their own kind; they were, to contemporary observers, in the process of creating an anomalous new breed of human, somehow linked to the geographic site they inhabited. A myriad of explorers, amateur scientists and early ethnologists like

³⁴ Other respectable figures of the social elite at the time also expressed their condemnation; for instance, the Clergy, which was a powerful sector of society, set the moral standards of the time period (Wray 152).

³⁵ Members of today's American clergy, such as the Anglican minister John Urston, and authorities, such as Governor Gabriel Johnson of North Carolina, also shared Byrd's comments on the poor class (Isenberg 55).

Byrd all assumed that inferior or mismanaged lands bred inferior, ungovernable people. (56)

Though mocked by others, lubbers, however, were considered harmless and posited no threat to the social establishment. As revolutionary sentiments started to take hold in the minds of the colonists, the lubbers were replaced by a different and more troublesome figure, the “cracker.”

By the seventeen sixties, poor white colonists dramatically increased in the territories of the Upper Ohio Valley, the western reaches of Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia where life meant “survival of the fittest.” These poor colonists became outlaw frontiersmen and were made of backwoods men who stole, “had a reputation of being ill-mannered, arrogant, treacherous, and cruel, stealing from Indians and propertied colonists alike” (Wray 34).³⁶ Though the type resembled its counterpart (“lubber”), the term implied a different meaning:

Lubber connoted idleness, squalor, filth, and perversity-evoking pathos, scorn, and laughter, but not terror or alarm. Cracker, on the other hand signified a dangerous and volatile social group, one to be feared and respected, posing a distinct threat to the stability of the colonial social order and the security of other colonists. Cracker was not so much a term of contempt as it was a term that spoke to the fears and anxieties, and grudging respect that these poor whites evoked among other colonists. (Wray 37)

This group of poor whites attempted against not only moral codes but agreements between the colonists and the Cherokee Indians, who were being constantly and continually undermined, robbed and attacked by the type. Crackers also conducted guerrilla rebellions against planters and yeomen smallholders. Unlike lubbers, who did nothing to directly provoke hostilities,

³⁶ A 1766 report by Gavin Cochrane on the behavior of certain British subjects in the upper Ohio River Valley to the Earl of Dartmouth contained the term “cracker” as synonym of poor white.

crackers managed to incite the repressive violence of planters and small-land holders, who, calling themselves the “Regulators,” would rampage throughout the backcountry, “burning cabins of outlaws, capturing others and their families subjecting them to public whippings” (Wray 37-38). The “Regulators”’ reactionary actions paid off through the enactment of vagrancy laws requiring landless whites to work six days a week or face public flogging and humiliation, thus resulting in the creation of new sources exploitable labor (39).

During the Revolution, poor whites —lubbers, crackers, and others— enrolled in the ranks of the military to fight for a new country, in high hopes of a fair treatment. Yet, despite their efforts to be seen as active members of society, the stigma never disappeared. In fact, after the colonies gained their independence, the term cracker —as a synonym of “poor, landless white”— encountered another term, the “squatter.”

As frontiers opened in Post-Revolutionary times, settlers looked to the West in search of an idyllic place where the ideal American man could till the land and build a prosperous, honorable life. But the type of inhabitant they found was not Jefferson’s ideal of “a sturdy yeoman on his cultivated fields; they found the ragged squatter in his log cabin” (Isenberg 106).³⁷ The presumptive “new man” of the squatter’s frontier embodied the best and the worst of the American character. The “Adam” of the American wilderness, as Isenberg puts it, had a split personality: he was half hearty rustic and half dirk-carrying highwayman:

In his most favorable cast as backwoodsman, he was a homespun philosopher, an independent spirit, and a strong and courageous man who shunned fame and wealth. But turn him over and he became the white savage, a ruthless brawler and eye-gouger. This unwholesome type lived a brute existence in a dingy log

³⁷ Isenberg makes explicit that the existence of the southern backcountry, as a distinct area different from the East Coast settlement, continued after the Revolution as new frontiers emerged during the early republic, hence people’s desires to explore beyond former colonial territories (359).

cabin, with yelping dogs at his heels, a haggard wife, and a mongrel brood of brown and yellow brats to complete the sorry scene. (107)³⁸

The squatter's stigma described him as in constant motion. Deprived of social advancement, squatters' only recourse was to move "freely" about the country. As the term had negative semantic implications such as squashing, flattening out, or beating down, squatters became associated with lesser peoples, perhaps because the word evoked the squatting position of lowering down, not standing (109). Because of their reputation of ruthless Indian fighters, horse thieves and wanderers, squatters were gradually identified with crackers, allegedly sharing many of the latter's "white trash" stereotypes, such as being considered landless, proprietors of nothing, and vagabonds, to name a few. To these traits others were added by the mainstream and elite society, resulting in these groups becoming identifiable by their idleness, despondence, and criminality. On the one hand, squatters were also associated with five specific traits: crude habitations, boastful vocabulary, distrust of civilization and city folk, an instinctive love of liberty (licentiousness), and degenerate patterns of breeding. On the other, crackers had a "telltale gait" that identified their distinct physiognomy. As one traveler put it, while describing an inhabitant of the Appalachian West, he ran across a "lantern-jawed, double-jointed backwoodsman, measuring some seven feet one in his stocking feet," or as another traveler said, referring to the inhabitants of southern Illinois, they were "gaunt, long-limbed, lantern-jawed..." The women had the same protruding jaw and swarthy complexion and were described as toothless (112-114). In the end, despite their differences and similarities, squatters and crackers became America's stereotypes of the poor white backcountry type.³⁹

³⁸ It is interesting to observe that this image of poor whites has remained intact, representing one of the scariest portrayals attributed to poor whites, "white trash," rednecks, hillbillies and the like. This is reflected, for instance, in James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1970) whose film adaptation (1972) exacerbated the stereotype.

³⁹ Judging by the physical descriptions provided in the texts of the time period, the stigma was already defining this type of poor white on not only the basis of class, but also on ethnicity.

With the consolidation of the Republic, Americans believed that freedom meant to have the right to move about: squatters and crackers —being the mobile type so large in numbers— gained relevance as a potential electorate pool to draw on for running presidential candidates. Still stereotyped, the figure of the squatter became the inspiration behind John S. Robb's character Sugar. Such a character was portrayed in *Streaks of Squatter Life* (c1847) as dressed in rags, giving advice on who to vote for in local elections while holding a keg of whisky. "Sug" had lost his girl and his farm, but as a landless squatter he had earned the respect of others. He could have represented the new common man, a simple fellow who couldn't be misled by fancy rhetoric.⁴⁰ His squatter's traits seemed to have softened and become romanticized, as in the stories he never brawled or threatened to steal, rob or take claim of somebody else's property; on the contrary, he knew his place in the town. It was as though an attempt was made to give out a new and revised image of a big enough poor white sector of society asking for some respect. Though "Sug" did try to level social inequalities, the end result pointed out more to class distinction than a sign of respect for the lower class.⁴¹ In the end, the cracker and the squatter were never given much social consideration but were always thought of as either "the bone or sinew of the country" or the drunken fool, filthy, idle, lazy and depraved.⁴²

While crackers and squatters were still considered stereotypes of the quintessential lower classes, white America directed its eyes towards a better definition of lower classes. In the mid eighteenth hundred, the term to define poor southern whites was no longer centered around the figures of crackers or squatters, but around those living on the margins of the slave

⁴⁰ In Isenberg's opinion, "Sug" also represented a reformed, even middle-class solution to the class struggle of the times (129).

⁴¹ This attempt to take the poor white backcountry folk seriously did not accomplish much, but perhaps, the chance to see any of the presidential candidates who started to venture outside the margins of urban areas and into the backcountry for their campaigns (Isenberg 131).

⁴² Isenberg refers the reader to George McDuffie's speech, in *Augusta Chronicle and Georgia Advertiser*, August 18, 1827 (371).

plantations where coexistence between slaves and poor whites took place on a daily basis. As Jeff Forret points out:

Through all these social contacts —work and play, drinking and gambling, music and dance, religion and superstition —slaves and poor whites often developed an understanding of the other, one that permitted them to shed their racial fears and hatred and to forge interracial relationships [...] Despite differences of color and status, they recognized that they both resided in a slaveholder's society that shunted them to the margins in different ways. (71)

In the world of the plantation, slaves and displaced poor whites occupied the same category, both depending “in large degree on the noblesse oblige of wealthy whites for their survival” (71). Feeling shunned and oppressed by the same figure —an element of dominance, translated into the “master” for the enslaved, and a “wealthier type” of white for the “white trash”— black slaves and poor whites felt equal in their misfortune. However, despise and contempt for white poverty was shared by not only the higher whites but also the black slaves.⁴³ A plantation-based economy led to social labeling of poor whites living and coexisting with black slaves. Lubbers, crackers and squatters, though landless and with no chance to go up on the social ladder, enjoyed their freedom to come and go. On the other end of the spectrum, the plantation poor, coexisting with slaves under the same deplorable living conditions, were subjected to harsher criticism. “Dirt-poor southerners living on the margins of the plantation society became even more repugnant as ‘sandhillers’ and pathetic, self-destructive ‘clay-eaters.’ It was then that they acquired the most enduring insult of all: poor ‘white trash’” (Isenberg 135).

⁴³ For instance, a South Carolina ex-slave recalled a “poor buckra” [poor white] named “Mr. Reed dat lived down on Wateree, passin’ our house sometime. He was a God-forsaken lookin’ man dat mrster or mistress always give somethin’” (Forret 71).

Scholars do not seem to agree on the history behind the coinage of the term poor “white trash,” later shortened to “white trash”. Nancy Isenberg states that the term appeared in its printed form as early as 1821, having been the designation widespread in the eighteen fifties.⁴⁴ Matt Wray states that the first recording of the term “poor white trash” took place in 1835. “Poor white trash,” “po’ white trash,” or simply “white trash” soon became “terms of choice” thanks to English actress and vocalist Fanny Kemble’s writings about her travels in the U.S. Kemble met Mary Caton, a member of the southern elite, who invited Kemble over for dinner. While at dinner, Caton, “who entertained very much,” proceeded to explain to Kemble why black slaves called the white servants “poor white trash”: “... in the South, there are no servants but blacks; for the greater proportion of domestics being slaves, all species of servitude whatever is looked upon degradation; and the slaves themselves entertain the very highest contempt for white servants, whom they designate as ‘poor white trash’” (Wray 41).

Regardless of the time the term “poor white trash” started to be associated with poor whites, scholars seem to agree the phrase “poor white trash” has been the most degradable term ever employed on the lower classes. “Poor white trash” encompassed all other derogatory labels and myths attributed to the lesser whites but with a bonus: the term also directly alluded to physical defects:

In descriptions of the mid-nineteenth century, ragged, emaciated sandhillers and clay-eaters became clinical subjects, the children prematurely aged and deformed with distended bellies. Observers looked beyond dirty faces and feet and highlighted the ghostly, yellowish white tinge to the poor whites’ skin—a color they called ‘tallow.’ Barely acknowledged as members of the human race, these oddities with cotton-white hair and waxy pigmentation were classed as

⁴⁴ Referring to the type of audience that went to bid their farewell to Andrew Jackson in his funeral, Isenberg quotes from the *New York Herald*, June 30, 1844 issue: “...it was ‘poor white trash’ who pushed the poor colored folk out of the way to get a glimpse of the fallen president” (Isenberg 135).

albinos. Highly inbred, they ruined themselves with the dual addiction to alcohol and dirt. (Isenberg 136)

It is thought that the appearance of literary characters depicting the poor “white trash” figure had some to do with such rapid spread of the myth.

Humorist Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes* were a collection of stories which in 1835 introduced “Ransy Sniffle,” a poor white man who in his younger years had eaten large amounts of red clay and blackberries.⁴⁵ Through Sniffle the term “clay eater” was introduced to a large readership on both sides of the Atlantic. The practice of dirt-eating was indeed socially unacceptable and most offensive, as incorporating what does not belong into the physical body was, for many, a powerful symbolic transgression of boundary lines, one that would put the stigma all across the southern states. Longstreet’s character, Ransy Sniffle, embodied the figure of the “dirt-eater,” “a comic character notable for his poor diet, his physical deformities, his laziness, apathy, and low intelligence” (Wray 40). Furthermore, “dirt-eating” became in the early century “the mark of poor white depravity most dwelt upon by Northern and foreign observers” (McIlwaine 57).⁴⁶ Nancy Isenberg also notes that Sniffle was presented as having an oddly colored skin, which was described as “tallow-colored” (40), while Wayne Flynt adds another “quality” to this character’s persona: that of trickster; according to Flynt, “Longstreet’s description of Sniffle provided information on diet, health, and qualities of shrewdness and trickery that were esteemed among the poor” (19). The most illustrative example of trickery as yet another trait of poor whites comes to us in the form of a popular song “The Arkansas Traveler,” known all over the southern states and frontier lands. It circulated in many versions and related the story of a traveler who stopped at a squatter’s cabin

⁴⁵ The stories about this character were an immediate success not only in the US but also across the Atlantic on the British Isles.

⁴⁶ Dirt-eating becomes one of the pillars of analysis in Dorothy Allison’s writing, and I refer to her second novel *Cavedweller* (1998) in which the protagonist resorts to eating dirt to resist the myth of “white trash.”

to ask for directions of its inhabitant who was perched atop a whiskey barrel playing a fiddle and manages to outwit the traveler with its trickery.⁴⁷ The image of the rural trickster outsmarting the “superior” breed of whites became a fixed player in America’s mythology in the mid-eighteen hundred as part of not only southern but also northern folklore.

Another “poor white trash” clay-eating character in American literature can be found in J.J. Hooper’s 1845 *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*.⁴⁸ He created a mischievous boy named “Yellow-legs.” According to Flynt:

The lad heckled Simon Suggs until Suggs finally confronted him: “I’ll kick more clay outen you in a minute than you can eat in a month, you durn’d little, dirt-eatin’ deer face.” Clay-eating was a malady of some lower-class whites, which was often used to characterize them as degenerate. (19)

The practice of eating what does not belong in one’s body is also made fun of in another fictional figure, Sut Lovingood, created by George Washington Harris. The title itself, *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a “Natural Born Durn’d Fool”* (1867), was most revelatory of the type that, in this case, is not portrayed as a clay-eater but a gunk-wallower. According to Jim Goad, Lovingood’s homestead “resembles the real-life rural dirt farm [...]: animals and excrement are everywhere” (Goad 85). Sut admits he has no intelligence but in fact he is an idiot, something that does not seem to bother him in the least as “he used his hoi polloi wiles to disrupt the hoity-toity’s custome ball” (ibid).

Overall, the comical and disgusting fictional portrayal of poverty also led to reinforcing the stigma of the “poor white trash,” already seeping the minds of the general public. According to most scholars, this type was believed to carry detrimental traits which made it impossible

⁴⁷ For song’s lyrics, see Flynt 21.

⁴⁸ Not to be confused with John Robb’s character, “Sugar” or “Sug” portrayed in *Streaks of Squatter Life* (c1847)

for them to aspire to better living conditions. They were also viewed upon as a class situated even below the black slaves on the scale of humanity. “Poor white trash” marked an evolutionary decline and foretold a grim future for the Old South; for if these free whites produced feeble children, how could a robust democracy thrive? (Isenberg 136).

Poor whites were a threat to not only the integrity of the Old South but the rest of the country as they could spread their “unique contagion” into the newly acquired territories in the west. As the country experienced a rapid and vast land growth, the idea of “national greatness” was also set in bloodiness and hereditary transmission. Isenberg explains that some believed “that the knowledge of one generation was literally retained in the atmosphere and that the aptitude for learning entered the bloodstream and ‘became part of our physical constitution and was transmitted to our descendants’” (139). Greatness, therefore, resided not only in the vast acquisition of land, but also it was infused in its people’s blood.⁴⁹ The race receptive enough to be the recipient of such greatness was, without doubt, the Anglo-Saxon. The same way as there was good quality blood, there was bad blood. Anglo-Saxons with a long history of pure blood in their ancestors and the physical constitution, unpolluted with hereditary disease (or bad blood), constituted the prime examples of American greatness. It is not surprising that to preserve the purity of the great American breed, marriages were kept hygienic and clean; that is, they relied on the selection of sexual partners who were receptacles of good health and strength. America was starting to build a new type of citizen that could not be conceived as anything else but made of untainted and pure white lineage.

In the South, however, poor whites were outcasts as they lived on the worst of lands: dusty, swampy, sandy and barren soil. It is then that other terms such as “sandhillers” and “pineys” came into being. Henry David Thoreau in his essay “Slavery in Massachusetts”

⁴⁹ For this assertion, Isenberg leans on an essay entitled “The Education of the Blood” (1837).

(1854), describes the slave South as a rotting corpse that should be used as “manure” to colonize other territories (Thoreau 109). The South was slowly beginning to feel like “white trash” in such a manner that anything associated with it, too, was associated with illiteracy, depravation, inbreeding, and social contamination. Other writers also described the poor whites in their novels. The description of a “poor white trash” family, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856), is worth noting:

Crouched on a pile of dirty straw, sat a miserable haggard woman, with large wide eyes, sunken cheeks, disheveled matted hair, and long, lean hands, like bird’s claws. At her skinny breast an emaciated infant was hanging, pushing with his little skeleton hands, as if to force nourishment which nature no longer gave; and two scared-looking children, with features wasted and pinched blue with famine, were clinging to her gown. (105-106)

Stowe viewed poor southern whites as living at the margins of society, looking miserable and pitiful, in great need of social attention. Yet, “poor white trash,” such as “crackers,” “squatters,” “rednecks,” “hillbillies,” “sandhillers,” “pineys,” etc., especially from the South, connoted a type of people deeply contemptible by the superior white breed.⁵⁰ By the eighteen fifties, poor whites had become a permanent class which was to be either ignored or thrown out of society. In the best of cases, “poor white trash” sparked interest among the common man as being “‘curious folks’ whose habits were as queer as any depiction of Chinese or Indians” (Isenberg 151). As great numbers of people moved westward, so did the “trash of society” in such a way that “they came to California in hordes and swarmed across the land in search of gold, posing a problem. The miners were an updated version of squatters” (145). From this perspective there was no difference between a California gold digger and a “poor white trash” man from the

⁵⁰ Other groups such as blacks, American Indians, immigrants coming from Asia and Latino America were also excluded from the “Anglo-Saxon Greatness” scheme.

South. Indeed, anywhere they went, “poor white trash” were considered the lowest of the lowest, the dirt and scum of the land, and were named undesirable. In the years preceding the “War between the States,”⁵¹ still living on the margins of society, “poor white trash” of whatever kind grew in numbers, making the social class divide even wider.

In antebellum America, as the antagonism triggered by the discrepancies over slavery grew among the southern and northern states, disagreement on the causes and consequences of the existence of “poor white trash” and their counterparts, such as “crackers,” “dirt-eaters,” “low whites,” “poor whites,” etc., deepened. According to Matt Wray (2006), poor whites became a controversial subject of debate between two major groups, the antislavery abolitionists and the proslavery secessionists. Regarding the former, quoting the narratives and testimonies of former slaves, abolitionists considered slavery evil with grave consequences on the non-slave-holding whites. Their argument rested on the premise that poor whites had been fooled into helping perpetuate the very same system that denied them any chance to develop their ability to sell their labor to the greatest bidder. Abolitionists believed that “poor white trash” could cease to exist through industrial capitalism and proper education. As for the latter, proslavery secessionists insisted that “poor white trash” had only themselves to blame for their condition. Their belief was the poor whites threatened the “social respectability” of the mainstream due to their own biological, physical, and moral laziness. Regardless of causes, origins, or reasons behind white poverty, the truth was that, for the secessionists, society could not function without social stratification. For secessionists, dependent and delinquent classes were an unavoidable—even desirable—outcome of human history and civilization. The real cause of poor white degeneracy was “tainted blood” which would not be affected by a change of social or economic systems, much less by the abolition of a slave-based economic system

⁵¹ Even today, in most of the southern states the American Civil War is known as “The War Between the States.”

(Wray 49). Being the subject of a most heated debate between the North and the South, “poor white trash” became not only a national problem but also a linguistic identifier with southern states, for, as the southern states’ economy was agriculturally-based, by the eighteen fifties, the countryside and its inhabitants were viewed as primitive, dirty, and hopelessly backward in the wake of progress and modernity (50). To make matters worse, it must have been a new type of upper-middle class, industrious and highly professional which, while inverting the term, presented the poor as having another negative trait: the lack of drive and inkling for idleness. As Matt Wray explains, “poor white trash” must have seemed to many of them [higher status whites] an apt term for those whites who did not rise or live up to their ideals of industry, laboring not at all, or only in the most degrading jobs, toiling beneath or alongside the slaves” (43).

Given the fact that “poor white trash” have also been socially frowned upon for their deeply religious beliefs, a look into the role religion played in the poor whites of the South is in due order. Wayne Flynt has provided a very clear and concise explanation of the reasons why poor whites were so enthralled with religion as a mode to escape social ostracism. He concentrates on two different approaches: the camp-meeting movement and the anti-mission movement. Regarding the first, Wayne Flynt explains the events that took place in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. Between 12,000 and 25,000 people gathered to hear:

...a thunderous cascade of sermons, hymns, and mournful conversions. Dozens of Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptist ministers proclaimed an emotional gospel shorn of theology but heavy with the demand of repentance. Many sinners were so overcome with guilt and remorse that they collapsed. Others were caught up in spontaneous exercises: some fell down; others rolled, jerked, barked, danced, laughed, and sang. (Flynt 27)

This display of emotional outburst, although rare on camp meetings, was used in order to discredit the great revivals of the early nineteenth century. Whatever reasons scholars have offered to explain and justify what happened at Cane Ridge could not remedy affixing the trait of religious fanaticism to the poor whites of the South.⁵²

Camp meetings were part of everyday life in the South. As Flynt explains, it was important to the poor the sense of eternal community that “gave each person a new way of looking at himself and the world” (28). In fact, the scholar emphasizes that camp-meeting revivalism and the different religious groups that appeared before the Civil War mostly appealed to those whites standing outside the political and economic mainstream. In the religious groups that Flynt calls “sects,” one could acquire the sense of social status otherwise denied on the outside. And so, it was not uncommon to find preachers who outside their religious meetings were field workers. Church-goers as well as their religious leaders managed to seize control of their own lives as their conversion was the result of a conscious decision, which provided them with dignity and a sense of purpose impossible to obtain in society. Flynt elucidates:

Conversion allowed [the poor whites] to enter another world that operated in two levels. On the first, that other world was a ‘heaven’ that someday would bring relief from all their troubles [...] Heaven contrasted to the hopelessness of this world [...] Evangelical religion served them mightily in the present. People who stood the major political and economic processes gained measure of control over their lives [...] they were not degenerate, no matter how poor.

⁵² Flynt lists some of possible reasons, such as the loneliness of thinly settled pioneer families, the weakness of institutional Christianity and the harsh physical quality of life. According to the scholar himself, Cane Ridge was an emotional catharsis for a people trapped by a hard, bitter, monotonous life (27-28).

They were not without control of their lives, no matter how powerless. They were immortal, people for whom the Son of God had died. (29)

Lastly, poor whites used the camp meeting as a way to reject the attitude of moral superiority assumed by more affluent Christians and to attack the alleged “sins” such as horseracing, theater, gambling and dancing that the planter elite committed. As the nineteenth century rolled on, more low-class whites were found in Methodist, Cumberland Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Missionary and Primitive Baptist congregations (30).

The anti-mission movement constituted the second approach of the poor whites to cope with social rejection. Flynt asserts that the movement surfaced primarily among economically insecure rural southerners. It based its preaching on the Calvinist belief that “those whom God would save were predestined to that fate, and the puny efforts of man could not alter divine intent” (ibid). As a result, these believers would oppose congregations of any type, be those camp meetings, Sunday schools, Bible studies, denominational colleges and seminaries, etc. They would also condemn drinking liquor while vouching for temperance, “their religious positions corresponded to their secular notions of individualism, anti-intellectualism and legalism” (ibid).

These two approaches to the social problems and rejection of poor whites of the nineteenth century have been known to play major roles in the misconstrued ideas and prejudice that surrounded the South after the Civil War. Such religious enthusiasts were the ones who gave the South their much-disputed legacy of irrational emotionalism. Religion, for some poor whites, was a true attempt to deal with their social isolation and hopelessness as it offered purpose and a sense of community to a group in great need of social acceptance and recognition.

The situation leading to the War did not look favorable on the poor whites. Moreover, the myth that the South was mostly inhabited by “poor white trash” had already taken root reaching its consolidation during the aftermath of the conflict, when it was not unusual to find northerners disassociating themselves from southerners. As Jim Goad states, “in the War Between the States, the South attempted to make itself into a foreign land. The North didn’t permit the South to do so. The North won the War. Ever since then, the North has made the South into a foreign land” (86). Being on the losing end, southerners saw their land and their people dive into more poverty than ever. Wayne Flynt explains that plantation owners and affluent merchants stood in breadlines in some southern cities (34). Difficult times hit the poor the hardest; soldiers returned from the front lines only to have missed harvesting the crops. To make matters worse, a drought destroyed the few crops that could be salvageable. Flynt further elaborates on the subject based on reports issued by the Freedmen’s Bureau: “they observed women and children begging door to door; others had not tasted meat in months; many were homeless” (ibid).

Relief and assistance programs to help the needy were created during the brief period of the Reconstruction, yet many poor rejected such programs because they would not want to be associated with “niggers.”⁵³ The results were those of disease, ignorance and more poverty. Ignorance was rampant, as very few whites attended the free schools the Bureau offered. It does not come as a surprise then that future generations of poor whites would opt for illiteracy over integration. In time, education became segregated to “appease” reluctant race-conscious whites —among them, poor whites who believed themselves superior to blacks—, refusing to interact with the black population.⁵⁴

⁵³ Assistance programs came mostly from the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, created in Congress in 1865.

⁵⁴ According to Flynt, such facts may have set a precedent for the school segregation and illiteracy of later years.

By the eighteen seventies, the government's control over the relief and assistance fell in the hands of the landed gentry and northern industrialists, who feared the rise of the black class, should whites be divided. Flynt observes, "conservative political hegemony was established partly as a result of the conscious choice of poor whites that race mattered more than class" (36). Such a conservative stance towards the social and economic problems of the poor only made it harder on the "poor white trash" who found themselves either being sent to the almshouse—at the charitable hands of public funds awarded to a handful of families—or having themselves leased.⁵⁵ While these ways of dealing with the poor lasted, at a national level, until 1900, the administration of welfare funds, however, remained in the local counties until the nineteen thirties. Although the post-War poor were not as isolated as before, they practiced subsistence agriculture and had no significant role in the market economy. Gradually, they entered the economic system as wage earners or tenant farmers, whose numbers dramatically increased during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Along with the increasing number of poor, the sentiment of disgust and contempt for their condition never decreased. By and large, "poor white trash" became a social category very much stigmatized, dishonored, and despised. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth developed an institutionalized pattern of perception on the poor fostered by the scientific community, which subjected the underprivileged to an unequal treatment. As Wray states, "stigmatized and outcast poor whites, previously understood as regional problems, were now increasingly viewed as a national problem, the solution to which held urgent implications for other whites, other races, and for the nation as a whole" (64).

The outcome of the Civil War, as well as the preconceived ideas generated on the poor, led scientists to conduct field research into the causes and methods of reproduction of poor

⁵⁵ Leasing dictated that indigents could be leased to the highest bidder for a stipulated time. Though this practice was more common for blacks, some poor whites in North Carolina were also subjected to it (Flynt 37).

white degeneracy, which was soon added to the growing list of “poor white trash” stigmas.⁵⁶ It was believed that “consanguinity” was one of the root causes of degeneracy (Dugdale, 28). The newly emerging American middle class, professional industrious higher-class whites, welcomed with open arms the interest of science in making “poor white trash” the subject of their studies. Among the research conducted on the degeneracy of “poor white trash,” Elizabeth Kite’s, whose results concluded that these “lazy, lustful, and cunning people were known by their sexual immorality practiced by ‘the male of the species’ and was clearly a profound menace to social order” (qtd. in Wray, 67), is worth mentioning. The fear that the moral disease these “degenerate” people carried could spread out among the general population and alter the status quo was such that by the nineteen thirties eugenic reformers allowed compulsory sterilizations on poor whites on a routine basis.

In preventing the “white trash disease” from spreading among social other social classes, the notion of “genetic inferiority” as subject of research took hold among the scientific community in an effort to hide an ulterior motive. In the words of Matt Wray:

Professional scientists, in turning their analytical gaze toward poor rural whites, crafted bold and precise lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, thus accomplishing some of the boundary work necessary for the formation of their own group and individual identities, and boosting them in their drive for higher status, prestige, and social advancement. (68)

In this manner, rural poor whites became pivotal in “the self-fashioning of turn-of-the-century white middle-class American identity,” for they were defined as the “other,” as what the newly

⁵⁶ Prison reformer Richard Dugdale conducted a research study on six prisoners in an upstate New York penitentiary who were close relatives. He was intrigued by the idea that criminality and poverty could be hereditary traits. Though the results were inconclusive, Dugdale’s study (*The Jukes 1877*) opened the door to the belief in the scientific community that heredity alone could be sufficient explanation for the existence of degeneracy (in Wray 66).

formed middle-class whites were not to be. Being greatly conditioned at the time by the readings and interpretations of Darwin's social theories, many believed that "just as the natural order evolved according to the principle of the survival of the fittest, so too the social order developed according to a struggle for existence and supremacy" (69).

Eugenicists concentrated on finding evidence of inherited traits signaling "biological inferiority" in the "poor white trash," due to their practice of consanguinity. Wray elaborates:

One [the mark of inferiority] that could be distinguished on the basis of such characteristics as distinctive skin color; a nomadic and vagabond way of life; promiscuity and licentiousness (especially among women); propensities toward violence and criminality; a broken family structure and a recurring history of miscegenation. (83)

The last study on degeneracy of the poor whites hereby presented did not concentrate that much of consanguinity as it did on race-mixing. It is interesting to note that these poor were no longer considered members of the white race. In assessing the social status of a small mixed population group living in the Blue Ridge Mountain foothills of western Virginia it was noted that:

... the white folks look down on them, so do negroes, and this, with their dark skin color, has caused a segregation from the general community. They are variously described as 'low down 'yellow negroes, as Indians, as 'mixed.' No one, however, speaks of them as white [although] a few claimed to be white. (Estabrook and McDougle 14)

In trying to demonstrate the inferiority of classes other than mainstream whites, eugenicists argued that the social cost of handling the social degeneracy of the poor would be too high for the nation. On the other hand, if degeneracy were left undetected and unmonitored, the gene of poor people's vices and immorality would spread throughout America's families, communities

and nations. As a result, eugenicists still believed that sterilization would be the solution to contain the threat that “poor white trash” posited to society.

Another mark of inferiority which made “poor white trash” an excellent subject of “study” was that of feeble-mindedness. Henry Goddard’s work, *The Kallikack Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness* (1912), used intelligence testing to establish the criteria by which to identify, diagnose, and grade different types of “mental defectiveness” (see figure #1). Goddard’s research was quickly accepted by the medical community as solid, empirical proof of the hereditary nature of intelligence or, for that matter, the lack thereof. It was so that the belief that intelligence “was transmitted as regularly or surely as color of hair or eyes” (Kelves 79), was looked upon as something unquestionable and scientifically true. Yet, feeble-mindedness connoted not only lack of intelligence or so-called “mental defectiveness,” but it also meant lack of moral values (as only feeble-minded people—more specifically women—could consent to immoral sex). The notion that the feeble-minded were not only feeble in mind but also in body became common knowledge.⁵⁷

The scientific community reached the conclusion that feeble-mindedness was more likely to happen in the poor white families from the rural areas of the country (Wray 84-85). This idea was reinforced by eugenicists who also claimed that there was evidence to assert that rural areas in the South were havens for morons and “high grade defectives.” In addition, Army intelligence testing showed that among southern states, demographically more rural than the

⁵⁷ The case *Buck v Bell* was crucial for not only building such misconception about “poor white trash” feeble-mindedness but also for allowing highly unjust and cruel laws be enacted against the poor, “inferior” classes. In this case, Carrie Buck, an eighteen-year-old woman from Charlottesville, Virginia, was deemed ‘social and economic inadequate’ and therefore it was ruled for her to be sterilized under the Virginian Sterilization Act. The judge’s decision was contested, and the case reached the Supreme Court in the fall of 1926 where the ruling was upheld, and the sterilization carried out. According to Matt Wray, such case is considered emblematic of the ways that “shiftless, ignorant, and worthless” lower-class white women were viewed by middle-class men who supervised, treated, and sterilized them (92). For more information on this case refer to Laughlin 1929, 49.

northern and whiter (as the African American migratory movement was already taking place), 50 percent of southern white males was graded as “imbeciles” (89).⁵⁸

The first half of the twentieth century also witnessed the division of the scientific community over the “white trash” predicament. Living under the threat of a hookworm pandemic, medical doctors felt inclined to believe that the symptoms — “white trash” traits— of poor white rural families in the South were not genetically transmitted, but they were the result of being chronically infected by this disease. Eugenacists, however, firmly believed that the epidemic was another proof, or “hereditary trait,” of “white trash social degeneracy” (107). As a result, eugenacists became more insistent on eradicating the epidemic through compulsory sterilization measures.

On the other end of the spectrum, John D. Rockefeller established in 1914 the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission, an organization whose objectives were identifying the hookworm, curing those affected by it, and implementing all preventive measures to ensure its eradication (see figure # 2). As the medical community tried their best to integrate the rural southern poor whites in society, others kept the social stigma alive. For instance, while members of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission made it clear that the disease affected the entire population, the New York Times published articles to discredit the opinions of the members of the RSC (Rockefeller Sanitary Commission).⁵⁹ The outcome was grim, as it was not too long before the “poor whites” were considered not only “agents” [source], but also a pathway of infection (Wray 107).

Regardless of whether poor whites were “hereditary polluted” or “disease ridden,” an aggressive campaign against the hookworm, which infected mostly the southern white poor,

⁵⁸ Dorothy Allison’s essays and poetry reflect upon this fact. It is important to know, then, that such misconstrued ideas about the South and its poor white people still prevail in U.S.A. today.

⁵⁹ The New York Times’s October 1909 issue #s 09, 13, and 12 made derogatory remarks blaming southern rural “poor white trash” for it. In short, this newspaper succeeded in transmitting the idea that the hookworm was the “lazy man’s disease.”

started across country. According to the “crusaders” (mostly medical scientists and doctors), poor whites were not to be confused with racial degenerates or “mongrels,” nor were they racially similar or inferior to blacks, they were just sick. Debates were held in the scientific community to reach an understanding of the target population of the disease, among which were the poor whites.

To many —among them, the members of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission—, poor whites, however, belonged in the Anglo-Saxon society. Thus, it became a matter of extreme importance to prove their purity of blood. It would take a process of transformation (by identifying, treating, and preventing hookworm disease, while also changing the dwellings and places where white poor lived) to find a solution to an otherwise unsolvable situation. As Walter Hines Page stated, “The southern white people are of almost pure English stock. It has been hard to explain their backwardness, for they are descended from capable ancestors and inhabit a rich land. Now, for the first time, the main cause of their backwardness is explained and it is a removable cause” (509).

Despite the efforts to “cleanse” and restore the southern poor white image, the stigma of white [southern] poverty still exists. Terms, such as “redneck,” “white trash,” “hillbilly,” and even “southern,” evoke in the mind of the average U.S. citizen images of apathetic, contemptible, and despised low-class whites, living on the margins of society, as in colonial times. These subjects are characterized by their poorly kept physical appearance (morbidly obese and rough-looking, for the most part) and their socially unacceptable behavior, defined by their propensity to violence, illiteracy and intolerance of others, to name some.

3.1.3 Women in a Man’s “White Trash” World

As members of a lower category of whites, women have also had to endure the social ostracism and discrimination that stigmatizing entails. Their oppression, however, comes from

not only the outside, but within their class as well. In a male-dominated world, they have had to deal with mistreatment from the men of the higher class and those of their own.

Observers, such as slaveholders or travelers, have attributed southerners' violent tendencies to the institution of slavery. As white plantation owners' children watched their parents employ violence on their chattel with the intention of correcting any type of rebellious behavior, thus turning violence into a "educating" weapon. Others argued that southern violence resulted "from a singularly pessimistic southern world view, in which a collective insecurity about human relationships convinced southerners of the necessary role that violence played in their society" (Forret 159). Whichever reason, the bottom line is that women (whether "mainstream" or "poor") have suffered the consequences of male violence.

The most valid explanation for the all too common existence of violence in the South is found in the abundance of nonstop duels and brawls. These took place under the necessity to defend one's concept of "honor" southerners had assimilated throughout time. This concept was rooted, once again, in the deepest notion of property: the higher a man's rank, because of owning a large quantity of slaves, the more social credit he would deserve. Slaveless poor whites, therefore, were excluded from the circle of honor (162). Male violence, therefore, transgressed black-poor white interactions and comfortably settled into the family environment where poor white men took their anger out on their women. Having no hold on slaves, or land of their own, "white trash" men considered their women as property of their own.⁶⁰

In "Sheroes and Villains" (1997), Amina Mama explains how women (of all class types and races) were relegated to the domestic spheres at various periods of US history, "the confinement of women to the economically dependent role of housewife is a condition that has made it difficult for many women to leave otherwise unbearably violent situations" (53).

⁶⁰ For more on the origins of poor whites' violence see "The Double Standard: Sex and Sexual Violence" in Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins* (2006).

Dorothy Allison's own life, reflected in part on her literary work, posits the predicament poor white women find themselves into. In *Class Definitions* (2008), Michelle Tokarczyk explains that Dorothy Allison's stepfather's violent behavior against Allison's mother "is unfortunately common in working-class and poor families under constant financial stress," as it was found "that violence was pervasive among women in these classes in Boston; as many as ninety two percent of women reported physical abuse" (150). The time frame the author was referring to in these lines dates back to only a few decades (1980s). The situation reaches its limit when the objects of that violence are the so-called "white trash." As the author points out, "impoverished whites represent the underside of the 'American Dream,' the American Nightmare" (ibid). Tokarczyk goes on to state: "If you fall off the ladder to success, you will wallow in shame and poverty" (150). The white middle class prohibited their children from associating in any way, shape, or form with the "white trash." Kept socially apart from the "mainstream," chances of social advancement are slim for those who attempt to pursue the American dream.

Almost all of the women Allison describes in her autobiographical work *Trash* (1988) were sadly, and without fail, similar to her mother. The women in Allison's writing worked long hours and were physically and emotionally abused by the men they were married to, "and constantly pregnant," elaborates Tokarczyk (151). This physical abuse they felt on themselves became, too many a time, also applicable to their children. In Allison's case, she was repeatedly physically and sexually abused by her stepfather who was always unemployed, living on welfare and "wanted by the law" (149). Because Allison's stepfather's relatives enjoyed the reputation of respectable middle-class, they ignored his violent nature as a husband and a father. Allison's stepfather was a man prone to having outbursts of anger whose frustration for not marrying his class was directed mainly towards Allison, the older of his two stepchildren. Moreover, as Allison's mother, being extremely poor and single, was believed to have found a "good catch" in her future husband, Allison's mother was never accepted into her husband's



family on account of her alleged condition of “white trash”. She represents those poor white women unable to provide for themselves, thus, forced to live a life filled with abuse in a male-dominated world.

The hopeless situation of women in white poverty has also been exacerbated by social misrepresentations of their sexual behavior. In a male-dominated society, poor white women in nineteenth-century America were seen as “sexually deprived.” Court proceedings documents of the time have recorded the punishment of women for having consensual sex with slave men (Forret 185).⁶¹ As for poor white men engaging in the same type of sexual conduct, legal documents show no signs of punitive action. For only poor white women were subjected to legal punishment.

Due to this gender-induced double standard, scholars claim that some white women at the margins of society’s code of conduct “crossed” the color line to “indulge” their sexual appetite.⁶² As a result, “white trash” women put themselves at risk of becoming victims of a much broader scope of male physical abuse which included white men of higher class, black slaves and male “white trash.” In addition, their low-working class condition immediately made “white trash” women an easy prey to sexual violence. According to the chronicles of the times, these women, not having a husband to provide for them, had to take on extra work to make ends meet, which made them vulnerable to male sexual abuse. In other cases, they were left home alone, while their husbands sought employment elsewhere. As Forret states, “Whether single or left alone on a daily basis or for days or weeks on end by husbands scouring

⁶¹ As these encounters entailed a fee for sexual favors, one cannot help but wonder whether indeed these occurrences were the product of a “sexually perverted” person, or the consequence of living in a state of despair.

⁶² Victoria E. Bynum (*Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, 1992), Laura F. Edwards (“Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction, and the Extension of Patriarchy in Granville County, North Carolina,” 1991) and Martha Hodes (*Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, 1999) have done extensive research on the sex lives of poor white women in the nineteenth century South.

the countryside for employment, the isolation of poor white women laboring at home made them likely targets of sexual assault” (191).

The conditions that “white trash” women were under did not lessen but, as time progressed, became harder to sustain. As the construction of true womanhood came into play, poor white women’s bodies were considered ugly and deprived of beauty, especially in agricultural areas where manual labor was harsh. The poor white women of the South were far too overworked, belonged to a despicable social class, and were of such an inferior type that nobody from the white society wished to be associated with.⁶³ Poor white bodies did not trigger any curiosity on the superior whites. On the contrary, poor white bodies were not exotic but shunned off, suppressed, invisible to society for their ugliness, dirtiness, and promiscuity.

Lastly, poor white women were left defenseless before the eyes of a society that mocked, taunted, and disdained their type. Even since the times of indentured servitude, these women have always been regarded as sexually depraved, more so should they have sexual encounters outside the race/class boundaries of their own group. Doubly jeopardized by their condition of poor working class and their ugly appearances, poor white women’s sexual conduct, and in turn their social behavior, has been highly stigmatized.⁶⁴

In summary, this section has traced back the origins of white poverty exploring stereotypes, misconstructions, preconceived notions, etc., built around a group still in need of social acceptance. This analysis has shown that the extremely poor, the so-called “white trash,” concern men, as well as women, living outside the “norm.” Despite efforts from some to

⁶³ It is interesting to know that this stereotype continued on until the middle of the twentieth century; series such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962), *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960), and *The Real McCoys* (1957) portrayed a stereotyped poor white female as ignorant, skinny and always struggling to keep peace and harmony in the family in an utterly comical fashion.

⁶⁴ Historians, such as Jeff Forret and Ronald Takaki, have indicated that some poor white women did engage in sexual promiscuity: “far more frequently than ‘respectable’ women, they broke taboos against interracial sex and boldly defied social convention” (Forret 185). One can only speculate that this behavior must have been the result of desperate economic conditions or social harsh criticism.

integrate poor whites in society, their stigma still pervades in a specific type of poor, “popularly known” for their laziness, dirt-eating, propensity to criminality and violence, sexual perversity, consanguinity, feeble-mindedness, and chronic disease portability.

Moreover, as the industrious, professional, middle-class white population, eager to control social politics, grows larger, the “poor white trash” have not ceased to be socially stigmatized. At present, poor whites’ juncture does not differ much from that of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Dorothy Allison’s writings are testimony of the prevalent discriminatory attitude mainstream whites hold against the “bad poor,” the “white trash.” This stereotyped image has only worsened since the emergence of the mass media. New popular media today are far more reaching than the travel accounts, books, and newspapers of the past. Due to advances in technology these vehicles of communication relate events, opinions, stories, while circulating rumors, faster and more engagingly than any medium ever used. The following section presents a sample of mass media products as newer and more effective tools to understand new contemporary modalities of stigmatizing.

3.2 Social Stigmatizing in Today’s Popular Culture: The Power of Mass Media

3.2.1 Introduction

In the last decades, underprivileged groups have been placed on the margins of a capitalist interest-driven market economy, a social system controlled by the “dominant” white class who does not see itself as part of any racial discourse. At first, travel accounts, folk tales, children’s stories, songs, and proverbs consolidated the specific mindset of a white majority. Mainly orally passed on since colonial times, popular beliefs gradually traveled across country to “tell” of and “show” the inadequacy of non-white groups. As the twentieth century came along, these popularly construed conceptions strengthened through a plethora of mass media

communications by which to “spread the word” more rapidly. Due to this dynamic exchange of information, twentieth-century storytelling has taken on a “new and improved” narrative carried out by mass media communications, such as films, documentaries, and TV shows, to name some.

Concerning the presence of poor whites as protagonists in the film industry, it was not until 1972 with the premiere of the film *Deliverance* that this class was granted a primary role. Unfortunately, the film’s portrayal of white poverty was solely based on highly stereotyped images of savagery, ignorance, and consanguinity, causing major disturbance, social unrest, and fear on general audiences. Based on James Dickey’s novel by the same title, the film hyperbolizes popular beliefs, distorting the image of the redneck mountaineer to the extent of transforming it into a frightful “evil” character who, in the end, “deserves” to be punished. Notwithstanding the fact that films spread preconceived notions faster than traditional storytelling, they, alongside TV series, documentaries, etc. are considered “articles” to be consumed in the marketplace. In so doing, films—and other forms of mass media—disguise human relations, while adapting the message behind the story to specific economic goals, thus turning them into a money-making proposition.

Not all films, however, are centered on distorting messages for economic purposes. One must note that, along with some commodity-building films perpetuating misconceptions and prejudice, there have been others which criticize, for instance, stereotyping of marginalized groups. As an example, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008) exposes “white trash” stereotyping, while *Beloved* (1998) uncovers the oppression of African Americans. Because of the emergence of these films in the last thirty years, one may argue that filmmaking appears to be as valid a venue to reverse stereotypes with the aims of developing renewed identities.

The objective of this section centers on examining the active role that the twentieth- and twenty-first century mass media have played in consolidating the poor whites' stigma through the analysis of a selection of films, documentaries and TV shows in which already analyzed labels, stereotypes and misinterpretations of white poverty can be clearly identified.

3.2.2 Films, TV Series, and Documentaries: The “White Trash” Image

The production of the film *Deliverance* (1972) marked the initiation of “white trash” into the film industry. In it, poor whites were to show an exaggerated and hyperbolic side of their most detrimental stereotyped personality traits. Ignorance, inbreeding, excessive cruelty, violence and sexual depravation are depicted in the film. Instilling in the minds of the mainstream audience fear of and terror for rural poor whites/rednecks/”white trash” has been the beginning of a long and varied mass media production on the under-favored.⁶⁵

In the first decade of the twenty first century, stigmatization experienced a change in style. Some mass media products have depicted poor whites, though still criminals and social losers, as victims of either their tragic past or society’s abuse.⁶⁶ Others, however, have aimed to the portrayal of a contemptible and/or pitiful poor white class.⁶⁷ To illustrate, the following presents an analysis of the films *Deliverance* (1972) and *Monster* (2003), the reality TV series *Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) and the documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009).

⁶⁵ It is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, and prior to poor whites becoming the center of attention for filmmakers, TV series such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) were already greatly acclaimed in the America of the fifties and sixties. These programs depicted light-hearted, watered down, comical poor white characters trying to function in a society that, condescendingly and patronizingly, allowed them to be part of.

⁶⁶ Under this light, *Monster* (2003), analyzed second in this section, constitutes an example.

⁶⁷ The market has diversified to include a myriad of films, documentaries, TV reality shows dealing with the subject.

In its portrayal of poor whites as evil, genetically inbred, intellectually inferior, and sexually depraved, *Deliverance* goes a step farther than the traditionally construed stereotyping generated by popular beliefs in the past. Directed by John Boorman, Oscar and Golden Globe nominee and winner of National Board of Review U.S.A. 1972 and National Film Preservation Board U.S.A. 2008, the film takes us on a trip down to the Cahulawassee River in Northern Georgia where four city slickers, all professional liberals belonging to upper middle white America, will have a most traumatic and violent experience with the inhospitable, clearly inferior hillbillies of the region. As the events unfold, Lewis, Ed, Bobbie, and Drew, the urban hot-shot protagonists, will slowly find out that the inhabitants of the Georgia Mountains are not at all what they had expected, a community of intellectually maimed primitive people; the hillbilly mountain people are capable of committing crimes, such as rape, sodomy, and even, they would assume, murder. What started out as a pleasurable weekend getaway to be in contact with Nature turned into a nightmare of survival of the fittest, of unearthing the innermost primal instincts of civilized humankind.

Annalee Newitz, in her article “White Savagery and Humiliation” (1997), establishes the idea that the stereotypes of good and bad are internalized during childhood. The problem, according to Newitz, arises when “we question our control over the boundaries between what we consider ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (133). Anxiety and consequently a feeling of guilt may occur when we realize that the boundaries between being good, white, and being bad, non-white, are not clearly delineated.⁶⁸ Newitz points out that as the term white is associated with the present civilization, all non-white (that is: bad) is then associated with the primitive past, and must exist, therefore, within the context of savagery and “un-civilization.” Thus, the misconception that poor whites, and among them “white trash,” are bad and live under

⁶⁸ Newitz quotes Sander L. Gilman when it comes to feeling anxiety upon stereotyping good and bad; Gilman elaborates: “The “bad” Other becomes a negative stereotype; the “good” Other becomes the positive stereotype. The former is that which we fear to become; the latter, that which we fear we cannot achieve” (134).

savage primal conditions (134). It is my contention that the racialized other, as the primitive “bad guy” in the picture, must be contained and, if need be, suppressed for white hegemony to exist. This becomes even more necessary when the “primitive bad” belongs to the category of “white trash.” The term “white trash” as stated by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz in the introduction to *“White Trash” Race and Class in America* (1996):

... is a complex cultural category; since it is racialized (i.e., different from “black trash” or “Indian trash”) and classed (trash is social waste and detritus) allows us to understand how tightly intertwined racial and class identities actually are in the United States [...] It speaks to the hybrid and multiple natures of identities, the ways in which our selves are formed and shaped by often contradictory and conflicting relations of social power. (4)

These relations of social power often entail a constant struggle between the “good” stereotype (hegemonic whites) and the “bad” (the poor whites and, in it, “white trash”). *Deliverance* (1972) is a clear depiction of this power struggle. As the protagonists get ready to set out into the wilderness, they come across a “physically maimed” mountain boy who turns out to be a “virtuoso” of the banjo, upon beating one of the superior class in what looks like a musical duel.⁶⁹ While the musical interchange goes on, the tone of the film turns upbeat and the initial tension built upon the arrival of the group does, indeed, wear off. But as soon as the high beat and lively rhythm of the contest end, the film’s tension picks right back up: the boy refuses to shake the hand of a highly impressed Drew and walks away without saying a word. Whether this encounter may reveal ominous of the class confrontation that is yet to come or not, is not entirely clear. The scene seems not to close, however, as the look on the boy’s face will come

⁶⁹ The film interpretation of this scene implies the “redneck boy” must be mentally disabled as well. In the midst of taunting and mocking the young mountaineer for his physical “deformities,” one of the city slickers makes the comment: “talk about genetic deficiency.” This comment bears a direct reference to eugenicist theories on inherited traits. For the viewing of this scene, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tqxzWdKKu8>

to mind when the nightmare for the city slickers starts to occur. One thing remains certain: in a scene where the city dwellers taunt and laugh at the mountain people, a crooked-toothed, crossed-eyed and dirt-poor boy proves his worth at mastering civilized practices, such as music playing, civilization and primitivism look each other in the eye and, much to everyone's surprise, the primitive rebels against the civilized.

Nature unfolds as a hostile element for the intruders in "God's" country.⁷⁰ The Cahulawasse River, with its treacherous rapids and meandering course, sets the stage for a most fatal outcome for the vacationers. Having hired two separate canoes—one per two of the vacationers—the party initiates their descent down the river. Ready to make a rest stop, the friends get separated and, while one group is still fighting the river current to reach the riverbank, the other has already made it to safe ground, only to fall prey to the rage of the local mountaineers. In a scene where primal instincts violently clash with civilization, two "civilized" white men find themselves face to face with savagery. It is now the "other" who taunts, humiliates, and attacks the dominant whites as two backwoods dwellers violently rape and sodomize one "superior" white in the group. Ready to attack the second one, their lives are spared when the other two friends come to their rescue by killing the "primitive" rapist. From this point onwards, violence dominates the course of the events. In an effort to avenge the rape of their friends, the white city slickers will become as aggressive and savage as the mountain rednecks, killing one of the primitive perpetrators. His partner, however, manages to escape only to take vengeance on them a few scenes later. In a chase after the redneck, Drew is shot and falls off and into the river where he drowns.

The film turns into a contest in which only violence will prevail. Violence has become property, at this point, of not only the "racialized" other, "the bad," but also of the "civilized"

⁷⁰ Both narratives, film and novel, portray the nature of the Georgia mountains as God's creation, not yet touched by the hand of man. The popular belief that rednecks are deeply religious people is implied in both narratives.

white, the good. As Annalee Newitz states, “The idea that middle-class whites need to become savages to defend themselves is a perfect excuse for the middle-classes to behave in outrageously cruel ways toward the lower classes (144). Once they have reached their destination, the group feels no longer empowered over or superior to the racialized class of the locals, but rather they have become “their equal,” having been forced to act like them. Being killed and having killed themselves, the narrative seems, on the one hand, to justify the higher class’s violent behavior as a self-defense mechanism and, on the other, to condemn the inferior class for their savagery and primitivism. Newitz explains:

If the lower classes “bring down” the white middle-class to their level, in essence they are “asking for it” when the middle-class turns savage and kills them off. Ultimately, middle-class whites, can use the hatred they inspire in lower class whites to justify their own violence and to claim that they can’t help being violent anyway [...] whites secure their innocence by swapping punishment and hatred back and forth between classes locked in combat with one another. (145)

The second to last scene reveals the protagonists, whose lives have changed forever, leaving the locality unscathed, though one of them has perished on this quest. Though the local sheriff remains suspicious, due to all the contradictions of their version of the story, he has no evidence to arrest them. The group is, in the end, warned not to come back: “Don’t ever do nothin’ like this again. Don’t ever come back up here. I don’t wanna see you or your friends again! I’d kinda like to see this town die peaceful.” The friends do not contradict the authority but quickly drive away. It is interesting to note that the task of throwing the group out of redneck territory falls on the shoulders of a member of the law enforcement. The narrative seems to imply that leveling down to the primitive “bad” could not or should not be allowed. Under this light, there might be a silver lining to the socially stigmatized “rural “white trash” as local authorities, suspecting foul play, yet incapable of proving it, have to let the friends go.

The ending of the film, thus, may be interpreted twofold: not only is resorting to the most primitive attributes of human condition feasible so long as your life is in peril, but also society may not render any punishment for such an act. It is in extreme danger, the danger of the presence of the other, (the bad, the “white trash” characters, socially stigmatized and portrayed as a threat to other whites) when savagery of any kind prevails. In the end, the redneck, “white trashy” officer of the law has been outsmarted by these whites and, grudgingly, does have to let go. Being warned not to come back, the “white supremacy” gets away with the crime. Upon the conclusion of the story, one can only assume that middle- and upper- class whites are still superior to the savage even in their own territory.

Being pushed away from society, poor whites can only hope to be left alone, in their own world, under their own terms, as the sheriff put it in his last lines, “I’d kinda like to see this town die peaceful.” The use of the verb “die” is significant in these lines. It looks as though the sheriff, and at this point the spectator, knew of the underlying but ever-present power struggle between the dominating whites and “white trash.” In such struggle, the film seems to imply, the dominating white class will always remain so, leaving the underprivileged feeling hopeless. This sense of hopelessness seems to have been internalized by the underprivileged class which, in order to defend themselves, have claimed theirs the primitive world of the backwoods. Despite suggesting that the rural “white trash” type has been violently forced into submission, *Deliverance* is also thought provoking, as the outcome of the film seems to instill doubt in the mind of the viewer. Though back home, the friends have sworn never to reveal the events of such a fatalistic weekend, the final scene is telling: Ed awakens screaming from a nightmare in which a dead man’s hand rises from the lake. This could be looked upon as the consequence of a highly traumatic event, or, at a symbolic level, as the manifestation of guilt of a dominating class over inferior others. The question remains: has the superior class escaped danger unscathed? or, on the contrary, has the course of the events left an indelible mark on



the superior whites' mind. Whichever reading the spectator chooses to adopt, *Deliverance* (1972) has conveyed frightening, terrifying and contemptible images of rural "poor white trash," still lingering in society today.

Along the years, stereotyped images of white trash as frightening and terrifying have been extended to white trash women as well, who have been depicted in films as ugly, violent and sexually deviant. As an illustration of the above, the present project analyzes the film *Monster* (2003),⁷¹ directed by Patty Jenkins, which recounts the life of a serial killer, Aileen Wournos, who at the age of 46 was executed by lethal injection in the State of Florida. The film tries to expose the mechanisms of oppression that mainstream whites exert against the marginalized and excluded. Belonging to a most current style of storytelling, that of confessional and/or life story, *Monster* (2003) presents the tragic existence of Aileen Wournos, a figure highly misunderstood by society. Aileen was born poor, white and female. Abandoned by her mother and raped by her grandfather, she started offering sexual favors in school at a very early age. After turning 14 years old and being raped by one of her grandfather's friends, Aileen was thrown out of her home. Already living at the margins of society and not knowing what else to do, Aileen dove into a life of prostitution, alcohol and drugs. Leaving her home state, Michigan, she headed off to Florida where she would meet Tyria Moore, her future lover and confident. Openly declaring her homosexuality and with little hope in the system, Aileen went into a life of delinquency which eventually led her to the killing of seven men who, as she claimed, raped her and put her life in danger. The film recreates Aileen's adult life in Florida while exposing her social abuse and neglect. The story focuses on the nine-month period between 1989 and 1990, during which the character of Wournos had a lesbian relationship with a woman named Selby (based on Wournos's real life companion, Tyria

[1] ⁷¹ For a preview, Online Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq70brIQP40>

Moore). Committed to her partner, she then starts murdering her clientele in order to make money without rendering sexual services. The plot reveals Aileen Wournos meeting Selby at a bar in Daytona Beach, FL. After falling in love, Aileen wants to lead a faithful relationship with her lover. For this to happen, Aileen will lurk the state's highways, like a predator, looking for ways to make money without jeopardizing her sexual-love life. Pinning the blame of her killing rampage on her traumatic past, the character reverses the roles of socially accepted conduct. As stated above, Wournos transforms into the predator charging against the lust-seeking male. If prostitution for women, on the Florida highways, was conceived as much dangerous as it was punishable, it is the male who is now being put at risk. For it is Wournos who, being hurt by her family and society, feels entitled to hunt and punish. The remnants of the nineteenth century cult of 'true womanhood' imposed upon by a dominating puritan white male mentality are taken down by a (poor white lesbian) female ready to claim what was taken away from her. As Jeff Forret explains, "it was since indentured servitude that poor white women have always been regarded as sexually depraved, their bodies being considered ugly, dirty, and disgusting and even well into the twentieth century the poor white female image has been construed as physically, intellectually and psychologically unappealing" (184).

Wournos's character, extrapolated by the director's desire to expose social locations of gender, class and race, posits a magnificent depiction of class, race and gender vindication. Representing the antithesis of subdued white femininity, Wournos comes across as the epitome of "white trash" female: ugly, butch-like and dirt-poor, yet her character does come with an added bonus; she represents the psychologically deranged and sexually depraved type. Psychologically deranged as a product of a chastising, suppressing white society not able to help victims of domestic abuse; sexually depraved as her lesbian sexual tendencies denote a deviation most condemned by the mainstream whites.

The outcome suggested in the film does not differ much from the real course of events. Charlize Theron outdoes herself in the portrayal of the real Wournos: her demeanor, both physical and psychological does mirror Aileen Wournos almost to perfection.⁷² Representing the figure of the “homosexual female white trash,” this character is also stigmatized on account of her sexual inclination. In the words of Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu, “Wournos may transpire as a socially disabled character, not because she may be physically impaired to be an active member of society but rather because her ‘impairment’ resides in “society’s unwillingness to acknowledge circumstances, for example, poverty [...], that continue to create environmentally instigated forms of disability” (4). Aileen’s early childhood’s abusive experience, her economic status and female condition, in addition to her sexual orientation are the unfortunate circumstances under which she formed her identity. Upon society’s lack of interest in and concern for such social type, Wournos is presented as both unsalvageable and disposable: unsalvageable because she carries out her vindictive act against the white male by refusing to be his prey, and disposable because “white trash” like her have to be either contained or eliminated from society. As in *Deliverance* (1972), *Monster* (2003) is a perfect display of the primal strongly surfacing to lash out against the superior class/race/gender. The outcome is, however, all the more devastating. For not only does shame come down on Aileen for being dirt-poor white, but also her condition of lesbian and “female” will leave the protagonist with no other choice but retaliate against society. Further, Aileen’s mental sanity is called into question as, in the eyes of society, she is “mentally deranged,” a marker signaling the “inbred primal poor white trash” in her. Her mental state as well as her circumstances drive her into a killing frenzy which, once put in motion, can only be stopped by her own disposal by society.⁷³

⁷² Theron won seventeen awards for her performance, including Academy Award for best actress, Golden Globe for best actress and Screen Actors Guild award for outstanding leading actress.

⁷³ For full interview and biography, online available: <https://prisonphotography.org/2010/01/04/aileen-wournos/>

Faithful to true events, *Monster* (2003) succeeds at making an impact on the spectator. Aileen Wournos's death should not signal individual failure but ought to denounce the collective's, the director seems to imply. It is the community which, by pinning the socially stigmatized condition of poor-white homosexual female on Wournos, fails to deliver. For Aileen Wournos, the real woman, would rather die than continue living among the mainstream whites. During her last interview with Nick Broomfield, a day before her execution, Aileen Wournos bitterly complained about having been made into a capitalist commodity; she stated: "You sabotaged my ass, society! [...] A raped woman got executed and it was used for books and movies and shit [...] you're an inhuman bunch of fucking living bastards and bitches" (Broomfield 5:30/7:04-5:45/7:04). Wournos's directly accusing society of turning her life into a commodity is a mere reflection on today's capitalist interests in films like *Monster* (2003), which attract a wide sector of the population through their depiction of the dark side of the poor whites' stigma, the one that makes us shiver and afraid of "white trash."

Films have not always focused on the scary side of white poverty to draw crowds into the movie theaters. In recent decades, other aspects of the stereotype have been brought out to public awareness as part of the great scheme of a commodity-building capitalist society. TV programs such as reality shows and documentaries have taken upon themselves to show "white trash" living from within. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) is a clear example.⁷⁴ Set in their rural hometown of McIntyre, Georgia, this American (TLC)⁷⁵ reality TV series follows not only the life of Alana Thompson but also her family's (her mother June, father Mike, and sisters, Lauryn, Jessica, and Anna). The program started in 2012 and came to an abrupt end in the spring of 2014. Alana is a beauty-pageant contestant whose life and, by default, the lives of her family, revolves around the world of beauty pageantry. Along with it, other aspects of

⁷⁴ For a preview on the series, online available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng6xd2txunQ>

⁷⁵ Originally "The Learning Channel" until it became a pay TV channel.

southern rural white poor living are also shown. As episodes roll on, the viewer gets drawn into “the nuts and bolts” of the Thompson family that very soon start to share their values, thoughts about life and reasons for their lifestyle with their audience. Each episode deals with an everyday life event the Thompsons have to cope with. Living in a shanty little house in the midst of a trailer park, the Thompsons consider themselves an “ordinary southern family,” whose activities include mud-bogging, special beauty-pageant diet, drinking, weed-smoking, road-kill exploitation, in-and-out-of-love relationships and teenage pregnancies.

While this family goes about minding their own business, the message conveyed through the eyes of the camera indicates that their lives are anything but “ordinary.” It is no wonder that the series has sparked controversy among critics, rising eye brows at “the way that the show seems to assume that those (*TLC*’s) viewers will look at this family and the world” (Poniewozick 2012). Others criticized the attempt to portray the Thompsons as people to single out and badmouth stating that “none of the women or girls who participate in the show seems to hate themselves for their poverty, their weight, their less-than-urbane lifestyle, or the ways in which they diverge from the socially-acceptable beauty standard” (Carpentier 2012). According to Megan Carpentier, this particular show focuses on the figure of the poor white female as repellent and non-attractive. Despite all, not minding their ugliness, the women of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) are not bothered by their physical appearance. Some are of the opinion that *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) wants to highlight poor whites’ stereotypes by showing the audience a family depicted as “a horde of lice-picking, lard-eating, nose-thumbing hooligans south of Mason-Dixie line” (Bricklin 2012). In fact, while the series could have served the purpose of demystifying the concept of rural “white trash,” it has done just the opposite. The reviewers who criticize it seem to vouch for poor white social justice as they think the program constitutes a mockery and a farce on poor whites’ values. Those who praise it do not see a reason beyond the point of social tolerance. Yet, telling the

story should function as a strategy for social awareness. In the case under analysis, however, presenting the reality of impoverished whites does not lessen social inequality, nor does it attempt to challenge the status quo, but rather becomes the perfect argument from which to economically benefit. The series generated high audience rates and was a profitable endeavor since it first started to air.

Not always have mass media tried to turn inequality of the underprivileged into a capitalist commodity. Julien Nietzberg's documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009),⁷⁶ henceforth *Wonderful Whites*, represents an honest attempt to raise public awareness on the dirt-poor, uneducated whites. Considered as the sequel to *The Dancin' Outlaw* (1991), which introduces audiences to the life of Jesco White—a tap dancer, law-breaking mountaineer—, *Wonderful Whites* follows the life of some members of the White family while in prison. The documentary also accompanies the Whites to hospitals and rehabilitation centers while sharing their passion for drinking, pot-smoking and prescription drug abuse. Though the entire clan seems to be doomed to leading a less-than-normal and marginalized lifestyle, one of its members, Poney White, manages to leave West Virginia to settle in Minnesota, where he makes a living as a house painter and feels happy to have run away from Boone County, his birth place. Nonetheless, Poney White's case is rare within the Whites clan for, as Anthony Oliver Scott explains:

...back there, an anthology of country standards unfolds in real life and real time: murder ballads, cheating songs and rebel hollers, with an occasional pause for fatalistic spiritual meditation. The Whites—in particular the three generations of women who are the movie's most compelling and complicated characters—are not shy in front of the camera, and their forthrightness quiets,

⁷⁶ For a preview on the series, online available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUIapa-U0bY>

at least temporarily, the queasy sense of exploitation that hangs around the film.
(2010)

Once again, the idea of economic exploitation surfaces in the minds of critics and viewers. In spite of this, the documentary attempts to remain non-intrusive and, above all, nonjudgmental of the Whites' actions which lead almost all of their male members to a tragic end (some are thrown in jail, awaiting sentencing; others end up being killed). As for the women in the family, they are the ones displaying great strength upon holding the family together. It is worth mentioning the matriarchal figure of Mamie who endures the Whites' mishaps with the law and misdeeds to each other. Contrary to other TV programs, such as reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014), there is rarely a scene that may appear staged in *The Wonderful Whites*, Kirk, one of Jesco's nieces, shows true emotions when authorities take her newborn baby away from her, after a long-drawn legal custody battle. As Christopher Long states, "at the very least, the film will not allow you to dismiss them [the Whites] as caricatures" (2010). In truth, the characters of *Wonderful Whites* are not social caricatures hyperbolized and censored for their life choices, but quite the contrary, they are, for the most part, genuine and heartfelt.

Regardless of the mixed emotions it might spark among its viewers, *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009) signals the efforts of its producers and director to open the eyes of the public opinion to a reality that lives in the backyard of modern America. A reality which the mainstream Anglo-Saxon public needs to not only acknowledge but pay attention to. As Christopher Long, reaching the final conclusion on the film, states: "I'm not sold that we should celebrate them simply because they live life by their rules (of helpless entitlement), but damned if they aren't a fascinating bunch. And the film fulfills one of the

more salutary roles of a documentary: it opens a window onto a world most people will never otherwise see” (ibid).

To conclude, while the above-mentioned films concentrated on the scary, primal, abhorrent and appalling side of the poor whites, the TV shows under study exposed, up-close and personal, their true and authentic detrimental side. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) and *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009) let audiences experience the life of the poor whites first hand, enticing them to either mocking or condemning their existence. Additionally, in both genres (films and TV programs), the portrayal of poor white women has not been left out. *Monster* is a compelling true story of a poor white female who, driven to desperation, bitterly holds society responsible for her actions. *Honey Boo Boo* depicts females as those whose values and convictions are as good as anybody else’s, while *Wonderful Whites* shows them as resolute, strong members of a clan that in order to live by their own rules, need to go on, despite the circumstances.

Overall, this reflection upon the films, TV series and documentary leads us to believe that social stereotypes about the poor whites of America are yet to be debunked. Moreover, visual arts is only a part of a much wider scope of mass media communications. The internet, social networking, live TV and videoconferencing, to name a few, are also products by which to rapidly “share” thoughts, opinions and ideas. In the end, all of these products have the potential to either make a difference on social stigma, or perpetuate myths, popular beliefs and urban legends. More troublesome, this new modality of “telling the story” appears to feed on those who enjoy intruding in other people’s misfortunes, while turning stereotypes into commodities for lucrative purposes. It is only on few occasions when sincere attempts to change the public’s opinion on the under-favored do emerge. No matter their effort, however, when it comes to raising awareness on the social juncture of the poor whites, the road to taking

down the barriers of prejudice and social stigmatization is long and a positive outcome remains yet to be seen.

3.3 Contemporary Notions of “White Trash”: Whites vs. Whites

3.3.1 Introduction

Though mass media initially depicted the most stigmatized and stereotyped image of “white trash,” a shift in adopting different approaches to the myth seems to have taken place. Kirstine Taylor (2015) states that in “the last two decades film and other media have begun to embrace “white trash” as both the subject and object of consumption” (73). She goes on to say that, for some, the term still signifies coarse bigotry, inappropriate nostalgia for the Confederacy and a variant of racial conservatism. It is in this fashion that “white trash” still evokes remnants from the region’s racist and violent past, becoming the recipient of racial guilt, once articulated by southern moderates in the postwar decades (74). However, this usage has declined after the Civil Rights Movement, gradually giving way to the perception of “white trash” as victims of white hegemonic power. In this regard, for some, class-based discrimination “recedes from view, and the victimization suffered by “white trash” reduces to an insistence that racial bigotry can and does target whites as well as blacks” (ibid).⁷⁷ Taylor explains that it was only after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the rise of neoliberal governance that “white trash” became an identity for poor whites to self-consciously inhabit. In her own words, “today’s ‘white trash’ fosters an old sense of grievance that they are, and have been, left behind and forgotten as poor whites” (ibid).

⁷⁷ Taylor quotes Mat Wray and Annalee Newitz as among those regarding “white trash” as victims of white hegemonic power. I feel compelled to express my disagreement with this line of thought. Matt Wray (2006) has proposed that instead of interpreting “white trash” identity as subjects of victimhood, a need to explore “white trash” stigma would lead to reconciliation between the two, dominating and dominated, perceptions of whiteness.

Neglected but white, “white trash” has been proposed as a constituent comprising the “multiculturality” of whiteness. In the words of Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, “‘white trash’ explodes the idea of what might be an acceptable, multicultural form of white racial identity.” (1997 5). On the other hand, while trying to “fit in” within whiteness, the term still carries traditionally-conceived stereotypes:

...affirmative “white trash” images are overtly manifest in popular media texts, fashion, behavioral performance and the articulation of contemporary values as a subversive and substantive means of influencing and sustaining whiteness as a core of social praxis [...] there is a seemingly array of linguistic interpolation and iconographic images used as contemporary cultural identifiers of the “white trash” aesthetic —polyester, trailer homers, shopping at Walmart, a fat Elvis in a diamond studded jumpsuit, incongruous lawn ornaments, and a mullet-style haircut, to name a few. Expectations of etiquette and/or behavior, regardless of social or economic status and material taste, as signified and constructed through individual personas —consciously or unconsciously— equally contain all of the historically defined assumptions and disdain of the “white trash” stereotype that is currently popularized within mainstream American culture (Castle 8-9).

Dressing in polyester and showing “trailer park” manners as fashion trends seem to attract large sectors of the general public. Moreover, signifiers of “white trash” such as sexual promiscuity, teen pregnancy, illegitimate children and incest, unstable families, poor diet or obesity, alcoholism and drug abuse, racist and/or homophobic viewpoints and specific attire such as the “wife-beater” tee-shirt for men and a visible thong for women can be found on numerous internet websites today. Such vast display of “white trash” paraphernalia indicates that the stigma of “white trash,” as it happened in film-making, has transformed into a commodity, an

object to be economically exploited, sold and consumed, instantly and easily available worldwide.

In a world where the internet has taken over printed news and access to mass media is no longer limited to a seat before a big screen or a theater stage, but readily available at the click of a mouse, new modalities of “white trash” stereotypes can easily and almost instantly originate, transform and spread. Furthermore, in a society that prides itself in being multicultural and global, stereotyping and stigmatizing disguise behind trends and fashions. Nowadays, displays of “white trash” imagery are found in celebrities, for instance, to attract the public’s attention with the sole purpose of selling a new trendy product, that of a “white trash” attitude. Such a phenomenon has been present since the late fifties to the present, from Elvis Presley’s glittering outfits to Paris Hilton’s defiant demeanor. As Gael Sweeney writes in her essay, “The King of ‘White Trash’ Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetic of Excess” (1997):

As with pornography, we know “white trash” Culture when we see it. Rather than defining a people or a class, although both are implicated, it is an aesthetic of the flashy, the inappropriate, the garish [...] It is an aesthetic of bricolage, of random experimentation with the bits and pieces of culture, but especially the out-of-style, the tasteless [...] “white trash” defines the self by display: it is not afraid to wear its philosophy on a tee-shirt or needlepoint it across a big pillow or proclaim it across the bumper of a pick-up truck, or tattoo it on an arm [...] “white trash” is an unwritten, folk aesthetic, the true American Primitive. (249)

These images, icons and symbols of “white trash” stereotypes reaffirm Jim Goad’s assertion that “being ‘white trash’ in America is mostly perceived to be a personal attitude rather than a socioeconomic situation,” as if “white trash” was a matter of choice instead of a predicament.

(38). The scholar continues, “those born in extreme white poverty do not choose to go barefoot or toothless to set trends or styles, they simply cannot afford the luxury to provide for themselves” (ibid). The bottom line is, however, that in a world of consumerism where merchandising of stereotyped social outcasts, such as “white trash,” is highly profitable, the situation of white poverty has not been given the necessary attention. On the contrary, it has been downplayed and undermined.

As new trendy stereotypes of “white trash” flood U.S.A.’s consumer’s society, traditionally-conceived and newly-adopted stereotypes now merge in the minds of Americans, even in those of figures of authority. It has been Hillary Clinton who, while in the past presidential electoral campaign, had to publicly apologize for her comments about defining half of her rival’s supporters as “deplorable,” meaning people who are racist, sexist, homophobic or xenophobic, attitudes popularly associated with “white trash” (Mohan 1). Such a statement reaffirms how deeply rooted the myth of “white trash” still remains. It also reaffirms that white hegemony thrives in a market economy where, for instance, multicultural professionals deny any connection with those exhibiting the traits of the “deplorables.” In so doing, some mainstream whites present themselves as recipients of a new, color-blind, “racial innocence,” needed for economic and social success.

In other words, belonging to the poor whites/“white trash” category is altogether different from behaving like one. While the latter is the result of having been bought into a capitalist consumer’s society, the former bears the stigma of having been born poor and white. In addition, the perception of poor white/“white trash” has been transformed along the years to such an extent that nowadays the term carries forth the mark of social deplorability. This mark can only be interpreted as the compilation of traditionally- and historically-preconceived notions of “white trash” compounded by the desire of a covert, yet active, hegemonic group of whites to appear innocent, race-blind and orderly.

3.3.2 Liberal Whites and White Hegemony

When social domination occurs, the idea of individuality is replaced by the systems of oppression of a hegemonic class. In the western world, such hegemony, understood as the only group holding the power, has traditionally been white. Inferior classes cannot operate on their own but are to render themselves to a higher white authority that imposes its will through systems of oppression. These so-called systems give way to a “social order” or class stratification with which all members of society comply and under which the chances of personal and social development become almost impossible. Theodore Allen offers a description on the essential social structure in class societies stating that first, there is the white ruling class, that part of society which is able to limit the options of social policy in such a way as to perpetuate its hegemony over society as a whole. Being itself economically non-productive, the ruling class represents, at the optimum, a small numerical proportion of society. Second, there is the intermediate buffer social control stratum, classically composed of self-employed small land-owners or leaseholders, self-employed artisans, and members of the professions, who live in relative economic security, yet in social subordination to the ruling class and normally in day-to-day contact with their social inferiors. Finally, there are those devoid of productive wealth (except their ability to work), who constitute the majority of the population and whose condition is generally one of extreme dependency and insecurity.⁷⁸ It is, therefore, that the white hegemonic class defines itself on the existence of other minority groups whose mark of inferiority resides in hierarchical differentiation under which those lacking wealth, yet capable of producing it, constitute the inferior class. In this light, late twentieth and twenty first century historians have included poor whites among those groups different from and inferior to the hegemonic whites, who have been commonly referred to as

⁷⁸ Theodore Allen explains that apart from economic oppression there are other basic lines of social distinction, such as racial, gendered, and national. These forms of oppression serve to reinforce the ascendancy of the ruling class. For more information, see Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* (1998), chapter III.

the “white race.” In this regard and concerning the American period of the Reconstruction, Ronald Takaki explains that though all whites could own land, there were those who lacked the means to buy it. Landownership, a mark of whiteness, ultimately became a privilege in the hands of the white upper and middle class (52-54).

From the standpoint of racial demarcation, Wray states that “whiteness is different from blackness (or any ‘racial-ness’) in that it has long held the privileged place of racial normativity” (3). Wray argues that it has been the invisibility (for whites) of whiteness what has enabled white Americans to stand as unmarked, normative bodies, and social selves, the standard against which all others are judged as different, hence inferior. In a nutshell, for the scholar, the mark of superiority embedded in the term “white,”—given by the fact that “whites” do not consider themselves recipients of any race— seems to be both class- and race-derived and, thus, deserves special attention:

As such, the invisibility of whiteness is an enabling condition for both white supremacy/privilege and race-based prejudice. Making whiteness visible to whites —exposing the discourses, the social and cultural practices, and the material conditions that cloak whiteness and hide its dominating effects — is a necessary part of any antiracist project. (3-4)

Wray’s notion that “white invisibility” may have played an important role in the oppression of others and that, to study the nature of the inferior, an introspect approach to white hegemonic discourses, practices and conditions is needed, had already been suggested by African American scholars.

bell hooks, for instance, explored the role of teaching whiteness in a multicultural setting where, despite the focus on diversity and inclusion, the majority of students were still white. To stray from biased views and “tokenism,” she states that “it is [...] crucial that

“whiteness” be studied, understood, discussed —so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present” (1994 43). Hooks writes these words a decade after the Civil Rights Movement, at a time when there originated a push for a better representation of minority teachers and administrators in secondary education. It was also crucial that there be community control and revision of textbooks so multicultural diversity would be recognized and studied. Efforts to implement a multicultural teaching system arose in universities and colleges across the country and the urge to add all groups in society as part of a multicultural curriculum became paramount.

The concept of whiteness has been challenged not only in education but also in other areas of study. In literary theory, Toni Morrison can be counted among those who have directly addressed the need to examine the role that whiteness has played in the construction of the term “American” literature. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), which exposes the white male writer as central figure of American literary tradition, Morrison suggests that it may be possible to discover the nature of “literary whiteness” through a close look at “literary blackness.” In the following quotation, the author implies that American literary tradition may have been composed in its entirety by “literary whiteness” only:

What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”? If such an inquiry ever comes to maturity, it may provide access to a deeper reading of American literature—a reading not completely available now, at least, I suspect, because of the studied indifference of most literary criticism for these matters. (9)

Morrison too makes an appeal to carefully and thoroughly examine the implications and consequences that “white” or “whiteness” may have brought about within the context of a

multicultural society as is the U.S.A. To her, the act of reading so-called American literary narratives entails that "...each of us reads, becomes engaged in and watches what is being read all at the same time" (x). Morrison is interested "in the pervasive use of black images and people in expressive prose [...] the taken-for-granted assumptions that lie in their usage and the sources of these images [...] and the effect they have on the literary imagination and its product (ibid).

In her work, Morrison exhorts writers to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains (xi).⁷⁹ Her essay signifies another proposal for reading and writing American literature, one that suggests the use of the "other," other than blackness, for self-identification. This proposal also entails examining "the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion and racial vulnerability and availability on non-blacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions" (11). Underprivileged whites, therefore, fall in the category of non-blacks, upon Morrison calling into question the portrayal of whiteness of the so-called American literary tradition: "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say" (59).

The construct of whiteness, however, goes farther back in history than the nineteen seventies. Terrance MacMullan defines W.E.B Dubois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) as still one of the greatest works of whiteness studies scholarship for its recognition that in order to solve the problem of white supremacist violence we must first recognize that whiteness is a "sort of public and psychological wage that is paid to European Americans" (2).

⁷⁹ In order to illustrate her statement, Morrison brings to the table her short story, "Recitatif" (1983), "a literary experiment to remove all racial signifiers from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (xi).

It was in the nineteen nineties that a “sophisticated analysis of the significance of racism in the formation of the nineteenth-century white working class” (Cleaver 2006) came to light. David Roediger’s work, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), henceforth *The Wages of Whiteness*, has been highly acclaimed by scholars willing to question whiteness. A white historian, David Roediger takes on a multidisciplinary approach to analyzing whiteness.⁸⁰ His work sheds light onto the construction of race based on the argument that “whiteness” has been a historical social construct in the U.S.A.

According to Roediger, the concept of race is intrinsically intertwined with class and, therefore, scholars cannot study one without giving due consideration to the other (xxv). A clear example of his hypothesis is represented in his in-depth case study of the Irish immigrants who, escaping the Great Famine back in their homeland, started to arrive in North America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Irish immigrants would not be regarded as “white,” as belonging to the superior white Anglo Saxon community, until they started to disassociate themselves from both blacks and freedmen. Kathleen Cleaver, in the “Introduction” to the third edition of Roediger’s work, states:

The fierce appropriation of whiteness by Irish immigrants provides the paradigmatic case study for Roediger’s theory. It was an open question in the mind of nineteenth-century white Protestants whether these Celtic immigrants belonged to the white race. They were vilified, segregated, and castigated as savage, simian, and bestial. The imperative driving the Irish Catholics who flooded into America in the wake of the Great Famine to define themselves as

⁸⁰ Roediger draws on mass culture, the use of language and politics. His approach to the construct of whiteness as the superior race over others is, according to Kathleen Cleaver, Neo-Marxist, providing most illuminating arguments for understanding white dominance as well as implementing measures leading to social groups’ reconciliation (xix).

white - despite their hatred of the British and their North American descendants - was that 'public and psychological' wage that whiteness promised desperate workers struggling to find their way through an industrializing world that held them in contempt. (xxii)

Following in the steps of W.E.B. Dubois's construct of whiteness in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Roediger adopts Dubois's concept of whiteness upon to explain white workers' attempts to become "white" in an emerging industrialized society. Dubois's concept needs to be placed within the context of a pre-Civil War America:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white [...]. [White workers] would rather have a low wage upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage. White labor saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives. (700-701)

Roediger states that, despite white workers' harsh working conditions, remunerated labor to them meant they no longer belonged to an "inferior race." In fact, "waged" white workers thought themselves a higher class than "non-white" workers. In the nineteenth century, blacks were the inferior class whites compared themselves to, as the country was transitioning from a slave-owning economy into capitalism. This urge for the white working class⁸¹ to become "white" was very apparent in the nineteenth century and persisted throughout the twentieth, for "white" has been always associated with upward mobility. Cleaver explains that

⁸¹ In the case of Roediger's study, represented by Irish immigrants.

in Roediger's work the concept of herrenvolk democracy⁸² is changed into herrenvolk republicanism. She states:

This ideological frame [herrenvolk republicanism], according to Roediger, reads blacks out of the ranks of the producers, then allows a concentrated fire downward against the dependent blacks, instead of upwards against the most powerful whites. The basic strength of this ideology, according to Roediger, lay in the assurance it provided the whites - who constantly feared downward mobility - that no matter what else they may lose, they could never lose their whiteness. (xxiii)

In doing so, Roediger establishes the connection in the nineteenth century American social stratification between class (wage produces wealth versus non-paid slavery —blacks) and race or whiteness (understood as “white” dominating over the “other”—blacks), being most illuminating in explaining why, in an increasing capitalist society as is the U.S.A., the perception of white race as dominant class, this time over all other non-white groups, still continues.

White hegemony, as the ruling ethnic majority, is also found among whites, though. According to Kirstine Taylor, this power has undergone a change throughout U.S. history. In her essay, “Untimely Subjects: “White Trash” and the Making of Racial Innocence in the Postwar South” (2015), Taylor observes that white hegemony has experienced a transformation from the postwar era to the two thousands.⁸³ Centering on the subject of racism, Taylor explains that by pinning the blame on poor whites, “white trash” or the low economic classes, dominant

⁸² This concept was applied by sociologist Pierre L. Van den Berghe to the elected governments in South Africa and the United States, which are politically democratic for the master race but tyrannical towards the subordinate racial groups. A herrenvolk democracy is a system of government in which only the ethnic majority rules, while minority groups are disenfranchised. Historians refer to the Nazi government as a herrenvolk democracy.

⁸³ Taylor understands postwar era as the years following the American Civil War up to contemporary times.

whites appear as repositories of racial innocence. It is not the educated, law-abiding, middle-class whites who perpetrate acts of violence but an “inferior” class within their class. Such transformation started in the nineteen forties, when the notion of “white trash” changed from being just simply primitive to becoming also guilty of committing acts, such as inciting political demagoguery, anti-black mob violence, lynchings, and racial outrages large and small. By contrast, “real” whites would not display such aggressively racist attitudes, nor would they exert overt violence on blacks (60).

In the years immediately following the Civil War and throughout the nineteenth century, given the fact that it was imperious for the South to maximize its industrial potential, eventually leading to economic growth for both North and South, superior whites concentrated their efforts on three preferences —business growth, law-and-order and segregation— which together “formed the basis for the emerging New South order” (61). In such context, “poor white trash” were “assigned” the role of the extreme violent, deviant, racist and ignorant class against which were these new “noble, law-abiding whites.” Taylor continues to explain that as segregation was a barrier to economic development and as middle-class whites, already in the nineteen fifties and sixties, were filling the burgeoning suburbs of cities such as Atlanta and Charlotte, political moderates sought a “compromise” with segregated school systems by pursuing policies such as pupil-placement and local option school plans. Such policies avoided strategies of open defiance, and “because they were ostensibly race-neutral, they left segregation largely intact” (63). This covert modality of oppression empowered the superior whites even more as they continued to place the blame of extreme racism on the racial backwardness and violence of the low white class. While moderate politicians did little to abolish segregation policies, they were quick to condemn “white” violence by associating it with “mobism,” once again personified in the figure of the “white trash” (66). In condemning the violence of “white trash,” “moderate whites” appeared as citizens of law and order in an

apparently violence-prone South (68). On this plane, white supremacy continues to exist by blaming inferior classes, such as “white trash,” for their own mechanisms of oppression:

Without “white trash” as figures of violent and anachronistic southern exceptionalism to gesture toward those things that the South was *not*, the New South political moderates would have had little room with which to reconstruct white racial innocence as a matter of middle-class, law-and-order progress.
(Taylor 72)

This transformation of white hegemonic power into “racial innocence,” which resulted in the disassociation from and condemnation of “poor white racism,” thrives in the America of the two thousands where self-conceited patriotism seems to have taken hold among its citizens.⁸⁴

Another type of white oppression over inferior whites comes in the form of what Michael S. Gibbons has defined as “the cultural elite.” In his essay “‘White Trash’: A Class Relevant Scapegoat for the Cultural Elite” (2004), Gibbons draws a picture of a contemporary cultural elite that, though showing signs of open-mindedness, behaves discriminatorily against poor whites. This group, mainly composed of “well-educated participants in the global economy” living in cosmopolitan areas, prides itself in adhering to a multicultural set of ethics that reflects the realities of a professional world. Gibbons maintains that the cultural elite profoundly dislikes the poor whites for being ignorant, sexist and intolerant and, more importantly, for being the underclass.⁸⁵ This multicultural, progressive, and professional elite, so reminiscent of that of “the intermediate social control stratum” in Theodore Allen’s social stratification, distances itself from the white racism “displayed” by “white trash” classes as a strategy to show their “professionalism” and “open-mindedness” in a multicultural and

⁸⁴ Currently, the U.S.A seems to have reemerged as wearing the old garments of the traditional white hegemony which, among other goals, predicates the need to make America great again.

⁸⁵ The scholar explains that the intolerance may be overtly racist and even manifest itself in “white supremacist” groups and ideology.

“politically correct” market, where distancing from “white trash” attitudes is a must, should one aspire to climb up the business ladder. This goes to show that behind such distancing lies “the troubling fact that middle class and professional whites are still benefitting personally from their structural power as elites” (Gibbons 2004).

It is a fact that the social landscape of contemporary U.S. still remains stratified, maintaining a social hierarchy very similar to the one drawn by Theodore Allen, with little modifications: the white hegemony is still on top followed by the buffered social stratum of the multicultural elite, capable of producing wealth. In both cases, white supremacy reigns over the lower classes. What is important in the case under study is to be cognizant that the brunt of the traditional and overt white supremacist forms of oppression now falls entirely on the poor whites, “white trash” or working-class, thus allowing the dominant whites to appear not only as law-abiding, race-blind and neutral citizens, but also as multicultural professionals who, in order to succeed in the work force, are eager to deny “white trash” attitudes. It is a transformation in white power, as Kirstine Taylor and Michael Gibbons have demonstrated, from overtness to covertness, white oppression to racial innocence, local tradition to multicultural progress.

Recent developments in the social political arena of the U.S.A. seem to have shaken the covert, racially innocent and multicultural demeanor of the white power over minority groups, such as poor whites/“white trash”. Since the November 2016 presidential elections, the U.S. electorate has been split into two very identifiable sides fighting over their own worldviews. As Nancy Isenberg states, “the symbols that mattered most to Trump’s voters were about class, but the metaphoric meaning played out in a more expansive rhetoric that divided constituencies by competing markers of identity” (xxvi). In such a fashion, Isenberg delineates the unspoken and spoken theme of the political contest as follows:

Clinton Democrats

Pedigreed Elites
Urban Insider
Cosmopolitan
Professionals
Meritocracy

Trump Republicans

Disinherited
Rural Outsider
Provincial
Working Stiffs
Hard Work

(xxvi)

While Clinton's Democrats vouched for upward mobility and progress, Trump's voters feared they would lose their class status should the other party win. Under the promise to "make America great again," Donald Trump won the country's presidency appealing to those who could never attain the "American Dream," which was based, according to Isenberg, on the premises that talent is rewarded "through the acquisition of earned academic credentials" (xxvii). As the majority of Americans do not have the means or opportunities to pursue higher education, but they would rather keep their status, Trump initiated a rhetoric catered to the white working class, those who witnessed the disappearance of their factories, their main source of income. These represented the "true" America, the left-behind class desperately trying to move out of the unemployment ranks into job security, the America lost to outsourcing and victim of an impossible American Dream. In such scenario, America's under-favored came to be the unemployed, disinherited—predominantly white—work force, who resented the past governments' actions for immigrants as "refugees." They felt themselves robbed of the opportunities the country gratuitously offered others and resented past government actions towards the less fortunate:

... many of Trump's supporters want to reinforce the old stigmas that separate the productive worker from the idle. They wanted the boundaries between the unemployed and employed to be firmly enforced, not weakened. "Make America Great Again" is another way of saying that hard work is no longer

automatically rewarded as a virtue. It tapped the anxieties of all who resented government for handing over the country to supposedly less deserving classes: new immigrants, protesting African Americans, lazy welfare freeloaders [...] Angry Trump voters were convinced that these classes (the ‘takers’) were not playing by the rules (i.e. working their way up the ladder) and that government entitlement programs were allowing some to advance past more deserving (white, native-born) Americans. This was how many came to feel ‘disinherited.’ (Isenberg xxviii)

Trump’s promises of a better, bigger, and greater America did not fall on deaf ears among the undeserving poor whites, or working class. In his inaugural address⁸⁶ Trump transfers the power from Washington D.C. to the “People,” who had suffered the consequences of Washington’s increase in wealth. Politicians became richer while jobs left and factories closed. It looked as though the establishment protected itself but not the citizens. Addressing to the struggling families across the land, Trump’s ensured that “the forgotten men and women of ‘our country’ would be forgotten no more and promised the return to the ‘American Dream’ for the working class.”⁸⁷

Empowering American workers with the right to be heard has given license to white supremacists’ demonstrations of violence and racism, thus allowing white hegemony to emerge once again. For instance, on August 11th 2017, the country became witness to a public ideological demonstration which reminded Americans of their regional, cultural and class differences. Yet, this time, racism, hate, and resentment among classes did not only fall on poor whites or working class alone, but, for the most part, on college-educated white supremacists.

⁸⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2017/jan/20/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-full-video> for full speech.

⁸⁷ See Inauguration Speech.

Violent confrontations took place in Charlottesville, VA, during a “Unite the Right” rally organized by right-wing nationalist groups to protest for the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee. As Nia Malika-Henderson pointed out:

...while the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee was the ostensible reason for the gathering of white supremacists in Charlottesville, the gathering also highlighted something else—the fear or replacement and erasure that sounds more benign when talking about statues and culture, but takes on a much darker, violent and extreme meanings in the hands of neo-Nazis. (August 18 2017)⁸⁸

The night before the protest, far right and white supremacist groups arranged a march down to the monument of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Described as one of the largest concentrations of white supremacists in the history of U.S., the demonstrators carried banners reading “white lives matter” and “blood and soil.” Protesters gathered again on Saturday and clashed with antiracist groups. The events resulted in the killing of a thirty-two-year-old woman and two helicopter pilots. In addition, several people were injured and taken to the hospital for treatment.

More puzzling than the events themselves was Trump’s initial response, however. The President condemned the incidents as an “egregious display of violence and bigotry on many sides.”⁸⁹ Though his later comments on Charlottesville riots were universal and directed to all wrongdoers, his first non-committal stance towards racism and hatred has pervaded in the minds of many Americans. Charlottesville riots transpire the resurgence of violence and racism

⁸⁸ For full article refer to <https://flipboard.com/@flipboard/-what-trump-understands-about-white-iden/f-852c673364%2Fenn.com>.

⁸⁹ For full view of press release, refer to <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-charlottesville-statement/index.html>

that contemporary U.S.A. is going through, this time in the hands of the white hegemony that no longer feels in the need to hide behind the front of white liberalism or racial innocence.

3.3.3 “White Trash” Today: A Conflict between Class and Race

The question remains:

How does a culture that prizes equality of opportunity explain, or indeed accommodate, its persistently marginalized people? Twenty first century Americans need to confront this enduring conundrum. Let us recognize the existence of our underclass. It has been with us since the first European settlers arrived on these shores. It is not an insignificant part of the vast national demographic today. (Isenberg 2)

In these times of hatred, violence and bigotry, all traits that until recently were attributed to those of poor economic means have come out in the open. It is the white superiority, to which organizations such as KKK and white nationalists ascribe, that shows no reticence in displaying such ideology. In the meantime the poor white class lies hidden and invisible, contemptible and hated. As Alec MacGillis points out in *The Atlantic* September 2016 issue, “a barely suppressed contempt has characterized much of the commentary about white woe, on both the left and the right.” In his article, MacGillis states that, on the Republican side, Kevin Williamson’s derogative comments about the low-income Republican white voters have been the ones putting Donald Trump in charge of the country:

Nothing happened to them. There wasn’t some awful disaster. There wasn’t a war or a famine or a plague or a foreign occupation. Even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little to explain the dysfunction and negligence—and the incomprehensible malice—of poor white America. So the

gypsum business in Garbutt ain't what it used to be. There is more to life in the 21st century than wallboard and cheap sentimentality about how the Man closed the factories down.

The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs [...] The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. (MacGillis 2016)

On the Democrat side, proceeds MacGillis, Josh Marshall's comments on the health decline of the white worker adds a note of fatalism to the future of the white working class. "Let's put this clearly," —the analyst states in wrapping up his analysis of the dismal health data—, "the stressor at work here is the perceived and real loss of the social and economic advantages of being white" (ibid).

Having presented these two opposite yet similar stances on the underclass issue, MacGillis's conclusion is anything but optimistic:

The barely veiled implication, whichever version you consider, is that the people undergoing these travails deserve relatively little sympathy [...]. Either they are layabouts, drenched in self-pity, or they are sad cases consumed with racial status anxiety and animus toward the nonwhites passing them on the

ladder. Both interpretations are, in their own ways, strikingly ungenerous toward a huge number of fellow Americans. (2016)

MacGillis expresses concern for the white working class, upon admitting that the stigma of being white and poor still pervades amongst a white working-class majority whose only desire is social and economic advancement.

Even though MacGillis's criticism on "white trash-bashing" is a point well taken, the fact is that low-income white workers—one of the groups known as "white trash"—have been placed in the category of those to blame for society's problems. In this regard, Nancy Isenberg notes:

A corps of pundits exist whose fear of the lower classes has led them to assert that the inbred perverse—white as well as black—are crippling and corrupting American society. They deny that the nation's economic structure has a causal relationship with the social phenomena they highlight. They deny history. If they did not, they would recognize that the most powerful engines of the US economy—slave-owning planters and land speculators in the past, banks, tax policy, corporate giants, and compassionate politicians and angry voters today—bear considerable responsibility for the lasting effects on "white trash," or on falsely labeled "black rednecks" and on the working poor generally. The sad fact is, if we have no class analysis, then we will continue to be shocked at the numbers of waste people who inhabit what self-anointed patriots have styled the "greatest civilization in the history of the world." (309)

If Isenberg centers the predicament of "white trash" mainly on class, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz reminds us that "white trash" is defined by the complicated interplay of both class and race. As explained by Wray and Newitz, "white trash":

...becomes a term which names what seems unnamable: a race (white) which is used to code 'wealth' is coupled with an insult (trash) which means, in this instance, economic waste [...]. "white trash" helps to represent a new connection between race and class in the US [...]. It also delineates a separation between race and class, for with "white trash" we are made aware that class actually cuts across race lines—stereotypically 'well off' whites are also poor.

(8)

Such an explanation transgresses the boundaries of class to further explore the issue of race. Wray and Newitz view "white trash" as an extremely complex social category which both connects and separates race and class.

In closing, social injustice still exists in the U.S.A. and those who suffer should not be ignored. Apart from having been given numerous derogatory names throughout history,⁹⁰ "white trash people":

... have been blamed for living on bad land, as though they had other choices [...] They are depicted as slothful, rootless vagrants, physically scarred by their poverty. The worst ate clay and turned yellow, wallowed in mud and muck, and their necks became burned by the hot sun. Their poorly clothed, poorly fed children generated what others believed to be a permanent and defective breed [...] we think of the left-behind groups as extinct, and the present as a time of advanced thought and sensibility. But today's trailer trash are merely

⁹⁰ Nancy Isenberg provides us with a long list: "Waste people, Offscourings, Lubbers, Bogtrotters, Rascals, Rubbish, Squatters, Crackers, Clay-eaters, Tackies, Mudsills, Scalawag, Briar hoppers. Low downers, White Niggers, Degenerates, "white trash," Rednecks, Trailer trash, Swamp people (ibid).

yesterday's vagrants on wheels, an updated version of Okis in jalopies and Florida crackers in their carts. (Isenberg 320)

Isenberg's words confirm today's state of affairs for the underclass. As seen, it is not only the general public that scorns, condemns and resents the existence of the under-favored but also politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, who refuse to acknowledge that the poor of whatever nature have always been a part of history and, as such, demand a solution to their predicament. In such social and political environment, Dorothy Allison's perspective on the "white trash" myth feels both contemporary and appropriate. The writer's mindset and her literary work may be worth re-examining to reflect on a stigma that still exists.

4. Writing from Within: Dorothy Allison's Literary Contribution to Demystifying Poor White/"White Trash"

4.1 Introduction: Life at the Margins. Dorothy Allison's Personal Experience

When asked to give a definition of herself, Dorothy Allison becomes outspoken and direct: "I'm not the kind of person who was supposed to be doing books. I'm supposed to be a waitress. I'm supposed to be a cook. I could be a housecleaner; I did it for a while. But I am not supposed to have a mind. I'm supposed to be this animal creature that the world chews up and spits out" (Miller 1998). These lines reveal society's expectations of the poor white class, whose stigmatization has always relied on the belief that the poor are to be ignorant, lazy and devoid of any personal drive.⁹¹

Belonging to a highly stigmatized social group as poor whites are, Allison grew up within a dirt-poor family whose members would do anything and everything to cheat, live off, or ride the system. The men in such family would spend the time drinking, gambling, or collecting welfare checks; the women would marry at an early age and get pregnant fast enough to qualify for welfare guaranteeing themselves with a somewhat steady income to live on. A very grim image of what an "American family" is thought to be like. In her collections of essays, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (1994) Allison draws an accurate picture of her people, "she is her mama's daughter, brought up with a feeling of unity and loyalty to her tribe, but a sense of low self-esteem" (*Skin* 170), yet ready to take in the damage caused by

⁹¹ In fact, and as seen, the poor have been associated, especially in southern states, with lack of education, inability to further knowledge and, in the case of women, with animalistic traits impeding advancement.

society's labeling them as "poor white trash," a category one could either ignore or be proud of.

It would take years for Dorothy Allison to overcome the damage of being different. Because the myth of "white trash" has been ingrained in the minds of the poor for so long, poor whites/"white trash" have internalized the idea of being different from mainstream, but not inferior, as they have been led to believe that, because of their "whiteness," they are somewhat superior to other non-whites.⁹² Allison states: "we were taught to be proud we were not Black, and ashamed we were poor, taught to reject everything people believed about us —drunken, no-count, lazy, whorish, stupid —and still some of it was just the way we were. The lies went to the bone and digging them out has been the work of a lifetime" (1994). Such internalization of feeling different yet equal to other whites has been the result of years of social labeling and misconception leading to an awkward state of affairs of which Allison feels the imperative need to get out. Upon being awarded a National Merit Scholarship, Allison left home to pursue a degree in higher education at Florida Presbyterian College, known today as Eckerd College.

The distance placed between her and her family meant for Allison an opportunity to search for ways to get to know herself. After graduation, Allison moves to Tallahassee where she starts looking for a community to call home. Allison found a collective to live in and did various jobs as a substitute teacher. In time, she became involved in the lesbian and feminist communities, while attending consciousness-raising group meetings which allowed Allison to take her first steps to healing upon talking about her stepfather's sexual and physical abuse

For Allison, breaking the silence built around rape, violence and incest is the first step to a process of self-discovery, acceptance and subjectivity reconstruction. Allison explains: "it [breaking the silence] triggers a lot of energy and empowerment, and then the long, slow

⁹² For instance, post-Civil War relief programs for the poor were not that successful due to the fact that poor whites considered themselves superior to other non-whites on the account of the color of their skin. (Flynt 34)

process of actually sorting through all that stuff and start to make changes in your life. That takes a lot” (Anderson 7). Having been able to speak freely about unspoken matters did not quench Allison’s thirst for the discovery of self, for there were other aspects of her personality, such as her sexual orientation, yet to be acknowledged.

Still trying to disguise her class and sexual orientation, Allison moves to Washington D.C. after having been offered a position as editor for *Quest*, an early feminist lesbian-gay journal. Her relationship with Morgan Gwenwald, another lesbian activist in the Movement, gave her a sense of belonging she had never had before but always wanted. As the author states, “I wanted a real family, the way people talked about family. I couldn’t even look at the way my family was real. I could always look at the way in which it had failed utterly, but I still loved them, and I wanted that. I wanted that in a women’s movement model” (22).

Gwenwald and Allison stayed together, while working relentlessly in the activist field. During the nineteen seventies, feminist activism was at its peak so both Gwenwald and Allison worked hard for women’s rights by putting together committees, organizing collectives, setting up consciousness-raising groups and instilling public awareness for the cause. Allison has always claimed that the women’s movement saved her life, as it “provided her with nurturing and comfort” (Anderson 2008). Feminism seemed to understand Allison’s background. Her team players and peers understood her worries and concerns.

The subject of feminism as a vehicle for personal and sexual subjectivity has surfaced in most of her interviews. Belonging to the second wave of feminists in the U.S.A., Allison has remained a feminist activist all throughout her adult life. Even in 2007, when feminism as she knew it was long gone, the writer reiterated her loyalty to it: “feminism saved my life; I’m not letting it go, even though at times it’s been a really hard room to occupy, but I’m not letting it go” (tape 3, 49). This insistence on remaining a feminist is deeply connected to Allison’s own perception on the movement. She believes in a type of feminism that transcends all boundaries.

According to her, being feminist means being conscious of her social surroundings⁹³ and working hard for her beliefs.⁹⁴ Speaking of the crisis feminism was to face—in which goals and objectives blurred and differed according to the beliefs of different groups within the women’s movement—, Allison is prompt to point out the small-mindedness of some feminists, which emerged during the sex wars of the early nineteen eighties and Bernard College Sex International Conference at which Allison was vilified, insulted, accused of deviant and perverse sexual conduct by the “mainstream” feminists.⁹⁵

It was in the nineteen eighties, upon the Women’s Liberation Movement starting to experience internal fragmentation, when Allison defended the rights of not only lesbians and gays, but also prostitutes, butch-femmes and other “sexually deviant” groups. In doing so, feminists like Allison initiated and sustained a long-drawn out fight against other groups, especially the anti-porn feminists. Allison felt it was their responsibility (Allison’s and her peers’) to speak up for the marginalized in society, those whose individual freedom and health were put at risk. She explains: “I mean, the hard part was fighting against the anti-porn people, when porn is such a criminal industry on so many levels, and trying to give women autonomy in a system that even the best autonomy you can get is still in a criminal system, is really tricky. It would be nice if it were simple, but it’s not. It’s human lives” (Anderson tape 3, 51).

As shown above, for Allison, feminism is about caring for and defending any underprivileged class, even if it means defending those outside the system.

⁹³ On one occasion, being asked what feminism meant to her, Allison uses California’s debilitating educational system as an example: for her, education is a feminist issue (Anderson tape 3, 48).

⁹⁴ Allison has been the editor of gay-lesbian magazines such as *Quest*, *Conditions* and the *Voice*, participated in numerous activist movements such as small press bookstore movements, rape crisis, Abortion crisis, Sexual Freedom Movement, New York Women Against Rape, among others, as well as in collectives, consciousness raising groups, sex conferences, etc.

⁹⁵ For more information, refer to “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” (1981) by Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, and “Dorothy Allison interviewed by Kelly Anderson,” *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project*, Smith College, 2008.



In hindsight, Allison complains that the Women's Movement did not finish its mission but neglected to fight for all women's rights, including the poor whites'. Using her sisters' lives to illustrate the point, the writer asserts that today's feminism cannot be considered successful.⁹⁶ In Allison's words: "because they [her sisters] are mostly single mothers and because they have had all the bad tendencies of my family, so that none of the immediate corporate successes of feminism are ever impacted on them" (47). Though her sisters were not able to free themselves from the stigma of being poor, white and women, they have somewhat benefited from the effort made by the Women's Equal Rights Movement.

In today's world and thanks to the activism of feminists like Allison, when it comes to aiming at a state of equality, women have made progress in matters such as education, marital status, and economic independence. It is Allison's opinion there is still much more to accomplish—objectives she believes in, but finds hard to meet—for nowadays young people do not have the community support and infrastructure feminists once had. Regarding the internet, she claims it provides youngsters with a fictitious feeling of unity. Because they see the presence of gays, lesbians, or queers on the mass media, young women think there is a community to organize, lead and fight for them. The reality is that "they don't have immediate access to resources and support that we put in place in our bookstores, in our women's centers, in our rape crisis centers" (Anderson tape 5, 97). In the previous statement, Allison is referring to the generation growing up under George W. Bush's administration in 2007.

In reference to the role of feminism in social media, the creation of activist movements, such as the "Pussy Hat," or "#MeToo," transpire the younger generations' ability to organize and fight for their rights, thus revealing the internet as an effective tool for the operation of

⁹⁶ On the subject, Martha Rampton asserts that academic feminism is, now, still alive and well in universities and colleges across the US, Canada and in other countries. Women's centers and gender/women's studies have become a staple in universities all over the world. Scholarship on women's studies, feminist studies, gay/lesbian studies, queer issues, etc. is prolific and academic major and minors on these subjects have produced thousands of graduates in the field. Yet, she contends that all this effort has generated more theorists than activists (2015).

already-established movements, such as The Equal Rights. In fact, Martha Rampton explains that the internet is disembodied and allows notions of gender, class, race and sexuality to be crossed. Moreover, the cyberspace is for these new feminists what bookstores, women's centers and rape crisis centers were for Allison and her fellow activists (Rampton 2008).

Despite her skepticism about the viability of the internet as a vehicle for feminism, Dorothy Allison has remained an adamant, loyal and enthusiastic combatant who firmly believes that activist feminism has a place in society other than in the academic field. Her undivided commitment to women's causes has led her to build a feminist/female identity of her own. Defending those who would not fit or qualify as subjects to the feminist cause (such as the illiterate, butch-femme lesbians, the "sexually deviants" and the working-class, among others), Allison's dedication to the women's cause represents a token of gratitude to a movement that gave purpose to her life, once at the crossroads of class, race, gender and sexuality.

Her moving to New York in 1981 opened Allison's eyes to channel her activism through the venue of writing. After the Barnard Sex Conference events,⁹⁷ Allison published her first written piece, a collection of poems entitled *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983). Written as a reaction to the events preceding the conference, this work is the product of rage, disillusion and disappointment. As with other discovery processes of her representations of self, it would take Allison a long time to overcome rejection. In her own words: "and then having to defend

⁹⁷ In 1982, Barnard College hosted a conference on sexuality in lieu to the increasingly growing women against pornography movement. Days before the conference and after many threatening letters and phone calls, the Barnard Administration had no other choice but confiscate the diary of the conference. Many of the speakers to take part in lectures, seminars and workshops were picketed, leafleted and insulted by anti-pornography feminists. These feminists tried to "excommunicate" from the feminist movement anyone who disagreed with them and aggressively sabotaged events that did not adhere to the anti-porn party line (Gaile Rubin, 2010). Among many of the public enemies of feminism were Dorothy Allison, Pat Califia, Lisa Duggan, Dierdre English, Amber Hollibaugh, Nan Hunter, Joan Nestle, Cindy Patton, Carole Vance, and Ellen Willis. For more information, read *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, 1984.

against people who should, on some level, speak your language [...] was bad. There's no other word." (Anderson tape 3, 54)

The Barnard Sex Conference scandal, however, provided Allison with enough strength and knowledge to interpret experience needed for subjectivity discovery while disclosing her sexual orientation and poor white origins. Still centered on the cause, Allison got involved with FACT (*Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce*). Without engaging in active fighting, Allison left the redefinition of feminism in the hands of those she trusted most. Nonetheless, she would be still very active in coalition groups such as *Necessary Bread* (Affinity Group) or *Women Against Rape* (WAR).

In addition, coming from a poor white woman's background empowered Allison to show strength, courage and resistance to her enemies. After a trip to visit her family (the first in nearly a decade), Allison returns renewed and ready to fight. Explaining to Kelly Anderson how she felt then about the Barnard Sex Conference scandal and directing her words to the boycotters of the event, she verbalizes her thoughts: "Who do you think you are? We have stood up against people who have hated us for centuries. We are hateful, we are contemptible. We do not die, you can't kill me" (tape 4, 74). To some extent, the Barnard Sex Conference allowed Allison to think her family background through and put an end to years of rejecting and denying her poor white origins. Having written lightheartedly about poor whites before, Allison makes the decision to represent herself not so much as to meet others' ideas of who she is, but as to genuinely reflect her own reality and the reality of those around her.⁹⁸ In the

⁹⁸ Allison writes about those days in her essay, "A Question of Class": "It is hard to explain how deliberately and thoroughly I ran away from my own life. I did not forget where I came from, but I gritted my teeth and hid it [...] The stories I told about my family, about South Carolina, about being poor itself, were all lies, carefully edited to seem droll or funny. I knew damn well that no one would want to hear the truth about poverty, the hopelessness and fear, the feeling that nothing I did would ever make any difference and the raging resentment that burned beneath my jokes" (*Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature*. 1994).

nineteen eighties, Allison leaves her public activism to devote herself to writing about her life and the “white trash” stigma.

4.2 Dorothy Allison’s Literary Activism

According to Wayne Flynt, popular literature about the South has been concentrated in three periods. The first took place shortly after the nineteenth century, when the Democratic Party’s attempted to enact the reforms wanted by the Populists. The second corresponds to the nineteenth thirties, when novelists and journalists dramatically portrayed the degradation of poor whites, while the third originated during the nineteenth sixties because of concerns for the rights of the blacks and the poor. There has been, however, a fourth initiated by writers, such as Dorothy Allison, who were raised poor and have endeavored themselves to present a more approachable perspective to the understanding of this highly stigmatized group.⁹⁹ Upon Allison’s decision to write about her people and her life experience, the author has concentrated her activist feminist efforts on her writing.

Raised poor and under a category thought contemptible by others, Allison distances herself from the stigma to not only adopt a more approachable perspective on “white trash,” but also to find alternatives to a socially damaged image. Her writing aims to expose and advocate for the white underclass. In so doing, her literary works point towards a rehabilitation of a tarnished image by means of debunking the stigma.

The purpose of being an activist writer resides for Allison, as it later will be explained, in humanizing the notion of poor “white trash” identity(ies). Danielle Docka states: “Allison hopes that her fiction will force her audience to replace prevailing stereotypical and distorted images of “white trash” with sincere identities that speak the harsh truth about economic

⁹⁹ Dorothy Allison defines herself as a Southern working-class writer. Interviewed by Robert Birnbaum, she states that there are a substantial number of Southern working-class writers that they do not usually get recognized as a category such as Larry Brown, Lee Smith, Tony Earley, Brad Watson, among others (104).

inequality” (2002). In addition, Allison depicts “white trash” as a people whose folkways have contributed to the country’s own cultural tradition. As Wayne Flynt explains, U.S. traditional culture cannot ignore poor whites’ culture:

The real challenge before the nation is to offer decent opportunities while preserving as much as possible all traditional folkways. Such a strategy is impossible unless the mainstream recognizes the value of poor white culture, unless it acknowledges that it has as much to learn as it does to teach. (166)

Concerning poor white culture, Dorothy Allison goes a step further than Flynt. To her, poor white culture —within U.S. culture— encompasses all, traditional practices and those, viewed as highly contemptible by the mainstream whites (1994). Greatly influenced by the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Allison’s writing examines southern poor white ways with a new set of eyes, intertwining the most traditionally accepted folk practices, such as cooking, storytelling, gospel singing and care-taking with others less “orthodox,” such as drinking, drug addiction, sexual and physical abuse, to name a few. All of this represents, for better or worse, poor whites’ cultural tradition, revealing poor whites as social group like any other, with their flaws but also with their virtues.

Dorothy Allison also perceives storytelling as part of the poor white world. She considers herself a storyteller since she grew up listening to the stories her mother, aunts, and grandmother would tell each other. In time, she ceased to be part of an audience and started to build stories to entertain a younger audience, as she would often babysit for her family (Anderson 2008). Gradually, storytelling became not only entertainment, but also a mechanism by which to dream a better life and survive upon her writing stories. If feminism saved Allison’s life by giving it purpose, writing/storytelling helped her rebuild her identity and the identity of her people. Furthermore, writing/storytelling also serves as a vehicle by which to heal the trauma of her past: her harsh childhood exacerbated by the poor, hopeless and neglecting environment she lived in. Storytelling, then, contains more than one purpose for Allison, being,

first, an excellent tool to draw the general public closer to the predicament of the poor whites; second, the means by which to heal from trauma; third, a cathartic exercise to purge her guilt for having managed to leave the world of the poor whites behind.

Allison's literary contribution towards dismantling misconceptions and myths about the marginalized goes quite often beyond parameters of class and race into the world of sexual orientation. Most of her literary work includes sexuality as a part of a whole in need of reconstruction. Relating her own feelings, Allison's words do not speak of her only but of others like her:

I knew myself queer. It wasn't just that I was a lesbian. It was that all of my sexual fantasies were so perverse in every sense of the definition. I knew myself an outlaw [...] I thought myself damned. Literally, I thought myself evil. Not just because I was poor and hopeless and raped and violated, and masturbating to being raped and violated, I felt myself on the edge of the world, and I was clinging to everyone else I saw on the edge with me. (Pratt 31)

Allison has tried to communicate to the public the meaning of sexuality, so misunderstood in the U.S.:

I don't think we understand sexuality, and we're constantly to categorize it, to limit it, and control it. We are not willing to let it be what it is. That's the thing that is astonishing to me [...] What is most powerful about sexuality is that it can't be controlled. Transcendence, enlightenment—all those things that some of us go to sex for—I think that a lot of Americans transmute sexual need, sexual hunger, into other things [...] To pretend that sexuality is not profoundly spiritual is a completely American concept. (Rowe 63)

Keeping a direct and matter-of-factly stance on her lesbian status, Allison claims that lesbianism is not a criminal act, thus bringing homosexuality closer to the heterosexual world. She insists that sex should be a practice deserving of both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Allison would like the average American to know that lesbians are ordinary people like anybody else: “I’m just interested in making plain that we’re as sexual and complicated as anyone else” (Keehnen 23). Hers is an attempt to draw society closer to another marginalized group.

For Allison, sexuality is an indispensable part of the self:

The statements of gay writers who defensively insist that they wish to be seen as writers first and gay lesbian secondarily, who insist they simply happen to be queer, that being queer has nothing to do with what or how they write [...] seem to me mostly intellectual, beside the point, and curiously old-fashioned. I have never imagined that there was any question about my sexual preference, and as a feminist I know that my convictions shape what I write about, what choice I can manifest, and what kinds of characters I will imagine—what I can write at all. I am one whole person, one whole person who is a lesbian and a writer. (*Skin* 212-213)

Lastly, Allison’s writing is the product of a growing-up process needed for subjectivity formation which projects outwards to encompass others like her either because of their class and race status, or because of their sexual orientation. In both scenarios, the writer exposes myths and stigmas imposed by a society that frowns upon those considered “outside the norm.” Through the use of a very explicit, to-the-point and outspoken style, Allison demands attention, recognition and acceptance of poor whites, poor white women and poor white lesbians, among other minority groups. Allison’s writing does not stop at denouncing the treatment towards her

people, however, but continues on to propose new, reconstructed and stronger identities comprised of the whole self, despite class, gender, race and sexual orientation.

4.3 Allison's Purpose for Writing

For Dorothy Allison, writing about poor whites or “white trash” signifies a means to express her lived experiences and feelings. Her work takes down the barriers built around the myth, while suggesting new identities based either on examining one’s actions through trial and error, or deconstructing and constructing the past to debase preconceived notions of poor whites. Talking about her first novel, Allison states: “*Bastard* [*Bastard Out of Carolina*, 1992] is telling myself the story of what would have happened if my mother had had the good sense to leave” (Ulin 96). Upon revisiting the past through her fiction, Allison proceeds to reconstruct her subjectivity as it should have been. Writing, therefore, unfolds as a viable medium to identity building/reconstruction.

Allison’s purpose for writing is twofold: first, to take down social misrepresentations of underprivileged classes, more specifically the poor whites and, second, to save herself from the guilt of surviving rape and escaping her condition of poor “white trash,” as if atoning herself from the guilt of having escaped this social condition.

Concerning writing as the vehicle to break down social misrepresentations, when asked what she wanted her writing to do, Allison’s answer has been straightforward: “I want my writing to break down small categories. The whole idea in *Bastard Out of Carolina* was to give you a working-class family that had all the flaws, but also give you the notion of real people and not of caricatures” (Dietzel 1995). The caricatures Allison refers to are those traditionally misconceived images of poor whites instilled in the minds of the mainstream whites. As Matt Wray states, “the image of poor whites, often known, as the low working-class, has evolved along the years. If in the colonial period, poor whites were reflected in the figures of the

“blubber” and the “cracker” in the twentieth century, “poor white trash” were either socially and economically excluded, or of tainted heredity” (2006 137). Be that as it may, when it comes to caricaturing the poor whites, the image of Longstreet’s Ransy Sniffle —the stereotyped clay-eating character, already discussed in earlier pages— still comes to mind, at the present day, in many southern states. It is because stereotypes and stigmas are so deeply rooted in popular culture that it does not come as a surprise Allison’s literary effort to take down the barriers of public identity misrepresentation and present poor whites or low working-class as another social group with its flaws and extraordinary features:

I grew up poor; hated, the victim of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and I know that suffering does not ennoble. It destroys. To resist self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the *they* that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary. All of us —extraordinary. (Allison 1994, 36)

To present poor whites as human will entail, on Allison’s part, certain degree of self-definition. In her interview with Kelly Anderson, she admits having inherited some of her family traits.¹⁰⁰ On the subject of degeneracy alone, Allison confesses she thought she was going to die young, either of cancer or that one of her lovers would kill her.¹⁰¹ She was the oldest living woman in her family whose members had been stricken either by cancer, high blood pressure or diabetes, “all the diseases of the working poor in the South” (Anderson tape

¹⁰⁰ In several interviews, as well as in some of her writings, Allison follows stigmatized poor white traits perhaps to highlight the positive side in managing to escape the social location of “white trash.”

¹⁰¹ Upon poor whites being labeled as a degenerate, disease-ridden class, scientists insisted upon the fact that this type of lifestyle would only be conducive to short life expectancy. Just in the twentieth century alone, the U.S. conducted several health campaigns to eradicate hook-worm disease, malnutrition, and whooping cough, to name a few. Lastly, the existence of many diseases has been attributed to living under dirt-poor conditions and even in today’s world, contracting specific health-threatening conditions, such as lice, brings about the socially stigmatized idea of “living in filth” (Flynt, 2004).

4, 71). Moreover, she has stated: “my family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness —the women of my family most of all” (Allison 1995, 32). By being still alive and in good health, the author has dismantled the belief that the working poor are “considered genetically infected and diseased” (Wray 2006).

Beliefs such as “white trash” looked upon as caricatures, or short lived, are not the only misconstructions debased in her writing. In fact, the social construct that women are raised to destroy themselves is a recurrent theme in Allison’s pieces. She explains, “I was raised to be a slave. I was raised to take care of other people and destroy myself taking care of other people” (Anderson tape 4, 82). This mindset is also used when describing the women in her family:

The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt. My family? The women in my family? We are the ones in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods, fires. We are the ones in the background with our mouths open, in print dresses or drawstring pants and collarless smocks, ugly and old and exhausted. Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. (*Two or Three Things I know for Sure* 33)

Working women such as Allison’s mother, aunts and sisters were born to endure the man’s abuse, to be turned into jokes because they were born down and ugly (36). Indeed, belittling and humiliation of low working-class white women are very much present in Allison’s writing. Speaking about the women in her family, the writer relates that, forced to do manual labor, the women in her family aged fast and were treated like dogs, “bitches sprung full-grown on the world,” like they were never girls, never little babies in their daddy’s arms (35).

Allison's narrative also acknowledges "superior" whites' contempt for poor whites and, in turn, the poor whites' reaction. In an interview by Blanche McCrary Boyd (1993), Allison reveals the origins of her strength to find her own identity:

...It's class. I was raised in a family of people who were hated. We were used to being hated, and we were raised to not back down. In public you've got that armor. But it's got lots of razors on the inside, because in the dark of night you remember all those terrible things that people did to you, and you question yourself constantly. (19)

Contempt is rebutted by the survival strategy of always "holding your head high," "keeping your chin up" and "never backing down." Reading about the writer's mother's own strength and endurance, it becomes clear whom Allison takes after:

"We are another people. Our like isn't seen on the earth that often," my mama told me, and I knew what she meant. I know the value of the hard asses of this world. And I am my mama's daughter—tougher than kudzu, meaner than all the ass-kicking, bad-assed, cold-assed, saggy-assed fuckers I have ever known. But it's true that sometimes I talk that way just to remember my mother, the survivor, the endurer, but the one who could not always keep quiet about it. (*Trash* 36)¹⁰²

If being tougher than kudzu is the result of knowing yourself utterly contemptible, so is Allison's language in her storytelling/writing. Inevitably, cursing, shouting and the use of foul language have been "traits" by which to socially identify "poor white trash." Yet, In Allison's writing, these rough ways of verbal communication are used, at times, as a defense mechanism against white contempt. Allison explains how: "Say goddamn. Say anything but begin it with

¹⁰² Kudzu is a quick-growing East Asian plant which was introduced in the U.S. during the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Known for its strength and resilience, it quickly spread throughout the southern states. Currently, kudzu is also found in the North.

Jesus and end it with shit. Add that laugh, the one that disguises your broken heart. Oh, never show your broken heart! Make them think you don't have one instead" (36).

Not disclosing weakness reveals, as well, as a strategy for survival, especially among the women in Allison's narrative. Being a victim of physical violence, Allison had to hide her feelings from her stepfather, who repeatedly raped her. The writer's own feelings about this transpire in the following text: "Push it down. Don't show it. Don't tell anyone what is going on. We are not safe. There are people in the world who are, but they are not us. Don't show your fear to anyone. The things that would happen are too terrible to name" (34).

Poor whites' "misuse" of the English language, another identifier of their class, is used in Allison's work as a marker of collective identity and cultural belonging. In Allison's writing, the language of the poor working-class unfolds distinction of a reconstructed identity which must be acknowledged. Inspired by African American women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, Allison uses "white trash language" as intrinsic to her class:

When I found Zora Neale Hurston, it was like getting kicked in the butt. It was a voice—the weird thing was that it was a voice I heard in my head. That I was familiar with. The speech, the rhythms of my family, the kind of language that I grew up with resounded for me in the books written by those women. It didn't read to me black. It read to me working-class. (Pratt 1995, 28)

However, in publishing her books in poor whites' "vernacular" language, Allison had to convince editors her writing style was not filled with "typos," but with faithful representations of a genuinely "poor white southern" modality of speech:

If you read Toni Morrison, you read Alice Walker; it is a dialect that is written with love and respect. This is how you do it. The copyediting was a struggle. I

had to fight for how I spell certain things [...] I had to argue for two words in particular. One was 'mama.' And one was 'an't'—as in "I an't having any." Also I'd noticed that in a lot of Southern speech, one of the big things is alliteration repetition. There are places that I describe, for instance, the uncle as having 'black black hair.' Well, it means something different to say 'black, black hair' than to say 'black hair.' But I had to fight for these speech patterns. (30)

The intentional repetitiveness and the southern tone and cadence of a most articulate "white trash language," go hand in hand with Allison's interpretation of gospel singing, another identifying trait of the low-working class. A practice passed on from generation to generation, gospel singing is intrinsic to the South and, within it, to the rural class. Rooted in the tradition of seeking individualism against the British Empire during the pre-revolutionary times, poor rural southerners and mountaineers crafted a religious music of their own.¹⁰³ These common folks rejected the lyrics of hymns from established churches and, in time, composed hymns whose lyrics reflected values and beliefs exclusively theirs. Nowadays, a sector of the poor white population still relies heavily on religious music to cope with their isolation and powerlessness. In addition, the practice of gospel singing by rural poor whites in the South is a tradition that allows them to have a sense of belonging, a sense of community (Flynt 32). In Allison's case, she acknowledges going to the Baptist Church services as part of her southern poor white upbringing. She confesses her passion for gospel music in one of her short stories, entitled "Gospel Song." Though these stories are told in a first-person singular narrative voice we could not assume is the author herself, their content is honest, sincere and truthful.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ For more information on religious music in poor white culture see Wayne Flynt's *Dixie's Forgotten People*, chapter 2, "Dogtrots and Jack Tales."

¹⁰⁴ Allison believes in writing honestly, in expressing true feelings in such a way that her characters will reveal part of themselves and/or herself. Along this line and upon revising her short story collection, *Trash* (1988), Allison stated she would have changed some of her stories for they were written in anger, but decided against it as at the time they were also written honestly (Prenshaw 105).

Therefore, it would not be farfetched to assume the passion for gospel music described in the story is Allison's own:

The night seemed to wrap all around me like a blanket. My insides felt as if they had melted, and I could just feel the wind in my mouth. The sweet gospel music poured through me and made all my nastiness, all my jealousy and hatred, swell in my heart [...] The music was a river trying to wash me clean [...] get them to make that music. Make that music! Lord, make me drunk on that music. (*Trash* 58)

As a writer who has broken free from the “white trash” stigma, Allison cannot adhere to some aspects of “everyday poor white living,” which she finds unacceptable. For instance, she disapproves of the southern rural racism still openly displayed in some states.¹⁰⁵ On a more personal level, and speaking of her stepfather—the man who repeatedly raped her from age five until thirteen—and uncles, Dorothy Allison verbalizes her pain for loving an extremely racist family, “It was that he [Allison's stepfather] was profoundly racist. But then my uncles would come to visit, and their racism was just as deep, but meaner and more violent, and that was harder to deal with, because I loved my uncles” (Anderson tape 3, 50). Allison's pain is overwhelming. In her interviews, memoir, short stories and essays, Allison is straightforward on issues such as race. On one occasion, the writer describes her sister's reaction upon meeting one of Allison's dear black friends:

¹⁰⁵ Wayne Flynt notes the most negative stereotype of southern poor white subculture has been centered on race. It was in 1973 (merely over four decades ago), that a minor candidate for governor of Alabama, Jessie L. Thrift of Semmes, whose autobiography constituted a disturbing catalogue of the crippling psychological baggage of poor white poverty even for those who had obtained middle-class status as he had, used slogans during his campaign, such as “A Rebel for Christ” and “The Hanging Candidate for Governor [...] the results of such racism have been all too obvious: one-sided justice, demagogic politics, educational and economic discrimination, and mindless violence, all of this supported by substantial numbers of southern whites whose main source of pride was their race” (116-17).

My sister could not handle it. And the look on her face was this kind of deep disgust. When I registered what was happening, I had no way to handle it 'cause all I wanted to do was punch her [...] At the same time, I just wanted to sit down and cry. Because that kind of contempt comes out from being hated and held in contempt. (Pratt 1995,34)

The last sentence in this paragraph may be perhaps key to understanding poor white and working-class upbringing in the rural South.

Still on the subject of race, Allison's ability to show the humanness in poverty is outstanding. In "Gospel Song," one of Allison's short stories from her collection *Trash* (1998), the narrator tries to talk Shannon Pearl (from the Pearl family, gospel event organizers in town) into asking her dad to hire "these gospel singers whose music she thought was the sweetest." Shannon's response could not have been more racist:

Shannon turned her head to the side and stared at me with a peculiar angry expression. "He don't handle colored. An't no money in handling colored." [...] "It's colored. It's niggers." Shannon's voice was as loud as I ever heard it and shrill with indignation. "My daddy don't handle niggers." She threw down her wild flowers and stomped her foot. "And you made me say that." (60)

In complete disagreement, the narrator cannot hide her astonishment: "at that I froze, realizing that such a church off such a dirt road had to be just that—a colored church. And I knew what that meant. Of course I did. Still I heard myself whisper, 'That an't one good voice. That's a church full'" (61). Allison conveys an anti-racist message through the girl narrator's words.

Poor whites' apathy is another aspect of her people the writer does not understand. While other underprivileged groups have acted on their oppression,¹⁰⁶ poor whites are yet to grapple the gravity of their situation. It is undeniable that having been told all your life that you are no-good-for-anything instills in one's mind not only hopelessness but also apathy, complacency, and lack of willingness to change directions. In her identity-building proposal, Dorothy Allison highlights agency—the act of representing oneself or acting on behalf others (Henze 238)—as the last stage to start the reconstruction of the self.

Concerning Allison's second purpose for writing about "white trash," writing becomes an act of self-redemption, a medium to save herself. Being white, poor and a female, and a victim of sexual and physical abuse took a toll on Allison.¹⁰⁷ To make matters worse, Allison's sexual orientation was, for years, hidden, ignored, or downplayed by others. Allison's guilt manifests on two different planes: first as a survivor of trauma, who eventually managed to come to terms with her stepfather's abuse. Second, as a successful writer, remorseful for having crossed over to the enemy's line.¹⁰⁸

As a survivor of trauma, Allison had to withstand the horrors of living with her rapist, while keeping quiet about her tragedy. According to psychologists, it is not uncommon for rape victims to experience feelings of both guilt and shame. Such emotions are also difficult to tell apart. Allison describes her feelings about being raped: "Most of my life I have despised myself, the child who didn't tell her mother she was being raped [...] The only defense I ever found was sending my little sisters in to him, because I knew he wasn't as bad with them as he

¹⁰⁶ For instance, African Americans have fought against oppression and for the building of an identity of their own.

¹⁰⁷ "Allison's stepfather, who raped her from the time she was five, left her with an enduring sense of shame" (Jetter 73)

¹⁰⁸ Allison felt she had betrayed her people upon acquiring status and recognition in the world of the mainstream whites.

was with me. So, I grew up convinced that I was an evil creature. Because I put people in harm's way to escape harm just a little bit" (Jetter 73).

The reason why Allison would not reveal her secret resided in her shame for "having contributed" to her own rape. Shame is what prevents survivors from speaking out. It is the feeling one gets that others may think poorly of them because they were assaulted, while guilt is the feeling one experiences upon a traumatic event, such as rape. The victim she/he deserves having been raped for they have done something to deserve it.¹⁰⁹ Among the strategies to combat guilt and shame, Nancy Venable Raine, author of *After Silence, Rape and My Journey Back* (1998), suggests looking up the definitions for each word, or keeping a journal.

The idea of "writing it all out," as in writing a journal, has been the best defense mechanism for Allison. For her, writing is an act of resistance, a medium which enables the writer to be in control (Jetter73), or the instrument by which to become conscious of brutality and fear needed to be unlearned (Megan 8). Either way, writing serves, for Allison, as a strategy to cope with her traumatic past. As a result, guilt and shame are fought by writing about memories of past stories, failures, and accomplishments.

Concerning Allison's feelings of guilt, writing provided her with the opportunity to escape hopelessness and embrace success, thus becoming overwhelmed:

When you've grown up thinking you are a worthless piece of shit, and well, when a piece of shit goes to New York and gets a job, exhilaration happens. I had so much guilt about being in a place where I was happy. Or almost happy. I'd call home, talk to my mama, talk to my sisters, and feel, thank you, thank you Jesus, for letting me get here. And then the wave comes in of 'I should be

¹⁰⁹ For more information on guilt and shame, go to <http://www.healthyplace.com/abuse/articles/guilt-and-shame-of-being-raped/#story>

dead.' I don't think people ever talk to you about how strong the wave is [...] The guilt of being a survivor [...] But just to get out of that world. And I have a lot of family that never had anything working, managing a convenience store, and raising three kids. (Miller 1998, 89-90)

In a nutshell, Allison's writing saved her life as it kept her going, propelled by the notions of saving her people while freeing herself of the violence, hopelessness and despair she suffered. It is interesting to note that during her activist years, Allison left her family and her origins only to return when she was mature enough to handle her past. Such maturity took place when she started putting in writing the story of her life and her people's.

4.4 Humanizing the “White Trash” Image.

As stated, Dorothy Allison's writing aims first, to break down the misconceptions or misinterpretations on poor whites/“white trash” and secondly, to rid herself of the shame and guilt for surviving her personal experience and the myth surrounding it. In doing so, Allison writes to reach out to those either willing to listen, or in need of help themselves, with exceptionally good results: her readership is wide and diverse, from readers of southern fiction, incest survivors and lesbian sex radicals (Jetter 54). Though it may look as though she denies her origins, Allison takes great pride in her “white trash” roots, as her straightforward attitude shows. At times, her style may be considered offensive to the ordinary reader. Alexis Jetter notes even her titles assault: *The Women who Hate Me*, *Trash*, *Bastard Out Of Carolina*, “Steal Away.” Indeed, she can offend literary sensibilities. However, there is nothing offensive about her books, as “she writes with unparalleled tenderness toward those she says we are trained to despise” (71). It is this tenderness what places Allison close to a wide readership spectrum. Tenderness will make the reader understand that behind each stereotyped and stigmatized feature, there is a human being with virtues and flaws, contention, and fear, hate and love. Her

extraordinary sensibility to write honestly about the “other,” makes her work approachable and non-threatening for all types of readers.

But how does Allison manage to shorten the distance between stigma and reality? When asked by Susanne Dietzel why she refused to idealize or romanticize the working-class novel, Allison responded that this type of approach to working-class was “contempt in reverse,” as “idealizing was trivializing reality” (45). It is not through idealization that Allison wishes to approach her readers, but through the depiction of her characters as “real people.” In addition, Allison’s narrative turns “brutally honest;” there is no sugar-coating in her narrative. For instance, in “River Of Names,” the protagonist makes a list of all her terrible stories to show Jesse, her lover:

So I made a list. I told her: that one went insane---got her little brother with a tire iron; the three of them slit their arms, not the wrists but the bigger veins up near the elbow; she, now *she* strangled the boy she was sleeping with and got sent away; that one drank lye and died laughing soundlessly. (*Trash*, 11)

Nonchalantly and matter-of-factly, the protagonist goes over stories of hopelessness and despair as items to cross out of a “things-to-do-list.” More surprising it is the neutral tone found, lines later, upon explaining the disappearance of her cousins:

In one year, I lost eight cousins. It was the year everybody ran away. Four disappeared and were never found. One fell in the river and was drowned. One was run down hitchhiking north. One was shot running through the woods, while Grace, the last one, tried to walk from Greenville to Greer for some reason nobody knew. She fell off the over pass a mile down from Sears, Roebuck warehouse and lay there for hunger and heat and dying. (ibid)

Through the use of the enumeration technique, the above-quoted text signals little regard for human lives. Moreover, the narrative resembles a children's tale, distancing both reader and narrator from the tragic outcome of these stories.¹¹⁰

Next, for Allison to bring her readership closer to poor whites, she takes life with a sense of humor. Humor, as a literary device, allows characters and readers to put events, experiences, and facts into perspective. Humor is also employed as a tension-releasing literary device. Illustrative of this is the following excerpt, from the story "Gospel Song," which relates the tragic accident that ended Shannon's life, the narrator's albino friend. After Shannon has repeatedly sprayed lighter fluid over the coals in the barbecue, this is what happened:

Shannon didn't even scream. She had her mouth wide open, and it seemed as she just breathed the flames in. Her glasses went opaque, her eyes disappeared, and all around her skull her fine hair stood up in a crown of burning glory. Her dress whooshed and disappeared in orange-yellow smoky flames. (*Trash* 70)

Told from the perspective of a child with a vivid imagination, the story managed to transform tragic death into a lighthearted departure from earth.

Lastly, Allison's writing allows readers to enter the world of poor whites through their family interactions. The writer explains in great detail her relationship with her sisters and mother which in the end do not differ much from those of middle-class whites. Happiness, anger, frustration and sadness, to name a few, unfold as universal feelings, regardless of class, gender, race, or sexual orientation. Though many of the stories gathered in her collection *Trash* (1988) are examples of poor whites' family interactions, it is her long fiction writing,

¹¹⁰ There is no denying that when said out loud, the text reminds us of Mother Goose's children's rhyme "This Little Piggy:" This little piggy went to the market—this little piggy stayed home— this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none— this little piggy cried Wee!Wee!Wee! all the way home" (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176318> 3/2/2016).

represented in her two novels, which analyzes in great detail familial relations in preparation for the writer's proposal of new identities.

4.5 Allison's Literary Work

Allison's literary work is not very extensive, yet it is written in a variety of genres, showcasing the writer's exceptional skills. From poems to memoirs, essays, short stories and long fiction, Allison's verbalizes the injustice behind the stigma of "white trash" while proposing new subjectivities without straying from the term itself. In other words, Allison wishes to transform the "white trash" stigma into positive images of "white trash" identities, a process that would take her years to accomplish. Her literary pieces signify the stages —rage, denial internalization, acceptance, and agency— the author underwent to form her own identity. In her identity-reconstruction process, however, these stages are not distinctly delineated, but rather they become fluid, appearing or disappearing to heal and prepare Allison's identification of the self, as needed.

The collection of poems *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983), as well as her short stories *Trash* (1988), transpire rage as the foundation for their creation. While in the former, rage is directed to the community Allison thought was her home,¹¹¹ in the latter, rage is aimed at her mother¹¹² for not having had the courage to take her away from her stepfather's abusive treatment.

The Women Who Hate Me (1983) is a collection of poems originated as a reaction to the events of the Barnard Sex conference in 1982 in which a group of women (mostly women

¹¹¹ *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983) was a reactionary response to the events of the Barnard Sex Conference. This work represents a way of trying to work through vilification (Anderson tape 3, 58). To show her agentive desires to do something about this social misconception on homosexuality in writing, Allison became involved with FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce).

¹¹² Allison states that she wrote stories directed at her mother during the period she started getting angry at her. She also admits that she should have become angry much earlier. A lot of the stories in *Trash* (1988) are largely aimed at her mother (Dietzel 1995).

against pornography groups) picketed the conference with fliers and posters of mainly six participants, among them Dorothy Allison, being tagged as public perverts and pornographers.¹¹³ Allison's resistance to this deliberate misconception of her artistic persona came in the way of this collection of 27 poems written between 1981 and 1982 and published in 1983. Her poems are seductively engaging for their emotional, linguistic precision and explicit imagery that shock the reader (Cantrell 2015). These poems represent an attempt to demystify lesbian romanticism by just telling it like it is; their tone sounds, at times, blunt and curt while; at others, filled with tenderness and respect. Themes are recollections of childhood sexual abuse, bittersweet childhood memories, class struggle, short-lived women relationships, desires and true love, to name a few.

Dorothy Allison's *Trash* (1988) won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Fiction in 1989, as well as the Best Small Press Lesbian Book award. First published in 1988, the collection was taken to press one more time in 2002 to include a short story: "Compassion." Consisting of a total of fifteen short stories, *Trash* (1988-2002) speaks of not only poor whites' virtues, such as their love for southern food, their passion for storytelling, the need to care for each other and their humor before adversity, but also of their flaws: in almost every page, we are reminded of the hardship endured by the underprivileged translated into the causes and effects of drinking, drug addiction and sexual and physical abuse, among others.

The collection also serves as a medium for the author to communicate with her mother. Embedded within the pages of *Trash* (1988) are mixed emotions from the author towards her family, more specifically towards her mother. Dorothy Allison "pours her heart out," upon revealing her true origins and her feelings about them. Her words are sincere, always depicting,

¹¹³ As Dorothy Allison was writing about her abuse as a child, everything she had written concerning sexual deviance and incest was redefined as pornographic, monstrous text (Anderson 2008). What Allison was doing at the time was trying to work through her own experience.

in the most honest manner, all of the unique aspects about her own people. Touching on all challenges ahead for a poor white female lesbian, the author shares with her readership tender stories that could have been about ordinary people, and not about the lower classes, in the so-called dominant white world. Her stories are eye-opening, as they examine the lives of gender-discriminated-against, or sexually shunned, poor white women. The children in her stories also have something to say. These are neglected by irresponsible adults who struggle to continue to live. The men in Allison's stories think of themselves as superior to their women, no matter how inferior they are to the mainstream whites. Despite all, *Trash's* characters reveal themselves as characters full of life, facing adversity.

The opening lines to the preface to this collection unlock the reasons why Dorothy Allison considers writing paramount for subjectivity building. She explains:

There was a day in my life when I decided to live. After my childhood, after all that long terrible struggle to simply survive, to escape my stepfather, uncles, speeding Pontiacs, broken glass and rotten floorboards, or that inevitable death by misadventure that claimed so many of my cousins; after watching so many die around me, I had not imagined the hunger for life in me was insatiable, endless, unshakeable. (*Trash* 1988, 1)

Writing, for Allison, has become both a mechanism for survival as well as a way out of her poor white origins. By writing these short stories, Allison takes “baby steps” towards self-discovery. Having been told all of her life she was useless and, furthermore, being at the crossroads of class, race, gender and sexual orientation encourage the writer to put down on paper everything she knows, feels and cares about her upbringing and personal life. Though it seems that this collection is entirely about her, Allison makes clear that writing is a purging process and a means to an end, that of speaking out about her class and herself:

“Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them. More subtly, it gave me a way to love the people I wrote about—even the ones I had fought with or hated...” (3).

Despite being a collection of short stories about her people, it must be pointed out that *Trash* (1988) is a work of fiction. The writer explains: “I write stories. I write fiction. I put on the page a third look at what I’ve seen in life – the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope, who has made the decision to live, is determined to live, on the page and on the street, for me and mine” (7).

The fifteen stories depicted in *Trash* (1988-2002) seem not to be randomly placed but they follow a thought-out order. Starting off with “River of Names,” storytelling focuses on childhood memories of a young narrator who provides us with an accurate description of her family members and those before them, centering on the key factors of life, birth and death. “The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee” recounts the hardships of the narrator’s great grandmother who had to toughen herself up to survive. Still through the eyes of a young narrator, “Mama” evokes admiration and tenderness while, at times, transpiring rage and bitterness. The text is also about the passion for storytelling that the young protagonist has inherited from her elders. “Gospel Song” brings up another aspect of poor white people’s culture, their love for church music. Such bittersweet text reveals itself as both, tragic and humorous. “Steal Away” accurately depicts the rebellious stance adopted by poor whites as a reaction to social stigmatization. Before the impossibility of being considered an equal among mainstream whites, the narrator takes revenge on society through the practice of shoplifting. Such a petty act of retaliation translates into triumphant moment against the comments of a self-centered professor who has deprived the protagonist of a bright future. The protagonist of the story “steals” from the institution that has stolen from her. Having committed her act in

front of her parents adds a touch of complicity and approval on their part. After all, the three belong to the same socially disabled class. "I'm Working On My Charm" deals with the northern white stereotypical figure of the Yankee, "the one the world was made for" (78). Setting the stage for perfect criticism, the story is most witty as it becomes apparent southerners too can laugh at the superior whites.

"Monkeybites" marks the dividing line in the collection. This short story abandons the intersecting categories of class, race and gender to concentrate on the narrator's, already a young woman, own sexual desires. No longer does the story deal as much with childhood memories as it does with values, beliefs and relationships. "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know" exposes the juncture at which poor white women find themselves. Aunt Alma, the narrator's aunt is a victim of physical abuse from her husband. Though the text brings back the themes of violence and abuse, it is not deprived of beautiful language denoting the tenderness with which the author writes. The story criticizes the situation of poor white women who marry young and expect nothing else from life. With a twist in style, "Demon lover" is a gothic story in which the narrator holds a dialogue with the ghost of a former lover. Feelings such as love, sex and lust appear in the story so overwhelmingly to the point of emotionally tearing the protagonist. "Her Thighs," however, posits a different perspective on lust which is looked upon as trashy, reserved only for the lowest. In trying to avoid social ostracism from a higher class, sexual restraint takes center stage in the story. "The Muscles Of The Mind" introduces the reader to a society that strongly condemns homosexuality. As a result, the gay world is depicted as a big family whose members safeguard each other from social discrimination protect each other from discrimination. "Violence Against Women Begins at home" allows the reader to take a look at the author's activist years while acknowledging her poor origins. The subject of domestic violence is dealt with in a direct, open and outspoken manner. "A Lesbian Appetite" reconciles sexual appetite with an appetite for southern food. Food triggers memories of



different lovers while serving as a weapon to attack misconceptions built around poor white's dietary habits. "Lupus" keeps up with the theme of southern food through a detailed description of southern living, while "Compassion," added to the 2002 expanded edition, relates the story of three sisters coping with their mother's terminal illness. Attempting to keep afloat amidst chaos and disharmony, the narrator tries to provide her terminally ill mother with a normal life. The narrator strives to recover the closeness she once longed to have had with her. It does not come as a surprise that in the story deeper topics such as life and death are being brought to the surface.

Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature (1994), henceforth *Skin*, is comprised of selected essays that posit Allison's mindset in issues affecting her life experience and her people. Reflecting a state not so much of rage and anger but of acceptance and growth, this compilation of essays, some previously published as contributions to journals, magazines and book chapters, reflects Allison's ideas on identity building conceived from multiple approaches. Though these views may have changed over time, they still serve as part of the solid foundation on which to set the basis for Allison's feminist, self-seeking ideology. Made of twenty two essays, preceded by an introduction entitled "Context" and finished by a conclusion, "Promises," *Skin* offers a comprehensive view on the many aspects defining Allison's location of poor white feminist lesbian activist/writer. Such work sheds light on to social stigmas ranging from myths and legends about poor whites to mainstream white misconceptions on sexual lifestyles such as femme-butch relationships.

"Context," introduces *Skin* by directly exposing the class differences between middle- or upper-middle-class whites and lower- or working-class. Disclosing her lesbian nature already in the first lines of the story, Allison reveals her fear of being hated, either by her own lover or outsiders. This short, but powerful introduction prompts the reading/audience to offer undivided attention to what follows. In so doing, Allison resorts to storytelling by relating two

episodes of her life in which fear and shame are the protagonists: firstly, upon recounting a visit with her friend, an upper-middle-class white lesbian, to her home town, Allison expresses her anguish and fear for social rejection, embodied in the figure of her girlfriend:

It was not my family I feared. It was my lover. I was afraid to take my lover home with me because of what I might see in her face once she had spent some time with my aunt, met a few of my uncles, and tried to talk to any of my cousins. I was afraid of the distance, the fear, or the contempt that I imagined could suddenly appear between us. (*Skin* 9)

In this passage, Allison's words communicate the fear of the "other," not of her origins. For she, already a matured woman, has accepted and embraced her poor white roots. Secondly, an anecdote takes us back to her childhood years when she became aware of the difference between her people and others. The writer remembers her stepfather's racial prejudice at a souvenir shop on a visit to the beach:

"Jew bastards will charge me if you break anything," he cursed. I flinched at his words and then realized the man behind the counter heard him. I saw his blush and outrage as his eyes follows my stepfather's movement toward the door. Then I saw his eyes flicker over to me and my sisters, registering the same contempt with which he had looked at my stepfather. Heat flamed in my neck and I wanted to apologize—to tell him we were not like my stepfather [...] I gritted my teeth and kept my head up, looked that man in the face and mouthed, "I'm sorry," but I could not tell if he understood me. What context did he have for people like us? (11)

Though the above episode had taken place long before Allison's understanding and acceptance of her people, the order chosen in the arranging of these two stories is insightful. She realizes

that, still, mainstream society is in urgent need for further clarification on the nature of the “other.” “Context” sets, therefore, the stage to bring to the table social stigmas facilitated by the convergence of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and others. What follows “Context” is a series of essays detailing theories and beliefs on the complicated and contradictory notion of “difference.”

In *Skin*, Allison sets the record straight on myths about poor whites’ short life expectancy because of their disease-ridden nature or taste for violence (“Never Expected to Live Forever,” “Gun Crazy,” or “Shotgun Strategies”), or the concept of the ‘other,’ analyzed from different approaches (“What Do We See? What Do We Not See?,” “Neighbors” and “Not as a Stranger”); survival is also another topic to touch on (“Survival Is the Least of My Desires”) while being direct and clear on the subject of silenced voices in and around those considered different (“Public Silence, Public Terror”). As a lesbian writer, Allison is adamant on writing about literature and the nature of female homosexuality: “Believing in Literature,” “Conceptual Lesbianism,” “Femme,” “Sex Talk” and “A Personal History of Lesbian Porn,” to name some, could be included in this category. Lastly, Allison pays homage to one of her role models in Porn literature, her professor and mentor, Bertha Harris, in “Bertha Harris, a Memoir.” The last of her essays, “Skin, Where She Touches Me,” gives the name to the collection.

Skin summarizes Allison’s beliefs and teachings about claiming one’s own identity, offering alternative ways to get to know the self. The evolution in Allison’s own subjectivity building is apparent in “A Question of Class,” an essay that explains identity should not be based on hatred and resistance:

What I know for sure is that class, gender, sexual preference, and prejudice — racial, ethnic, and religious— form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes

our lives, and that resistance to hatred is not a simple act. Claiming identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance is infinitely complicated, and worse, almost unexplainable. (23)

While *Trash* (1988) leans on rage and shame to resist stigmatizing and stereotyping, *Skin* focuses on what Judylyn Ryan has come to define as the paradigm of growth; that is, looking inwardly towards interconnectedness with others in hopes of constructing a collective identity whose basis are set on identifying with the social group as a whole (17).

On a more individual level, *Skin* also gathers Allison's thoughts on self-discovery. Regarding her sexual identity, Allison resolves to write about sex, a topic silenced and shunned by society. In her own words, "sex seemed to me like poverty, the thing not to be mentioned, never to be admitted, but just as implacable and ubiquitous and fearful" (*Skin* 80). Lines later in her essay, "Sex Writing, the Importance and the Difficulty," Allison endeavors to grasp an understanding of what should or should not be written about sex:

What I had not said was so much greater than all the soft words I had used with such care. What was taboo? In what context? Sex had always been so risky. It had seemed enough just to pronounce myself a lesbian. Did I have to say what it was I truly desired, what I did and did not do, and why? The prospect was terrifying [...] But if everything was connected, and writing well required the kind of self-knowledge and naked revelation, then writing was too dangerous for me. I could not go that naked in the world. (90)

This internal turmoil about what should or should not be acceptable in sex writing continues until the writer comes to a decision: "If writing was dangerous, lying was deadly, and only through writing things out would I discover where my real fears were, my layered network of careful lies and secrets. Whether I published or not was unimportant. What mattered was the

act of self-discovery, self-revelation” (90). It becomes apparent that, for Allison, writing about the prohibited and the silenced becomes necessary for the acceptance of the whole self. In fact, the subsequent essays in the collection will be devoted mostly to writing about her sexual nature.

Providing closure to Allison’s series, “Promises” consists of an insightful look into the act of remembering. Written in hindsight, once the author has moved to California and started a new life with an already discovered, unveiled, and accepted identity, this short composition ponders over the act of remembering in storytelling, Allison’s most cherished literary device. “Promises” means a trip to the past while living in the present, hoping to have learned from experience. Allison wonders about the veracity and authenticity of the past brought back up by storytelling. At this point, Satya Mohanty’s notion about memory is worth mentioning. According to Mohanty, the act of cognitively remembering lived experiences awakens in us emotions and feelings which help discern the relevant from the irrelevant, thus initiating a process of identity reconstruction (43). Memories from the past also bring forth the realization that there have been social aspects in one’s life that might have impaired one’s ability to exercise control over feelings and emotions, thus hindering the discovery of the self. Along this line, Paula L. Moya states that these social aspects have become the basis on which matrices of power against the oppressed operate at large and with ease (80).

Moving back and forth between past memories and present events, Allison gives presence to other marginalized groups of society, not only the poor whites, but American Indians and African Americans. Remembering the only vacation her family managed to enjoy together, she states:

Mama told us that Indians —Cherokee even— had lived in those swamps once, and runaway slaves and poor whites had come there, the latter fleeing sheriffs who would have locked them up for debt. All of them passed through carefully,

leaving no mark, and that was what we were to do —carrying out everything we carried into the swamp. (255)

Having endured mistreatment and abuse, the above-mentioned groups (Cherokee, runaway slaves and poor whites) are placed equal to one another, thus debunking misconceived notions of white superiority, for the poor white class also represents the oppressed. To retrieve experience from the past, the author travels back to her birthplace years later only to find out that the physical evidence of her memories no longer exists. The vestiges of her past have been replaced by a new, gloomier and foreign landscape, “‘There were all those trees,’ B.J. kept saying, we drove past one suburban blacktop after another looking for that house. Acres of tract houses, barren of trees or blackberry bushes, confused and saddened us” (256). It is then when the reflection upon things remembered surfaces:

Is it memory that feeds us as we grow older? Is it memory that houses all our dreams? The landscape of my imagination is all memory and passion, the wetlands where I wandered as a child, the hidden places where I birthed my stories, widened my vision, plotted my escapes. That we were poor made no difference in that beautiful place. The flowers bloomed for us as thickly as for others, the breeze came in at evening and cleaned the heated atmosphere. We could run out into those woods and know that hope is everlasting. What feeds children who never run there, never discover anemones under rotted waste, or startle birds so beautiful they hurt the heart? (258)

For Allison, the emotions and feelings of the past are the source she draws on to tell the story of her poor white origins, which she once envisioned as free of stigmas, labelling, shame, or contempt.

Despite all, “Promises” adds a note of hope for minority groups whose identity, be that collective or individual, is yet to be formed. Nostalgic and, at times lyric, the text invites to introspection and self-reflection, while not forgetting that remembering encompasses a dialogic communication between emotions, feelings and learned experiences.

Overall, *Skin, Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994) summarizes Allison’s thoughts on stigmas, stereotypes and misconstrued notions at the crossroads of the intersecting categories of class, race, gender and sexual orientation. In addition, her essays deal with a vast array of preconceived “white trash” myths,¹¹⁴ which is Allison’s acknowledgement of her extraordinarily complex subjectivity.

Allison’s memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), henceforth *Two or Three*, represents an acknowledgement of poor whites’ stereotypes, while debasing the “white trash” myth centered on its human aspect:

I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that’s exactly who we are said to be. That’s what “white trash” is all about. We’re all supposed to be drunks standing in our yards with our broken-down cars and our dirty babies. Some of that stuff is true. But to write about it I had to find a way to pull the reader in and show you those people are larger than that contemptible myth. And show you why those men drink, why those women hate themselves and get old and can’t protect themselves or their children. Show you human beings instead of fold up, cardboard figures. (Bledsoe 87)

Allison is interested in presenting a picture of her people by which to analyze the reasons and consequences of being white and poor. In doing so, the writer offers an approach

¹¹⁴ For instance, as seen, the term equates disease-ridden, violent, sexually perverse, inbred, and homosexually deviant.

from the “other side of the fence,” providing her readership with a wider and open-minded scope. Like other writers born in poverty, Allison does not pursue a romantic, sympathetic, victimized idea of her class. On the contrary, upon reclaiming derogatory terms such as “poor white trash,” redneck and hillbilly, etc., she manages to analyze aspects of social labeling, openly and objectively, through her favorite style, storytelling. She uses storytelling, combined with a quasi-confessional style, to once again “showcase” the human side of the stigmatized.

According to scholars, Allison’s memoir relies heavily on storytelling to such extent that the act of telling becomes the focus of her narrative. In order to understand how telling reality and perceiving reality work in *Two or Three*, Timothy D. Adams offers his own perspective:

Telling refers of course to narrating, but it also has to do with counting and with telling on someone. The word “story” also suggests a wide range of activities, including reports, deliberately false tales, and lying. Children are often asked, following an obviously untrue account, “Are you telling a story?” The author’s stance toward storytelling in her memoir is complicated. (84)

As seen, the characters in Allison’s memoir do not correspond to someone’s life experiences and accounts. They have been made fictional for the sake of storytelling alone. Moreover, what Adams means by her memoir’s being “complicated” is Allison’s way of constructing a story of the accounts:

I’m a storyteller. I’ll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes

every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than intended.

The story becomes the thing needed. (*Two or Three* 3)

In an act of boldness and honesty, Allison starts out her memoir by warning the reader about its reliability. To emphasize her point, she states that “the names of most family members have been changed and other characters are composites —creations based on friends, family, and acquaintances.” As it is, Allison’s memoir contains fiction mixed with snippets of reality from its author’s family lived experiences, which allows for an insightful, protected, perspective on poor whites.

Because “the story becomes the thing needed,” this combination of memoir style and storytelling narrative, “employs a kind of believe-it-or-not technique conducive to exaggerating and/or inventing” (Adams 85). As we read along, we find that the text challenges the reader’s ability to belief, “oh, I could tell you stories that would darken the sky and stop the blood. The stories I could tell no one would believe. I would have to pour blood on the floor to convince anyone that every word I say is true. And then? Whose blood would speak for me?” (*Two or Three* 51).

In telling the story of her family, Allison memories go back to the beginning, remembering with mixed emotions her birthplace, Greenville, South Carolina:

Where I was born —Greenville, South Carolina— smelled like nowhere else I’ve ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles, cheap makeup and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the

country of my nightmares: a pure pink and blue sky, red dirt, white clay, and all endless green —willows and dogwood and firs going on for miles. (6-7)

Recalled in binary terms, memories of Greenville signal the internal turmoil Allison goes through to claim an identity yet to be accepted.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the act of remembering the past upon recapitulating or interpreting its events is Allison's intentions of acknowledging her belonging to the "white trash" community, the initial stages of identity building and acceptance. Nature evokes in Allison the happy days she would spend in the company of her "support system," her mother and aunts.¹¹⁶

To explain the idea of retrieving the past to initiate the process of subjectivity formation, is important to note that, in Allison's memoir, the act of remembering the past materializes through the discovery of long-forgotten family pictures whose faces nobody seems to identify. These pictures awaken in the reader an interest in Allison's family's ancestors, thus soliciting more information, which will be delivered through storytelling. Passed on from generation to generation, the stories she knows are those her mother had told her along the years, now immortalized in those "fading sepia images" (*Two or Three* 18), which are the photographs time left behind. These images reveal untold or forgotten secrets about Allison's family members, mostly women: "Didn't she marry Bob?" [...] "This is her girl beside her, and the babies they both had the same year." [...] "Don't think I ever knew the other daughter." [...] "Were they the ones who died in the bridge accident?" (ibid). The unknown, therefore, finds a vehicle of expression in the visual representations of family photographs, thus recapturing family origins. Hence, the act of remembering becomes a literary device, recurrent in the narrative:

¹¹⁵ Binary terms built on opposites; for instance, green apples-baby shit, beautiful-terrible, dreams-nightmares...

¹¹⁶ The women in Allison's writings represent Mohanty's "community of the oppressed," which Henze has alluded to as "the support mechanism for an individual interpretive process" (Henze 234).

Now spread across Wanda's coffee table, they were as anonymous as they had been all my life. My aunt Bodine went through them, but she seemed to know as little as I. "Never met her; don't think I knew him." There were a few she did know. "Oh, that's your aunt Dot, your granny, and the boys, David and Dan. Your cousins Billie and Bobbie. Your uncle Brice, the handsome one, and this one's him with his best friend died in Korean War. Your mama at fifteen, I think, and this one at sixteen." (20)

The presence of photographs in *Two and Three* serves as a graphic example of socially construed representations of "poor white trash" used by the author to expose the social stigmatization of her people, both men and women. The following excerpt describes the men in Allison's family:

My uncles went to jail like other boys go to high school. They took up girls like other people choose a craft. In my mama's photos they stare out directly, uncompromising, arms crossed and braced on their knees. I thought them beautiful and frightening, as dangerous as those quick endearing grins as for those fast-muscled arms, too tall, too angry, and grown up way too soon. (29)

While the next focuses on the description of "white trash" women:

The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt. My family? The women of my family? We are the ones in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods, fires. WE are the ones in the background with our mouths open, in print dresses or drawstring pants and collarless mocks, ugly and old and exhausted. Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. WE were all wide-hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. Wide hands marked horses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through

magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species. (32-33)

In the above-quoted lines, upon relying on preconceived notions of collective identity, the protagonist debases stigmatizing upon personalizing the stereotypes. For instance, the use of possessive adjectives, subject pronouns, family relations and modifiers supply the narrative with personal identification of an otherwise abstract concept of social misrepresentation.

As far as the structure is concerned, Allison's memoir consists of ten sections ending in a reflection upon lessons learned. *Two or Three Things I know For Sure* (1995) neatly recalls experiences from its author's birth to her years of young adulthood. Throughout the book, tales concatenate to project a lifetime of social contempt, shame and violence, gender discrimination from within, beauty and love. Stories of women in Allison's family take center stage during the author's early years. We learn of the author's wishes to leave such a toxic environment where her stepfather would subject her to beatings for no apparent reason and when least expected. Being female and having been born out of wedlock made Allison the target of her stepfather's rage. The narrative also suggests that all women in her family too have been subject of male violence from within. None had the opportunity to escape. On the contrary, they became more engulfed in a location they could not escape "until they no longer knew who they were, what they had first intended. But it happened. It happened over and over again" (*Two or Three* 5). And hopelessness continues in this family, as Allison's sisters and cousins become mothers themselves, wrapped up in their own world of endurance and survival.

Two or Three Things I Know For Sure (1995) is not only a memoir built around storytelling, but also a coming-of-age testimonial. Allison's trajectory to identity reconstruction would be followed by a series of reflections on learned experiences at the end of each section of her book. Such reflections are always cued in by the very same words of the

title. As a result, Allison leads us through her own reasoning process: Allison knows for sure “the way you can both hate and love something you are not sure you understand” (7). She is certain that “if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seeds in a wind” (12) and that “no one is as hard as my uncles had to pretend to be” (32). She asserts that “none of them [the things she knows] is why a man would rape a child, why a man would beat a child” (43), and that “change, when it comes, cracks everything open” (48). She is aware of “how long it takes to learn to love yourself, how long it took me, how much love I need now” (67), and firmly believes that “I would rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me” (71). Allison reveals the secrets for survival as “to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (72), while offering advice to her readers: “If we are not beautiful to each other, we cannot know beauty in any form” (86). She appeals to honesty when she states that “telling a story all the way through is an act of love” (90) and leans on trust when claiming “I can tell you anything. All you have to believe is the truth” (94). There is no doubt that Allison’s “decatalogue” of maxims serves the purpose of reconstructing an identity unique to the self. From the stigma of the poor white collective, such reflections extend towards the singular self, while standing at the intersecting categories of class, race, gender and sexual orientation.

In summary, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995) presents itself as a memoir made of stories to arrive at a learned-from-experience construction of personal identity. By recalling family past events, for instance stories triggered by fading images of family relatives in photographs, the narrator acknowledges her position in society which ultimately will help her attain a better image of herself. Starting out from the exposure of the “poor white trash” stigma, this collection of autobiographical accounts uses stereotypes to its advantage by reversing the so-called notion of the “other” in such perspective that the “other” becomes the mainstream whites. Through her reflections upon class, race, origin, gender, and sexual

orientation in the text, Allison's readers relate and empathize with the narrator's situation. In addition, this piece of non-fictional literary work is revealed as a process of personal growth and acceptance, underscored by the "maxims" stated at the end of each section. Such a display of intimate reflections is intended to pave the way to self-identification. Though, at a glance, *Two or Three Things I know For Sure* (1995) may seem redundant within the scope of Allison's work, the memoir is a very much needed testimony of the social location of poor whites, with explanations as to why they might have been labeled as such, as well as of Allison's own struggle to self-disclosure and acceptance.

Allison's non-fiction and short fiction have centered on exploring the myth of "white trash," using stylistic devices such as storytelling, lyric prose, and a straightforward narrative. Resisting the stigma has been presented through role reversal, more specifically in the idea of the "other," while personalization takes preconceived notions of white poverty from the collective to the individual to draw her wide and diverse readership closer to the poor whites' situation. Though poems, essays, short stories, and memoirs suggest the beginning of subjectivity formation, it is in Allison's two novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998), however, that identity building/reconstruction finally materializes.

Allison's long fiction writing highlights her proposal for a newly reconstructed and positive "white trash" identity. Such proposal unravels in *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), henceforth *Bastard*, in the figure of Bone, a young girl who has suffered the consequences of being poor and white. Among other themes, it is worth exploring the novel's resistance to the notion of social invisibility of "white trash," which leaves the protagonist with a sense of hopelessness, aggravated by the fact that she is the victim of her stepfather's physical and sexual abuse, a sign of "white trash" male dominance. A reflection upon aspects of southern culture as constituents of the poor white collective identity constitutes the foundation on which to start a process of subjectivity formation. The sexual self is also explored in the character of

Aunt Raylene, Bone's lesbian aunt, entrusted with her upbringing. In essence, *Bastard* is a bildungsroman, the story of coming of age of a girl in need of guidance and protection. It is through the learning of lived experiences, such as disappointments, social rejection and abandonment, that the protagonist ultimately reaches a sense of agency and self-worth needed for the reconstruction of her identity.

Amy Kaplan locates Allison's first novel within the frame of realist southern literature, a trend that started to grow during the nineteen eighties in the U.S. Such style concentrates its efforts on describing trauma and survival in a hostile environment (13). As a result, states Gillian Harkins, *Bastard* is often read as a survivor's story, one that documents and transcends the traumatic reality of family violence through the narrative and authorial survival of the protagonist (116). But the novel represents more than that: it brings up conflicts between classes and within the poor white class itself. The novel does not dwell in the tragedy of living as part of the underclass; on the contrary, it exposes intersecting categories such as misconceptions or myths about the "poor white trash," class differences, trauma and violence with the aim to come to an understanding and, therefore, a resolution to such categories; always keeping in mind that to attain subjectivity, we must learn from experience. Such a need for subjectivity is implicit in its title. *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) hints at the idea that the protagonist's family is, from the start, at odds with society's moral rules: the term "bastard" denotes unknown lineage, an impossibility for self-identification, not to mention public acknowledgement or recognition.

The story begins with a story itself, Bone's birth, which provides the grounds for her own invisibility. Bone's pregnant mother,¹¹⁷ aunts and uncles were on their way to the airport to pick up a relative when her uncle Travis, driving the car, crashes the vehicle. The impact

¹¹⁷ Her mother is an unwed fifteen-year-old poor white girl.

launched Bone's mother through the windshield with such a force that it left her in a comma for days. In the absence of maternal and paternal responsibility, the child was deemed "bastard" by the state and registered as "illegitimate" in the birth certificate.

The idea of invisibility, whether individual or collective, is clearly stated in the first chapter of the novel. Bone is "invisible," as she does not belong to anyone. Not even her mother could have testified on her legitimacy as she, strictly speaking, was not present when her daughter was born. The text reads: "Of course, she didn't wake up for three days, not till after Granny and Aunt Ruth had signed all papers and pick out my name" (*Bastard 2*). Invisibility brings forth the notion of "poor white trash" twofold: first, not having a father to attest paternity, the protagonist is not being given a public identity, therefore she is left out of the community as if non-existing. Second, because it has been made official that Bone is illegitimate, Bone's mother is defined as "white trash" for having given birth out of wedlock. Being considered "white trash" places Bone's mother in the category of the unseen, the invisible in the eyes of the rest of the white collective.

Invisibility also implies contempt leading the subject to a feeling of worthlessness in the eyes of the mainstream whites:

Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy, shiftless*. She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile —anything to deny what Greenville County wanted to name her. Now a soft-talking black-eyed had done it for them— set a mark on her and hers. (*Bastard 4*)

Comparing Anney Boatwright, Bone's mother, to the image of an inanimate object such as a rock reinforces the idea of invisibility and worthlessness for which "poor white trash" is known. Anney tries her best to erase the mark of invisibility by making frequent visits to the court house to have Bone's birth certificated corrected. Yet each time she requested her daughter's birth certificate changed, it would come back with a stamp across, in oversized red-inked block letters, reading "illegitimate" (4).¹¹⁸

Through the story of the accident, leading to stamping the word "illegitimate" on Bone's birth certificate, the narrative implies that it was uncle Travis who, while driving drunk—a defining marker of "white trash" living—, rammed the car into another. Being a man, however, allows Travis to not have to answer for his actions. Furthermore, the story of the accident becomes so fuzzy, dubious and unclear that it will be difficult to know what really happened. Passing the relay of storytelling on to her aunt Alma, Allison makes Bone skeptical about the course of the events: "My aunt Alma insists to this day that what happened was in no way Uncle Travis's fault, but I know that the first time I ever saw Uncle Travis sober was when I was seventeen and they had just removed half his stomach along with his liver. I cannot not imagine that he hadn't been drinking" (2). Lines later, she tells what she thinks it has really happened:

No, mama was just asleep and everyone else was drunk. And what they did was plow headlong into a slow-moving car. The front of Uncle Travis's Chevy accordioned; the back flew up; the aunts and Uncle Travis were squeezed so tight they just bounced a little; and Mama, still asleep with her hands curled

¹¹⁸ After several visits to the court house to try to get Bone's certificate amended, Anney is reminded of her social status: "'Well, little lady,' he said in a long, slow drawl [...] 'This is how it's got to be. The facts have been established'" (*Bastard* 4).

under her chin, flew right over their heads, through the windshield and over the car they hit. (2)

Though different, both versions indicate that drinking was the determining factor in Bone's status of invisibility. Acknowledging her stigmatized condition, nonetheless, Anney posits resistance to the stigma from the beginning: "the stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her" (3). For Bone, the realization of her stigmatized condition —the beginning of identity formation— is marked by a gradual process, in which other categories intersect. For instance, sensing males enjoy more freedom and independence even within white poverty, Bone wishes she had been born a man: "men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding [...] What men did was just was men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy" (23). Bone's desire to have been born a man is a sign of male domination in the collective of poor whites.

Male domination is highly present in the figure of Bone's stepfather, the paternal figure Anney needs for her girls.¹¹⁹ A step above the Boatwright's class, Glen Waddell symbolizes Anney's safety net for her and her girls. He will be her rescuer, her protector and her defender. The scene at the diner when Earle introduces Glen to his sister Anney lets the reader know both Glen and Anney's intentions:

Yes, Glen thought, oh yes, but he kept quiet and took another drink of tea. The gravy in his stomach steadied him but it was Anney's smile that cooled him down. He felt so strong he wanted to spit. He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earle's baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers. He would carry a knife in his pocket

¹¹⁹ It is worth noting that Anney's first husband, Reese's father, had passed on and that there is no male presence for Anney's children, Bone and Reese.

and kill any man who dared to touch her. Yes, he thought to himself, oh yes [...] Mama looked over at the boy standing by the cash register, with his dark blue eyes and bushy brown hair [...] “I need a husband, she thought, turned her back, and wiped her face. (13)

So early in the story, these lines anticipate the conflict to unravel. First, social class hierarchy is established upon stating Glen’s belonging to a higher class which will disapprove of his marriage. Next, Glen’s male-engendered sense of property is deeply ingrained in his personality to the extent of potentially turning violent to others. In a gradual process of personality transformation, Bone becomes Glen’s object of his physical, emotional and sexual abuse, for her relationship with her mother threatens his own. Last, gender and class dominance are represented in the figure of Anney, who, in spite of her honest attempts to leave her husband, eventually surrenders to a life of emotional and financial dependence upon him.

Glen’s transformation from the rescuer of a family in need to the perpetrator of violence occurs rapidly and unexpectedly. In analyzing Glen’s patriarchal role in the novel, Katherine Henninger explains how the plot transforms from a romance story between Glen and Anney into a family romance in which Glen keeps its members—Anney, Bone and her half-sister Reese—under tight and strict control (120). In fact, a few months before their wedding, Glen’s figure of rescuer seems to give out signs of already obsessed possessiveness, “his face slid past Mama’s hair, pressed into mine, his mouth and teeth touched my cheek. “Call me Daddy,” he whispered. “Call me Daddy because I love your mama, ‘cause I love you. I’m gonna treat you right. You’ll see. You are mine, all of you, mine”” (*Bastard* 36). As Henninger proposes, “Glen assumes the identity of ‘Daddy’ when he unifies word and deed, enacting his claims ‘I love you’ and ‘you’re mine’ by molesting Bone in the parking lot of the hospital where Anney is giving birth to their child” (Henninger 121). This first scene of molestation “entitles” Glen to his rights as the head of the family, holding legal paternity over Anney’s earlier and his now

children. Such an entitlement grants Glen license to use violence at will on his family property. The following passage, though long, is the perfect introduction to Glen's dominance over Bone, his "property." Having been in the hospital frantically pacing the hallways, Glen decides to check up on the girls (Bone and Reese) asleep in the Pontiac. Making Bone sit in the front, he slid out from behind the steering wheel and pulled Bone up on his lap:

He pushed my skirt to the side and slid his left hand down between his stomach and his wrist, his fingers fumbling at his britches. It made me feel afraid, his big hand between my legs and his eyes glittering in the dim light. He started talking again, telling me Mama was going to be all right, that he loved me, that we were all going to be so happy. His hand was hard, the ridge of his wrist bone pushing in and hurting me [...] He was holding himself in his fingers. I knew what it was under his hand. I'd seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary and hard. His sweat running down his arms to my skin smell strong and nasty. He grunted, squeezed my thighs between his arm and legs. His chin pressed down on my head and his hips pushed up at the same time. He was hurting, hurting me! (47)

The above-quoted text makes numerous references to Daddy Glen's colossal upper body strength. His hands, arm and fingers display male power and dominance over Bone's fragile and innocent body. They are the instrument of Glen's own narrative, anticipating his escalating violence and sexual advances on the child protagonist (Harkins 125- 126).

Glen's hands symbolize the story of a man, possessive and violent, whose sense of rightful entitlement over the family he has given name to is deeply rooted in his male behavior; such is represented by the movement of those hands all over Bone's body in the above-cited scene and all others to come. Bone cannot understand Glen's hands as they seem to her as

having a life of their own.¹²⁰ By the same token, when episodes of sexual assault and beatings enter the scene, the menacing and scary image of Glen's hands joins forces with another, as equally important instrument of violence, the belt:

One day we chased each other into the house as always, not noticing the car out back, not seeing Daddy Glen until he caught my shoulder in one big hand. "What did I tell you? He shouted, and lifted me high, shaking me back and forth till my head rocked on my neck. "You bitch. You little bitch" [...] "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I was so frightened I stuttered. "Not as sorry as you're gonna be." He pulled his belt free from the loops and wrapped the buckle end around his palm. "I've waited a long time to do this, too long." (*Bastard* 106)

In this passage, two instruments of dominance, hands and belt, occupy center stage in unjustified recurrent scenes of violence. It will not be enough for Glen to sexually abuse her stepdaughter, for his anger and frustration call for further retribution. Grabbing Bone's shoulder with his big and powerful hand denotes male patriarchal control while applying the belt on her body appeases Glen's anger outbursts against a child who is yet to be legitimized by the community. Illegitimacy is a fact Glen cannot accept due to his hyperbolized sense of legal patriarchal responsibility. The lines "I've waited a long time to do this, too long" denote his long-awaited desire to take action against what clearly chains Glen to the mark of "white trash": Bone, the bastard of the family.¹²¹ Furthermore, Bone's illegitimacy symbolizes Glen's failure as both a man and a member of the middle-class. Lastly, Glen embodies the male and

¹²⁰ "What did I believe? I looked at his hands. No, and more and more those hands seem to move before he could think. His hands were big, impersonal and fast [...] My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around door frames and crept over the edge of the mattress, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes" (*Bastard* 70).

¹²¹ The narrative makes it clear Glen subjects Bone to beatings on account of her "white trash" condition, for having been born a "bastard:" "when Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door [...] It was hard to know how not to make him mad. Sometimes when I looked up into his red features and blazing eyes, I knew that it was nothing I had done that made him beat me. It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine" (110).

class dominance over the underclass, his family, and more specifically, over Bone, the cause of his social frustrations.

Glen's role in the interplay between class and gender dominance also surfaces in his relationship with his family. The Waddells feel, by far, superior to the Boatwrights. The following passage shows Bone's acknowledgement of such a fact:

It was not only Daddy Glen's brothers being lawyers and dentists instead of mechanics and roofers that made them so different from Boatwrights. In Daddy Glen's family women stayed at home. His own mama had never held a job in her life, and Daryl and James both spoke badly of women who would leave their children to "work outside the home." His father, Bodine Waddell, owned the Sunshine Dairy and regularly hired and fired men like my mother's brothers, something he never let us forget. (98)

The narrative openly concedes to the difference in class existing between the two families. The Waddells are all well established in the community occupying liberal professional jobs whereas the Boatwrights still have to work with their hands in order to make ends meet, having to ask for work at Bodine Waddell's even at the risk of being fired shortly afterwards. Indeed, the Waddells are "rich" while the Boatwrights "dirt-poor."

Having married "down," Glen is the embodiment of social shame for his dad, as his position is closer to the low dirt-poor class than to his own. Being reminded of his many and total failures, Glen feels nervous and anxious when he visits his dad's:

It was true. Around his father, Glen became unsure of himself and too careful. He broke out into a sweat, and his eyes kept flickering back to his daddy's face [...] He would pull up his pants like a little boy and drop his head if anyone asked him a question. It was hard to put that image of him next to the way he

was all the rest of the time —the swaggering bantam rooster who called himself my daddy. (99)

Though portraying Glen’s behavior as “submissive” before his father, (breaking out into a sweat, not looking him in the eye, dropping his head when spoken to), the lines above also show Bone’s concept of her stepfather as the “protector” of Anney’s family, who comes to define him as “the swaggering bantam rooster who called himself my daddy.” The statement is revelatory. It signals the beginning of Bone’s identity rebuilding upon realizing her physical and sexual abuse is perpetrated by a dominant male figure, who feels himself superior from a class and gender perspective. Indeed, Bone has already started to resist and fight Glen’s “fatherly love.”

As Glen’s episodes of physical abuse still take place, Bone seeks solace in her southern cultural heritage. She daydreams of a safe family environment within the realm of gospel worshipping:

I ran off before Daddy Glen could ask for anything more and took the fan out on the back porch. I sang to myself as softly as I could, humming into the motor, thinking about how gospel singers were always on the road. Even if I didn’t get to be the star, I might wind up singing background in a ‘family’—all of us dressed alike in electric-blue fringed blouses with silver embroidery, traveling in a big bus, and calling home from different cities. But it would be better to be a soloist and be in demand all the time. All I needed was a chance to turn my soulful black eyes on a tent full of believers, sing out the little break in my mournful voice. I knew I could make them love me. (143)

Bone fantasizes with the idea of finding refuge in the gospel singing community. Living in a no-longer-safe environment, the girl looks for alternative places to call “home.” In her

analysis of Schreiber's notions regarding Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, Katrina Harak provides a definition of home suitable for an interpretation of Bone's case. Home has the potential for being "a mnemonic repository or focus of nostalgia, a place of self-discovery, comfort and healing, as well as a means of moving past trauma. In other words, home, whether a place or a concept, retrieved through memory, provides protection from trauma" (253). It is the concept of gospel singing and its symbols, such as the "tent," the physical manifestation of home, what provides Bone with "protection" against her trauma. She yearns for love and recognition from her "new family" in the stories she makes up, where she emerges as the heroine of Glenn's violent beatings, or as the martyr, capable of miraculously escaping the flames that engulf her. Beneath Bone's fantasies about being accepted into the community of gospel singing lies her need for the love denied to her by her mother Anney and her stepfather Glen (George 129).

Despite her efforts to find in religion an escape route from her stepfather's abuse, Bone is incapable of joining the realm of gospel singing. Through a series of events in which conflict between the child protagonist's values and new emerging characters is apparent, Allison harshly criticizes the ulterior motives and social disguises of southern religious denominations. Raised Baptist, the writer has shown her dislike for such southern lifestyle:

You grow up in Baptist Sunday school and you see—My paradigm with Baptist Sunday school is the used car salesmen who are deacons. Who, Monday through Friday, will cheat you and lie to you and abuse you, and then show up on Sunday, toss money in the plate, and be a saint. You grow up in that situation, you look at that, and you see what a criminal enterprise it is to not hold people accountable for what they do on Monday. (Anderson 2014, 50)

The above-quoted lines transpire Allison's opinion of a society operating under appearances, hence detaching itself from reality. In *Bastard*, Allison draws a picture of a world in which double standards are socially accepted. In so doing, the world of gospel singing and camp revivals is represented by a new set of characters, the Pearl family, in charge of exposing and critiquing southern attitudes towards the underprivileged. Bone Boatwright befriends Shannon Pearl, an albino girl who is subject of mockery from the other children at school for her physical appearance:

I watched her face—impassive, self-sufficient, and stubborn; she reminded me of myself, or at least the way I had come to think of myself. Sweat was showing through her dress, but nothing shows on her face except for the eyes. There was fire in those pink eyes, a deep fire I recognized, banked and raging [...] Six inches shorter than me, Shannon had the white skin, white hair, and pale pink eyes of an albino, though her mama insisted Shannon was no such thing. [...] Shannon's blue blood vessels shone against the ivory of her scalp. (*Bastard* 154-155)

The semi-grotesque description by which Shannon is introduced sets the stage for immediate conflict. A conflict felt deep inside by both Shannon and Bone, for Bone recognizes in Shannon her impassiveness, self-sufficiency and stubbornness, signs of having been made contemptible by others, just as Bone has been, as "white trash," by the collective and her stepfather.

But conflict also resides in the immense whiteness of Shannon's entire body which alienates her from the community. No doubt, she is too white even for the white majority. The narrative introduces the category of race for the first time by placing it at odds with the term

“white,” thus rendering Shannon’s extreme whiteness as odd and strange:¹²² white is not supposed to look like Shannon. White is supposed to be beautiful, powerful, and attractive. Repellent as she is, Shannon exerts a most compelling attraction on Bone:

It was a lesson in the power of love. Looking back at me from between her mother’s legs, Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction. There had to be something wrong with me, I was sure, the way I went from awe to disgust where Shannon was concerned. When Shannon sat between her mama’s legs or chewed licorice strings her daddy held out for her, I purely hated her. But when other people would look at her scornfully or the boys up at Lee Highway would call her Lard Eyes, I felt a fierce and protective love as she were more my sister than Reese. (155-56)

The mixed feelings Shannon instills in Bone are not without reason, as Bone thinks Shannon is fortunate for having a family that loves her. Bone feels indebted in providing Shannon with her unconditional love, as she imagines both of them sisters in a society that despises Shannon for excessive whiteness and Bone for the lack of it.¹²³

According to Gillian Harkins, Shannon poses as Bone’s double who promises an alternate representational future for her (131). Indeed, Bones sees in Shannon all future prospects of herself: Shannon benefits from the love Bone does not get at home, she is given the safety that Bone is not, and enjoys gospel singing in the form of a cohesive community

¹²² In this regard, Allison exposes, criticizes, and resists different notions of white superiority, such as hegemonic whites and white innocence, analyzed in the first section of this project.

¹²³ Shannon’s whiteness is excessive for mainstream whites, while Bone’s condition of “white trash” places her under the category of not white enough.

where everyone is considered equal.¹²⁴ Yet Shannon is not the saint-like character Bone imagined her to be.¹²⁵ On the contrary, in the narrator's own words: "once she relaxed with me, Shannon invariably told horrible stories, most of which were about the gruesome deaths of innocent children" (*Bastard* 157). Similarly, Shannon's family, the "gospel-singing organizers" Pearls, are as much a disappointment to Bone as the Waddells have been: "Mrs. Pearl reminded me of the way James Waddell looked at us, of his daughters' smug, superior faces, laughing at my mama's loose teeth and Reese's curls done up in paper scraps [...] Whenever the Pearls talked about my people, I'd take off and not go back for weeks" (162). Both Shannon and her family appear as classist and racist, while showing despise and contempt for Bone's people: "what do you think you are? You and your mama and your whole family. Everybody knows you're all a bunch of drunks and thieves and bastards. Everybody knows you just come round so you can eat off my mama's table and beg scraps we don't want no more. Everybody knows who you are..." (Shannon Pearl in *Bastard Out of Carolina* 170). Shannon and her family will disappoint Bone to such an extent that she would discard southern religion as the haven and refuge she imagined it to be.

Country music is another aspect of southern culture to reflect upon in the novel. The genre takes turns in both happy and traumatic (violent) scenes. This interplay between happiness and trauma starts in the first lines of the novel upon Bone recalling her safe place:

When I think of that summer —sleeping over at one of my aunts' houses as easily as at home, the smell of Mama's neck as she bent over to hug us in the dark, the sound of Little Earle's giggle or Granny's spit thudding on to the

¹²⁴ Speaking of the early days of gospel singing, Paul Harvey states that in "gospel, then, the streams of southern religious music, white and black, flowed alongside one another, exchanging tunes and lyrics and styles while remaining distinct" (305).

¹²⁵ "I had the idea that because she was so ugly on the outside, it was only reasonable that Shannon would turn out to be saint-like when you got to her" (*Bastard* 157).

ground, and that country music playing low everywhere, as much a part of the evening crickets and moonlight— I always feel safe again. (*Bastard* 22).

In the highly lyric and nostalgic scene depicted in the quotation, all members of the family share a moment of happiness induced by listening to country music. Conversely, country music signifies danger, violence and trauma as it is the cue to Glen's first sexual assault on Bone, "the song playing low on the radio was a Kitty Wells tune that mama liked. I rocked myself to the music and watched the night" (46).

Despite its ambiguous role, country music gradually allows Bone to be in control. First, the protagonist professes her admiration for country music singers by humming their songs:

Every afternoon after school I was supposed to go stay with Reese at Aunt Alma's, but instead I started going over to the West Greenville Café on the Eustis Highway. The jukebox had as many old songs as new —Loretta Lynn, Teresa Brewer, Patsy Cline, and Mama's favorite, Kitty Wells. The truckers loved that music as much as I did. I'd sit out under the café windows and hum along with those twangy girl voices, imagining myself crooning those raw desperate notes. (140)

The fact that Bone listens and hums to country music sung by those "twangy girl voices" in a man's world is indicative of her already-put-in-motion mechanisms of resistance against a male-dominated southern culture. Interestingly enough, her pick are all women who were the first and few women counted among country music singers in a world exclusively controlled by men. As the course of the events evolves, Bone continues to enact her resistance against

southern culture by singing along to the music of the above-mentioned country music female singers while no longer adhering to gospel music.¹²⁶

Second, country music is the vehicle by which Bone enacts agency and initiative to rebuild the self. On her way to her aunt Raylene's, knowing her mother has made the decision to go back to Glen, Bone gives herself courage to face up to reality, that of her abandonment by her mother:

I sang to myself as I walked, sometimes out loud. Ruth Brown's "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean." Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight." Out at the intersection of White Horse Road and the Eustis Highway, I even started on Elvis Presley. Singing kept me from crying. Singing kept me from walking. The spirit of meanness that had come up in me broke out in song and movement. I felt hateful but strong, mean but powerful. (256)

The narrative confirms the agentic power of singing, already consolidated into resistance to social injustice. No longer is Bone the repository of Glen's brutal physical and sexual abuse, nor is she the passive recipient of moments of happiness. She is her own person, the one who controls her decisions and acts upon them. Singing keeps her from breaking down, it gives her the power and the right to be the agent of her own life-changing decisions. The narrative also reaffirms Bone's understanding and acceptance of the past by accepting the fact that Anney would have never stood up to Glen, as she had always financially depended on him. Bone has finally reached a state of unity with the self through her southern background. Moreover, while she enjoys southern music, storytelling and evenings spent with all of her family out on the

¹²⁶ Bone became disillusioned with gospel singing and everything that it entailed upon finding out the Pearls' racist and derogatory thoughts about her class and others like hers.

porch, she also rejects the violence, abuse and abandonment so intrinsic to poor whites, a fact that makes her different from her kin.

The presence of her lesbian aunt Raylene, as Bone's custodian and role model plays a paramount part in her self-identification. Everything about Aunt Raylene was to be kept quiet, despite the fact that in her younger days she had been a worldly woman with "a wild past and a few friends, all equally quiet private people" (*Bastard* 179). Raylene's life is a mystery to Bone until she realizes that her aunt is a woman of convictions who would rather live a life apart from town than having to conform to social conventionalisms. She lives alone, resisting to living a life dictated by southern patriarchal norms.

Raylene's place is also unconventional:

Raylene's place was easy to get to on the Eustis Highway but set off by itself on a little rise of land. The Greenville River curved around the outcropping where her weathered old shotgun house stood, and from the porch that went around three sides, you could watch the river and the highway that skirted it. Raylene kept tree cut back and the shrubs low to the ground. "I don't like surprises," she always said. "I like to see who's coming up on me." (179)

Allison's highly figurative tone elicits metaphorical interpretation. Raylene's place is far enough to stay out of harm's way but close enough to remain vigilant. Her home, her place of safety, embodies her whole identity, already rugged and tired —constantly keeping watch for potential danger coming from the outside. In self-inflicted isolation, she feels fairly capable of leading a lifestyle in accordance with her identity of "poor white trash" lesbian, care-free but vigilant.

Entrusted with Bone's care by her sister Anney, Raylene becomes an unconventional role model. Single and lesbian, this character provides Bone with the love and nurture lacking

in the child's life. In addition, the parenting responsibility assigned to Raylene "normalizes" socially unacceptable sexual behavior, allowing for the development of a sexual identity. As it stands, the novel provides accounts of sexual interplay, such as masturbation and sexual fantasies, as part of the identity-building process.

Exploring the sexual self allows Bone to rid herself of Glen's sexual dominance. One night at Raylene's place, Bone gets the hook she had found buried down in the river and polishes it shiny and smooth. Already in bed she puts it against her legs, pulling it back and forth. Becoming sexually aroused, she thought of the women in her stepfather's porn magazines she once found hidden in the garage. Fighting against the notion of being as much a prostitute as those women in the magazines,¹²⁷ Bone derives pleasure from her sexual act:

I used the lock I found on the river bank to fasten the chain around my hips. It felt sun-warmed and tingly against my skin as shiny as the sweat on Uncle Earle's freckled shoulders, as exciting as the burning light behind my eyes. It was mine. It was safe. Every link on that chain was magic in my hand. I put my head back and smiled. The chain moved under the sheet. I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me. (193)

In these lines, the image of the hook comes to us twofold: firstly, as a phallic symbol for male domination and, secondly, as the instrument with which to break free of Glen's chains. Her masturbatory act feels liberating as the chains at the end of the hook no longer restrain but contribute to her pleasure. The lock, used mostly to constrain, keeps her safe and protected. The sexual climax she reaches (the burning light behind her eyes) is only hers, as her pleasure

¹²⁷ Bone posits resistance to the male misconstructions of womanhood.

is something no one can take away from her. Reading about sex, or acting upon it, rejects the idea that masturbation is a dirty act. Recalling her childhood days, Allison explains: “playing with yourself was dirty and would get you a whipping if your mama or your aunts found out. It was all sex and it was all ‘funny.’ Funny-scary or funny like the jokes my aunts were always making.” (*Skin* 185). On this note, sexual “dirtiness” is strongly associated with the term “dirty-poor,” as another defining aspect of “white trash”.

The “dirty” aspect of sexuality is what Allison insists on writing about. Dirty means different from the traditionally white male-dominated concept of sexuality, which predicates sex as a heterosexual act.¹²⁸ Therefore, sexual practices, such as masturbations, sexual fantasies and same-sex interplays, etc. are generally not considered aspects of the sexual self, in the conventional sense of the word. In the novel, Bone’s acting on her sexual desires represents Allison’s own act of defiance against the “white heterosexual” norm. Speaking about the constraints for homosexual writers when openly verbalizing sexuality, Allison explains:

The worst thing done to us in the name of a civilized society is to label the truth of our lives material outside the legitimate subject matter of serious writers. We are not supposed to talk about our sexuality, not in any more than the most general and debased terms, our passions reduced to addictions or the subject of poorly thought-out theories of deviance and compulsion [...] I need you to do more than survive. As writers, as revolutionaries, tell the truth, your truth in your way. Do not buy into their systems of censorship, imagining that if you drop this character or hide that emotion, you can slide through their blockades. Do not eat your won heart out in the hope of pleasing them. The only hope you have, the only hope any of us has, is the remade life. (*Skin* 216)

¹²⁸ U.S. mainstream society has adhered to the idea of sexual intercourse as an act performed only by a male and a female. Same-sex sexual interactions were perceived as a denial of sex (Boyd 20).

Allison encourages homosexual writers to tell the truth about their sexuality for the reconstruction of sexual identities. In addition, speaking the truth enables Allison to propose a process of subjectivity formation for the whole self: “the truth about our lives is not nice, but acknowledging that allows me to make people in my stories more whole [...] wanting this in my stories is about wanting myself whole” (*Skin* 217-218) In *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Allison utilizes the figure of Bone to openly verbalize the prohibited, that what it is taboo, yet necessary for wishing oneself whole.

Though Anney’s decision to abandon Bone exposes the pressure that southern women feel in a patriarchal society,¹²⁹ it is also the result of a gradual process of love, especially for her first born, Bone, who since birth had been “officially” marked with the “white trash” stigma. In the initial chapters of the novel, Anney defends Bone’s honor upon answering back to a preacher, “‘your shame is between you and God, Sister Anne. No need to let it mark the child.’ My mama went as pale as the underside of an unpeeled cotton ball. ‘I got no shame,’ she told him, ‘and I don’t need no man to tell me jackshit about my child’” (*Bastard* 14). When Glen’s physical and sexual abuse worsens, she sends Bone to Raylene’s place to keep her safe. Anney’s close and loving ties with her daughters transpire her motherly love for them. Anney makes sure Bone and Reese are well taken care of when she has to work the night shift (33). She would tuck her daughters in at bed time (34), spend hours of family time tenderly doing Bone’s hair (28), and was firmly convinced that Glen would love them as much as she did (36).

Bone also loved her mother. The narrative is infused with multiple expressions of daughterly love. For instance, while Anney did her hair in the evenings, Bone would watch her in awe: “she always seemed to smell of buttery flour, salt, and fingernail polish—a delicate insinuating aroma of the familiar and the astringent [...]. I would have cut off my scalp before

¹²⁹ Poor white women, normally, depend on their husbands for survival.

I let them cut my hair and lose the unspeakable pleasure of being drawn up onto Mama's lap every evening" (30). And at the diner, Bone would share her thoughts about her mother: "while we sat in that booth, I'd watch her at work. She was mesmerizing, young and sweet-faced and too pretty for anyone to be mean to her" (33). Looking at a picture of Glen and Anney, taken a few days before the wedding, Bone reaffirms her strong ties with her mom:

Mama was beautiful in it, no question, though there was puffiness under her eyes and tightness in the muscles of her neck that made her chin stick out. But her smile was full, her eyes clear, and you could see right into her, see how gentle she was in the way her neck angled as she looked past Glen to Reese and me, the way her hands lay open on her lap, the fingers slightly bent as if they were ready to catch the sunlight. (43)

Anney's eyes are not set on Glen, but directed toward her daughters, the reason why she would marry him. As Natalie Carter asserts, in Glen, "Anney sees an escape from the careless poverty into which she was born—an escape which until now has been virtually unimaginable for her" (4). But mother and daughter's strong ties begin to loosen when the child starts to hide the frequent episodes of sexual abuse she was being subjected to:

I was always getting hurt, it seemed, in ways Mama could not understand and I could not explain. Mama worried about how careless I was, how prone to accident I had become [...] I didn't know what to say to her. To say anything would mean trying to tell her everything [...] I remained silent, stubborn, resentful, and collected my bruises as they were unavoidable. (111)

After the last brutal "rape-beating," mother and daughter would no longer communicate. Anney's oblivion to her daughter's repeated episodes of sexual abuse is a marker

of female “white trash” survival, resulting in Anney’s decision to remain with her husband Glen, the abuser, instead of protecting her daughter Bone, the victim.

In spite of Anney’s abandonment, her love for Bone never ceases. When mother and daughter see each other for the last time, Anney hands Bone the proof of her love: a document not bearing any mark, “blank, unmarked, unstamped” (309). No indelible sign of having been born a bastard now stands between Bone and her future. These emotionally charged lines close the story of Bone’s search of her own identity, a story through which Allison delivers the message that while social categories such as “white trash” convey hopelessness through hatred and contempt, resistance and agency are generators of hope, being powerful tools for a new start. In Allison’s own words, “I made her [Bone] a child full of hope as well as despair; and while I worked carefully at all the ways she learned to hate herself, I also made it plain that she was not hateful in any way” (*Bastard* “Afterword,” 314).

Reflecting upon the analysis of *Bastard out of Carolina*, it is important to note that, firstly, Anney’s motherly love is passed on to Raylene, who provides Bone with the safety she always longed for. Moreover, such a character grants humanness to the misconstrued idea of poor white lesbian, thus allowing her to represent a new “nuclear family” as opposed to the traditional type. Allison chooses Raylene as Bone’s new mother for a reason:

We are not supposed to talk about our real families, especially if our families do not duplicate the mythical heterosexual model. In a world in which only a fraction of people actually live in that ‘Father Knows Best’ nuclear family, in which the largest percentage of family consists of women and children existing in poverty, we need to hear more about those of us who are happy that we do not live inside that mythical model[...] I believe in the remade family, the possibilities inherent in our lesbian and gay chosen families, our families of

friends and lovers, the healing that can take place amongst the most wounded of us. (*Skin* 215)

Secondly, the ending of the novel signals Allison's wish to write in such a thought-provoking style,¹³⁰ so that her readers would become conscious of what it means to feel and live shunned and outcast by society. Allison refuses to hide the truth about conflicting women relationships: "pretending that our mothers do not fail us, pretending that our mothers do not literally betray us, just puts a gloss over this gaping wound which allows it to lie there and fester the rest of your life. You'll never get over it" (Hollibaugh 16).

In a nutshell, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) draws a clear proposal for the discovery and building of new "white trash" identities. Being a work of fiction, it allows Allison the freedom to let her characters live life-like experiences in which to work out positive outcomes. Subjectivity formation is presented as a process in which rage, resistance, acknowledgement and agency (acting upon adverse situations to overcome stigmatization) hold center stage. Though Allison's first novel clearly establishes the stages towards the development of the self, such a process feels "incomplete," upon the conclusion of the story. Bone is left under her aunt's care, ready to start exerting agency by interpreting the feelings that past and future experiences will originate in her. We, as readers, will have to imagine what her true identity will be like.

Cavedweller (1998), is Dorothy Allison's second novel.¹³¹ As with *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), the novel has been critically acclaimed while becoming a national bestseller, New York Times Notable Book of the year, finalist for Lillian Smith Prize, and an ALA prize winner. Despite the fact, however, that both of Allison's novels deal with the growing-up

¹³⁰ "I want to be able to write so powerfully I can break the heart of the world and heal it. I want to write in such a way as to literally remake the world, to change people's thinking as they look out of the eyes of the characters I create" (*Skin*, 212).

¹³¹ At the present day, Allison asserts that a third novel, *She Who*, is forthcoming.

process of the female protagonist from puberty into adolescence, *Cavedweller* (1998) allows Cissy, one of the young protagonists of the story, to be in charge of her future. Cissy decides to return to her birthplace, California, where she starts a new life. As Michael LeMahieu states:

Near the end of the narrative, the protagonist Cissy becomes friends with two women whom she suspects are lovers. “I don’t care what they are,” she says; “I don’t care who I am. I can go to Los Angeles in the fall. I can be anybody” (*Cavedweller*, 409). This sense of mobility and the freedom that accompanies it—Cissy plans to enroll in UCLA—are all but absent from *Bastard Out of Carolina*, where the only movement that occurs is the economically insecure and geographically circumscribed flight from the creditors. (653)

The narrative elicits Cissy to physically, psychologically and emotionally sever ties with an environment hindering her from developing her own subjectivity. In addition, *Cavedweller* (1998) is a portrayal of a multiplicity of women types, middle-class or “white trash,” black or white, among others, who oppose social marking. In so doing, Allison’s women characters are designed to put up barriers against hatred and contempt by displaying unity and solidarity. As a result, Allison’s women characters in *Cavedweller* (1998) are not flat, as they evolve; they are not passive, as they react, and, above all, they are complex and intricate.

The novel also represents a return to conflicts and issues already addressed. The story retakes the theme of abandonment with which *Bastard* closes. Delia Byrd, the mother protagonist returns to Cayro, Georgia, to reunite with the daughters she abandoned ten years earlier, Amanda and Dede. She brings along Cissy, her California-born daughter, who rejects her mother’s class from the start to later come to terms with her origins. With the return of their mother, Amanda and Dede are forced to undergo a process of self-identification in which the concept of family plays a primary role. Love returns to this novel as well, as Delia’s longing

for her abandoned girls compels her to return to Cayro in high hopes of building a place of safety for all of them. In Delia, the sense of belonging, of safety —another of Allison’s leitmotifs— is prompted by her memories of the past and the experiences she goes through in the present. In fact, her recollection of Cayro as home has been disfigured by the passing of time leading Delia to idealize the town itself and its inhabitants. As the townsfolk have not forgotten her running away and leaving her daughters behind, Delia will have to go through a period of “atonement” to prove the people of Cayro she is not the “white trash” woman she was ten years earlier. Delia commits to taking care of Clint, her dying ex-husband in exchange for moving back in with her girls. Eventually, Delia is given the opportunity to manage a beauty parlor which in time becomes the “haven” for women of all types, a place where to feel welcome and united. Other recurrent themes are hidden behind Cissy’s own growing-up process, which becomes more noticeable in the second half of the novel. Like Bone, her counterpart in *Bastard*, Cissy undergoes a journey of self-identification. Unlike Bone, Cissy rebels, analyzes and negotiates with the notion of “white trash” from the approach of an outsider/insider. As a result, *Cavedweller* (1998) offers an insightful perspective into social stigmas and prejudices through Cissy’s own perceptions and thoughts. The following concentrates on the analysis of Cissy’s identity building process as part of Allison’s proposal for newly reconstructed “white trash” identities.

Having been born in California, yet to a “white trash” mother, places Cissy as an insider/outsider within the novel’s scheme. In fact, it only takes the protagonist a few days after she has been forced to move to Cayro to realize that her newly forced identity chains her to a foreign and alien location, “until the day she died, despair for Cissy would taste of ice chips and sweat. Fear would wear a pushed-down cap with a stained sun bill. Shame would sport bright-colored barrettes and a tight mouth. And the word “honey” would be a curse” (40). Despair, fear, shame and curse will be Cissy’s own identifiers of southern “white trash,” a



marker from which she will try to break away. In so doing, Cissy will undergo a process of identity formation leading her to, first, internalize her condition of “white trash.” Secondly, Cissy will show hesitation and denial on belonging to the category of “white trash” in order to, thirdly, resist the myth, resulting in, fourth, ultimately abandoning the stereotype, once her identity as a whole person has been delineated. Such process takes place throughout the narrative upon Cissy’s trying to reach an understanding of her new environment by interacting with the inhabitants of Cayro. Her ambivalent condition of insider/outsider affords the young protagonist a wider perspective on the social location of “white trash” as she lives it from both sides of the spectrum: as the foreign girl from the outside world and as the daughter of Delia whose only desire is to return to her “crazy,” as incomprehensible, world.

Concerning Cissy’s internalization of her newly imposed upon condition, the young girl displays distaste and dislike for her mother’s ways. Thinking that the only reason why she has ended up in Cayro is because her daddy was dead and her mama was crazy (36),¹³² Cissy begins to despise her mother’s dismay of being thought “white trash”: “if Delia was going to cry, she was going to disappear” (60). In fact, upon watching her mother fall apart, Cissy’s first impulse drives the girl to think she would be better off as a non-existing member of a broken family rather than a participant one. Invisibility in this instance goes in accordance with her insider/outsider status. In her condition of outsider, therefore, Cissy shows indifference towards her mother’s feelings: “Delia could cry. Cissy did not care. She had already made it through the first few days at Cayro Elementary on sheer tight-lipped determination, ignoring the whispers and pointing fingers” (60). Her strength and determination, triggered by the hatred she professed for anything identifying her with “white trash” places her, in her mind, on a higher plane than that of the inhabitants of Cayro. However, the inevitability of being her

¹³² Cissy’s dad, Randall, had died in a motorcycle accident back in California.

mother's daughter propels Cissy to dive full force into a condition of "white trash" by not only despising her mother but also hating herself.

It is Karen Gaffney who reminds us that Allison describes how many men and women categorized as "white trash" internalize this hatred and consider themselves "trash" (49). Speaking from experience, Dorothy Allison sheds more light on to self-hatred: "it has taken me most of my life to understand that, to see how and why those of us who are born poor and different are so driven to give ourselves away" (*Skin* 34). While Cissy begins to drive herself away, taunted, mocked and laughed at school, she transforms into the epitome of strength and resistance. She grudgingly conforms to the state of affairs, while her hatred for her mother never ends. After a series of months of mourning and repentance to gain social sympathy and acceptance, Delia is ready to put herself together and start to work out a plan to get her daughters back. Cissy does not like her mother's new stage, however, "This was a new version of her mother [...]. Some days Cissy actually missed the weeping Delia in her gray sinking T-shirt. At least that Delia had left her alone" (80). To make matters worse, Cissy's isolation and hatred becomes stronger as she realizes that everything for Delia revolves about "her sisters": "everything was Dede and Amanda. The world was full of people who looked at Cissy like she was some dog who might bite, some girl who didn't matter at all" (113). The text is revealing, for embedded in it are the two reasons for Cissy's anger: to be looked at as an outsider and to be regarded invisible, just as "white trash" is to the upper- and middle-class whites. In this instance, invisibility has become something undesirable, as it equates the category she wants so desperately to be disassociated from. In addition, it is her own people who do not love her, "The world was suddenly full of people who did not love Cissy" (113).

As the course of the events evolves, Cissy enters a second stage in her identity reconstruction process that allows her to change perspectives on the "white trash" stigma. A new series of circumstances will be necessary for the young protagonist to abandon her own

prejudice against others. Given the opportunity to help Delia take care of Clint, Cissy now shows hesitation towards the perceived notion of “white trash.” Caring for Clint comforts her, as Cissy could make Clint happy by standing there in front of him, not hating him and not running away from him (117). Furthermore, for Cissy, Clint ceases to be “Delia’s abuser”¹³³ to become someone she could relate to, someone who would understand her, someone who would also comfort her with his own silence:

He was crazy, but he was like her, or she was like him. She was more like him than his true daughters. Maybe it was the silence they wore like a long cotton shirt. Delia and Amanda and Dede were always talking or shouting or slamming doors, radiating outrage and crackling energy. It was Clint who had nothing to say. Cissy only spoke when she had to [...] He had begun talking to Cissy a lot in his brief stretches of lucidity, but even then, his silence was that she noticed.
(177)

The feeling of being crazy, to the extent of having reached a breaking point, is what makes Cissy empathize with Clint’s position. In later pages, her empathy for Clint gradually grows stronger as he carries the burden of guilt and grief for having abused his wife. Remembering back to the days he exerted control over his wife, Clint admits to Cissy that Delia was right to leave him (179). In assuming his role of abuser, Clint has forged an image of Delia as a girl soft in the middle, any man’s dream: “You get close to them [girls], you feel that softness turning to you. And that’s what a lot of men want. Like a clay center, you can make it into what you want, fire it, harden it” (180). By having Cissy empathize with Clint’s position, the narrative becomes the means to explain Clint’s abusive behavior. It seems as though it was the traditionally conceived notion of manhood what drove Clint to abusing Delia, a learned,

¹³³ Clint’s abusive behavior, an identifier of “white trash,” was the cause of Delia’s abandoning her daughters.

rather than genetic, condition. In addition, in Clint's perception of Delia's, the term "clay" places Delia at the juncture of class and gender: firstly "clay" implies dirt and poor origins, what Delia is thought of by the community of Cayro. Secondly, "clay" entails softness and weakness, attributes intrinsically associated with male dominance and abuse.

Male dominance is also present in Clint's relationship with his father, suggesting that abuse is nurtured rather than naturally inherited, thus contradicting the popular belief that "white trash" people are violent "by nature." Referring to his family upbringing, Clint seems to justify his violent conduct, not understanding that his own propensity to violence has been learned from his father's behavior: "better not to speak. Better to smile and look away. Better not to see what he could not understand, his daddy's great anger and his mama's thin-lipped endurance" (188). As Clint breaks the silence of his actions to Cissy, Cissy becomes more skeptical about her preconceptions on "white trash."

Despite incipient doubts about her own convictions, anger will still hold Cissy prisoner of her own thoughts, originating, once again, resistance to the idea of "dirt." Cissy stops talking to Delia (183) and was the only one who shed a tear at Clint's funeral. Her stance towards a world increasingly alien to her makes Cissy feels trapped, encased in a space between resigning to the idea of being born "white trash" (as the daughter to her "white trash" mother) or acting upon it. In such a state of affairs, Cissy becomes obsessed by the act of cleaning everything around her, in an effort to make her "white trash" mark disappear. In a "home" she feels she does not belong to, Cissy finds refuge in the laundry room:¹³⁴ "clean clothing, shirts and blouses and underwear made new under Cissy's hands, all of it breathed the longing she would not acknowledge aloud, the family connection that seems so tenuous everywhere outside that room---the one place in which she knew where everything was and how it got there" (282).

¹³⁴ Though living together with her half-sisters and mother, Cissy still feels inadequate and unwelcomed.

In the familiar place of the laundry room inside the unfamiliar home, Cissy's process of self initiates twofold: firstly, having lost her origins upon moving back to her mother's birth place, Cissy's sense of belonging is seized back in the laundry room: "the only time Cissy felt herself to be a dutiful daughter, Delia's little girl, was when she did the laundry. It was another life, that yearning for the safe girl-child's place" (282). Secondly, Cissy questions her own identity by comparing herself to those around her: "between them all, who was Cissy?" (283).

Cissy's identity reconstruction process reaches completion when she begins to experience the world outside the insular community of Cayro. Meeting Mim and Jean, two college lesbian friends, gives Cissy a new perspective on the self. The three girls would embark themselves on adventurous trips exploring the caves of Paula's Lost and Little Mouth. Her frequent visits to the caves, either in the company of the girls, or by herself, are an eye-opening experience for the girl's learning process. On the one hand, Cissy deals with the notions of dirt, mud, and clay to act out her resistance to "white trash" while, on the other, the caves guide Cissy towards the construction of the whole self. The caves, then, occupy center stage on Cissy's last stage to identity reconstruction.

It was Nolan who first introduced Cissy to cave exploring.¹³⁵ Having taken her on her fifteenth birthday to Paula's Lost, Nolan awakens Cissy's desires to wander out of the alien world of Cayro into a world potentially safe and nurturing. During her first encounter with the dark, Cissy's mixed feelings unravel:

Cissy's pupils widened to catch any gleam. But the dark was absolute, a blackness that touched her nerves with icy shudders and broke a sweat in the pockets of her body. After a moment, though, there was a reddish shit in the blackness, burning specks in a spectrum of velvet night. Plush. Gorgeous [...]

¹³⁵ Nolan and Cissy became friends upon Cissy's arriving in Cayro.

Sparks. Light. Instantly she could feel the open space above her expand as synapses fired and sparked. A bead of color flame lit as she clenched her teeth. Every sound made color. (242)

Though Cissy is initially taken over by fear, she gradually begins to perceive colors differently. The black of the cave no longer means emptiness, but discloses as filled with colors, leaving Cissy in awe. This synesthetic approach to light opens up a world of possibilities for Cissy to adopt a wider perspective on life. In the caves, black turns to gorgeous colors by which to start defining one's self. And though at first, surrounded by darkness, the experience seems intimidating, it also reveals thrilling and enticing. In the cave, Cissy's abilities to "see beyond" sharpen. Her "sight" broadens to comprise all senses,¹³⁶ thus allowing for a more in-depth exploring of the caves and her subjectivity. On the use of the senses to see beyond, Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, comes to mind. As Thomas H. Fick explains, speaking of Pecola's visual scrutiny of her three prostitute friends,¹³⁷ the connection between sight and reality speaks of Morrison's commitment to depict reality as it is. Yet, Morrison, continues the scholar, is also interested in antithetical senses of the real, "in different ways of locating value in the world rather than the different values alone" (12-13).

Allison's intentions are comparable to Morrison's in the manner by which Cissy's sense of sight transcends physical limitations to reflect other senses, such as hearing. By allowing Cissy to perfect her receptive skills, Allison reaches out to the reader's willingness to accept that color (understood as race) cannot be dealt with separately and in isolation, but rather as part of an exchange between gender, class and sexuality. As the narrative explains: "colors? How would she explain? If she tried to see colors, they burst and faded. They were more to be

¹³⁶ In the last quoted text. Cissy associates sight with sound. "Every sound made color"

¹³⁷ "Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real? Marie Belched, softly, purringly, lovingly?" (*The Bluest Eye* 49)

felt than seen” (243). In this instance, the sense of touch is introduced into the scene: “she shifted slightly in the send, and her hips felt molten chocolate” (ibid). This wider perspective on life, signaled by the interplay of the senses, will eventually guide Cissy to an understanding of her whole self.

In her second visit to the cave, this time alone, Cissy elevates the position of the female to that of the divine, thus affording the female with the highest authority:

Female, Cissy thought, every time she tilted her head back into the chilly drafts that swept through the outer passages at Little Mouth. The dark was female and God was dark. God was dangerous, big, frightening, mysterious, and female. And blasphemous. Sometimes Cissy wished she could explain to Amanda how she thought about the divine. Not biblical but familial. (276).

The above-quoted excerpt subverts conventional notions of the female. Its fluid and contradictory nature moves about within the divine and the prohibited, the good and evil. The complex nature of the female anticipates Cissy’s own discovery of her sexuality, which takes place, curiously enough, in the “familial” place of the laundry room. There she encounters her first masturbatory experiences, letting her feel raptured, spiritual, involved in an air of mystery:

Cissy liked the way it felt, that machine heated and pounding under her. In the steamy heat of the laundry room she fell into a reverie so intense she could not say afterwards what she had been thinking. She would load the machine and climbed up as soon as it started to bang, becoming instantly transformed [...] The steamy air exuded rapture. The heat seeped mystery. (281)

Aware that sex is only one defining part of her,¹³⁸ Cissy longs for the caves, her true place of safety where her new friends, Jean and Mimi, admire her for who she is:

In the life she wanted, she cared for nothing outside the reach of muscle and sinew. In the caves Cissy would brace a hip, bend a knee, or reach above her head to push her body forward, and see Mi's eyes on her over Jean's shoulder gleaming in pleased admiration. There she was nobody's baby girl. She was a grown woman, strong and able. (283)

Seeing herself as made of muscle and sinew helps Cissy debase gender categorization, for strength no longer means "male." Moreover, thinking herself strong affords Cissy the power of independence, demystifying "white trash" as synonym of economical, physical, and psychological female dependence upon the male.

As Cissy continues to explore ways to find herself, now with her new friends Mimi and Jean, the caves become all the more familiar, thus no longer scaring her. In the words of Karen Gaffney, feeling happy in her body,¹³⁹ "the physical sensation of climbing up and down the cave passages empowers Cissy" (56) in such a manner that she finds in the cave the awareness of herself, "I know who I am, what I can do" (*Cavedweller* 307), thus finding comfort in the safety of the dirt:

The dirt cradle, God's country and the devil's backyard [...] she felt completely loose and happy in her body. Above her was not the dome of sky but a dome of earth, a tabernacle of mud and rock and pulverized stone that felt safely close

¹³⁸ "But what she was doing was nothing so mundane. Not everything was about sex" (281). Allison intends for Cissy to heal, recover and reconstruct all of the aspects of the self.

¹³⁹ "The farther they crawled, the more careless Cissy became. Sliding on the rocks and scraping her elbows and knees made Cissy feel not wounded but more powerful [...]. Climbing out of the lower shafts, her body trembling with exhaustion, Cissy knew she had done something extraordinary" (*Cavedweller* 308).

and comfortingly familiar. I love it down here, Cissy thought [...] “I guess I’m just a cave dweller.” (308)

The spiritual imagery employed in these lines reminds us of Cayro, where everybody’s lives are judged by their socially expected actions. For Cissy, the place of worship no longer resides on the outside, but remains hidden in the warmth emanating from the cave. By presenting the cave as a tabernacle for worshipping, Allison strips religion off its social power while rendering dirt, (“white trash”) meaningless. For dirt is no longer scary, cold, or dirty but embracing, warm, and welcoming.

One of Karen Gaffney’s readings on the symbology of the caves focuses on motherly love. Lost in a world underneath the reality of Cayro, Cissy begins to envision the cave through images of the female body:

The bumps in the rock above Cissy were whitish gray and darker gray, damp in the weak light, like bubbles in meringue. Some of them had dimpled centers with drip points that looked like nipples. To Cissy’s dazzled vision the bubbles were warm breasts sweating in the cool, damp air. She was tempted to slide back up the slope to a spot where the gap narrowed so steeply that she could lie back at an angle and put her mouth to one of those bulges [...] She could imagine grainy syrup filling her mouth. That tit would sweat sweet. It would be like rock sugar. (414)

As Cissy imagines only sweetness exuding from the female breast, one can interpret this passage as a profound act of the motherly love Cissy longs for. Cissy’s caving experiences awaken in her the desire to understand Delia’s situation: “Cissy begins to think about her mother as a person who is constructed as “white trash” and therefore not to blame for her poverty and self-hatred” (Gaffney 54). Cissy’s attempts to “see beyond,” marks the beginning

of a gradual process of reconciliation, which culminates in acknowledging her love for her mother: “Cissy forced her hips to the edge of the booth. She looked up at Delia’s worn face, the sad brown eyes looking back at her. “I love you,” she said. Delia’s softened, the corners crinkling though she did not smile. “I know,” she whispered and took her girl’s hand” (*Cavedweller* 429).

Caving has helped Cissy reach an understanding of herself and of others, more specifically her mother. On a figurative plane, the cave system Cissy moves in and about is made of a series of tunnels that intersect with each other making both caves, Paula’s Lost and Little Mouth, merge on to one. With twists and turns, such a cave system resembles identity building in progress, in which the stages of disbelief, denial, rage, internalization and acceptance are essential. It also serves Allison as a device to highlight the role categories, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and others, play in piecing together the various aspects of the self. For Allison, *Cavedweller* (1998) is a written effort to arrive to understanding and reconciliation from the inside. In Allison’s words:

Most of all I have tried to try to understand the politics of *they*, why human beings fear and stigmatize the different while secretly dreading that they might be one of the different themselves. Class, race sexuality, gender —and all other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other— need to be excavated from the inside. (*Skin* 35).

In summary, *Cavedweller* (1998) is a novel about understanding and reconciliation. Allison explores the myth of “white trash” while questioning social behaviors, examining female relationships and presenting another perspective to subjectivity formation. Cissy’s identity seeking unfolds different from Bone’s (the protagonist of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, 1992) inasmuch as the former has been offered the possibility of returning to her true origins,

as well as coming to terms with her mother's own, from the perspective of an outsider/insider. As in any growing-up process, Cissy's perception of reality may be distorted at first, which allows for a deeper excavation of her subjectivity, once she has learned to properly interpret her emotions and feelings. It is only then when the protagonist is capable of healing, regenerating and reintegrating all other aspects of her identity which signifies the whole self. The novel, therefore, proposes newly constructed "white trash" identities for a more thorough and complete process in which the ability to act upon social stigmatizing (agency) surfaces in the end.

Overall, Allison's literary work demystifies the "white trash" stigma, while proposing new identities with the help of her long fiction writing, revealing herself adamant on investigating the myth of "white trash" from a fresher and newer perspective.

In her new approach, Allison showcases her taste for southern food, her enthusiasm for long, lazy summer afternoons spent with her family out on the back porch, her passion for country and gospel music and her tendency to dream of a better future. This attempt to generate closeness towards poor whites/"white trash" eliminates social misconceptions, while adding "humanness" to their image. Allison's characters no longer reveal themselves as abhorrent, scary, stupid, or disease-ridden. On the contrary, poor whites feel, laugh, share experiences while engaging in as equally important interactions as the mainstream whites.

Though Allison's beliefs and intentions to write about her identity and her people may seem contradictory, it takes a more profound reading of her personal experience, her years as a lesbian feminist activist, and her writing to realize the complexity behind Allison's work. Hers is a process of not only identity finding but also social understanding, only attainable through narrowing the gap between poor whites and the public. From an academic literary standpoint, Allison succeeds in closing the social divide between classes. First, Allison's use of a straightforward language allows for a better depiction of human qualities in her characters,

thus presenting them neither as legendary nor as mythical. Second, Allison resists idealizing or romanticizing the poor working class, as she considers idealizing is trivializing (Dietzel 45). Her characters, therefore, are real rather than caricatures. Third, Allison's literary work is highlighted by her sense of humor, something she admits to have inherited from her family (Anderson 2008). Even in the most tragic scenarios, Allison's skills in drawing a smile on the reader's face are without doubt. Last, Allison presents the humanness of poor whites through her characters' familial and social interactions: female-male, mother-daughter and women relations, among others, transgress all boundaries to disclose multilayered identities embodied in non-specific social groups.

Allison's literary history also mirrors her quest for an identity that unfolds as both individual and collective. Prompted by feelings of rage and shame, her work gradually evolves to ultimately achieve a degree of acceptance of the self and others. Her writing experiences notable growth: from her poetry and short stories, which appear fragmented and damaged, to her memoir and essays which further seek real aspects to white poverty, to arrive at the initiation, development and completion of a process of identity (re)building in her long fiction. Nowadays, when feelings of contempt and despise for oppressed groups emerge under the prism of modernity, her work is a reminder that not all whites may be assumed superior, hegemonic, and oppressive.



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5 Resisting the Myth: Allison's Proposal for New "White Trash" Identities. Three Articles

5.1. Introduction

In exploring Dorothy Allison's stance on the myth of "white trash" and her proposal for identity building, this project presents three different articles as subjects of analysis. "Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison's Literary Contribution to Demystifying Poor Whites/ 'White Trash' Stigma" (2017) sheds light on to Dorothy Allison's purpose for writing, her strategies to debunk the disguised image of an old south where the presence of the poor whites was-nonexistent, as well as her straightforward style to tell the story of the poor whites unflinchingly. Based on the approaches adopted in contextualizing the "white trash" predicament, the paper represents an introduction to Allison's literary activism, better understood upon exploring her two pieces of long fiction, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998).

The second selected article, "Trashing the Myth of the Old South: Poor White/'White Trash' Identity Seeking in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*" (2019) explores Allison's proposal for "white trash" identity reconstruction. The novel, considered semi-autobiographical, relates the story of a "white trash" girl, Bone Boatwright, which presents striking resemblance to Allison's own. Bone's harsh life unfolds as a growing-up process leading to a renewed and positive "white trash subjectivity." Bone experiences feelings of rage as she realizes she has been "stamped" with the stigma from birth.¹⁴⁰ Despite her attempts to deny her poor white origins (the child fantasizes with a pure blood lineage, tries to find refuge in cultural aspects of the South such as gospel singing and country music, and unleashes her anger on her mother as the cause of all her hardships), Bone's anger continues as her situation

¹⁴⁰ Of no known father, the child's birth certificate shows the word "bastard" stamped in red letters. Illegitimacy, a clear identifier of "white trash," becomes a powerful leitmotif throughout the story.

follows the path of “white trash” living. Bone is the victim of her stepfather’s sexual and physical abuse and of her mother’s emotional and, eventually, physical abandonment. In spite of despair and hopelessness, the story represents a glimpse of hope through the protagonist’s process of self-acceptance and acknowledgement of her condition of “white trash.” Lastly, this article also focuses on Allison’s choice of a surrogate family for Bone. Abandoned by her mother, Bone’s care is entrusted to her “white trash” lesbian aunt, Raylene, who becomes her mentor. In so doing, Allison replaces the traditional concept of family, as a unit comprised of socially acceptable heterosexual parents, for an unconventional, socially unacceptable type, thus resisting and debasing white upper- and middle- class values.

The last article of the selection, “‘White Trash’ Resistance, Women’s Interactions and Identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*. An Intersectional Approach” (2020) studies women’s resistance to “white trash” stigmatization at the juncture of class, gender, race, and other axes of convergence. While *Cavedweller* (1998) offers two parallel stories of identity reconstruction, the mother protagonist’s, Delia, and her California-born daughter’s, Cissy, the paper focuses on the former to analyze women’s stigmatization. In carrying out the task, women interactions in both public and domestic spheres emerge as resistance mechanisms against the male-dominated white community in the story. In addition, women’s resistance helps Delia forge her female and parental subjectivity. In this manner, Allison recovers the subjects of “white trash” female identity and motherhood, brought up in her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), to complete the process of subjectivity formation. Through interacting, Delia manages to be accepted by the women of the community while becoming a “mother figure” for her daughters; a mother figure capable of emotionally providing within the family unit, so unexpected of “white trash.” In so doing, Allison enables Delia to take down the barriers of social misidentification. Because of the multiplicity of women characters in the novel, each in their own predicament, *Cavedweller* ‘s (1998) complexity in resisting



misconceived identities and accomplishing new ones is analyzed from the perspective of Leslie McCall's intersectionality theoretical constructs.



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5.2 “Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Demystifying the Poor Whites/‘White Trash’ Stigma”

The first article of this compilation, “Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Demystifying the Poor Whites/‘White Trash’ Stigma,” henceforth “Individual and Collective Identity,”¹⁴¹ summarizes Dorothy Allison’s purpose for writing about the social situation of the poor whites, already presented in this project, while validating her literary work as contemporary today as it was four decades ago.

Born to an unwed, fifteen-year-old “white trash” girl, Allison has deep knowledge of the so-called poor whites’ “bad traits,” examined in the article through Allison’s own line of thought. The article underscores Allison’s work in the nineteen eighties as contemporary now as then. The changes taken place during the Trump Administration (2016-2020) have been a sad reminder that minority groups still need to make themselves heard. Promising to give the “greatness” of America back to its people,¹⁴² Donald Trump stirred old feelings of social neglect and preconceived notions of class, vowing to recover the U.S. economy on behalf of the low-income working class. Trump’s campaign also catered to rural America who, shocked by the President’s own behavior, started to verbalize their opinion about women’s role, race, class and sexual orientation, to name a few. As a result, Trump’s policies have created social unrest among some sectors of society, such as poor whites, women, African Americans and homosexuals, for instance. In this state of affairs, it does not come as a surprise that new publications, such as Nancy Isenberg’s *“White Trash”: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2017) and J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016),¹⁴³ on the before-invisible and now-

¹⁴¹ *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 21 (2017), Seville, Spain. ISSN 1133-309-X. pp. 91-117.

¹⁴² For instance, by recapturing outsourced sectors of the industry, such as manufacturing, steel and automobile.

¹⁴³ On the subject, one must note that while Isenberg’s study focuses on a thorough exploration of the “white trash” class throughout U.S. history, Vance’s autobiographical account has sparked controversy among scholars of rural America and Appalachia. In 2019, *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to “Hillbilly Elegy,”* a collection of essays in response of Vance’s stereotyped views of the working class, as well as his concept of the

misinterpreted low-white class have attracted the curiosity of many scholars. In this context, Allison's convictions, proposal of new identities for the marginalized, and literary activism feel suitable in today's U.S.A.

Starting off with an introduction to Allison's personal experience as "white trash," the article focuses on the author's purpose for exposing the stereotype in her literary works. Hers is an attempt to draw her readership to the social category of "white trash" by humanizing the otherwise neglected, ostracized type. Humanizing the marginalized entails, on Allison's part, the recognition of the existence of a poor white culture led by traditionally southern practices such as cooking, care-giving, storytelling, gospel singing, country music and a rich repertoire of vocabulary, partly belonging to the culture of the South, partly intrinsically theirs. As part of their cultural tradition, Allison also incorporates other practices —also defining of her class—, such as lying, stealing, cheating, gun shooting, swearing, a taste for violence and their dislike for other races, especially African-Americans.

Storytelling is, for Allison, crucial to express her purpose for exposing the situation of the "white trash." Oral tradition, intrinsically southern, claims the writer, belongs to the poor whites as much as to the ordinary southerner. In fact, the author conceives her writing as a way to tell a story. Allison's prose reads many times as if it were orally transmitted, rather than literary written. In this manner, Allison transfers "white trash" language on to the page¹⁴⁴ so as not to miss out on the rhythm, cadence and musicality of her "vernacular" language. For this task, Allison found inspiration in African American authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison (Pratt 28).

Allison centers her writing around two main objectives: firstly, she considers writing

"American Dream" based on meritocracy, reached the shelves in an attempt to further explain the precarious situation of the poor whites.

¹⁴⁴ This is most appreciated in her short story collection and novels.

as the medium to break down, therefore demystify, social misconceptions, such as the “caricaturesque” notion of poor whites, among others.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Allison debases the myth by taking down the collective identity misrepresentations of the poor white type, upon using her case as an illustration to expose stereotyping, stigmatizing and discrimination. She counter-argues the belief that all “white trash” are socially degenerate and, as a result, expected to live short, disease-ridden lives. Social degeneration has not taken place in Allison’s case, however. The writer, against all odds and contrary to popular belief, has not died young, but continues to live a full and rewarding life. On the subject of poor “white trash” women — commonly viewed upon as illiterate, ugly, tainted and self-destructive—, Allison is the exception to the rule, for she managed to get out of a damaging environment and amount to something in life. In a direct, outspoken, almost defiant tone, the writer does point out, however, that most women in her family did fit the stereotypical image of the “haggard, repellent and abhorrent poor white female,” born to remain in the domestic sphere, ignorant and oblivious to an outside reality. As for gospel singing and country music, quintessentially southern features, Allison feels her people still rely on these practices as a mechanism to cope with their helplessness. Her passion for gospel and country music she grew up with is clearly reflected in both her short stories and novels.

Though Allison exposes and criticizes some “white trash” popular beliefs, she acknowledges the existence of others. For example, she is completely opposed to the racist attitude that poor whites have displayed against blacks.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Allison cannot comprehend the social apathy and despondence that accompanies poor whites throughout life. While other minority groups have stood up to social oppression and discrimination, poor

¹⁴⁵ As already discussed, the type was viewed upon as a social oddity symbolized in the figures of the clay-eater, the lubber, the cracker; and later on, Ransy Sniffle, to name a few (Wray 137).

¹⁴⁶ This stand point is present on multiple occasions throughout her writing; for instance, as stated earlier, the short story, “Gospel Song,” portrays a family of gospel singing organizers, the Pearl family, as most racist. On another occasion, as previously seen, it was Allison’s own sister who displayed deep feelings of racism against Allison’s partner.

whites/“white trash” lack awareness of their situation, leading them to live a life of oblivion and marginalization. Allison scrutinizes the matter with objectivity, however, concluding by stating that education is the way out of stigmatization. Allison’s ambivalent stance on the issue of “white trash” has steered her activism towards literary writing in such a way that her work reflects criticism of not only society’s condemnation of her kin, but also of her kin’s lack of agency to act against their stereotype.

The second objective for Allison’s writing about “white trash” resides in her desire to tell her life’s story. Allison’s life is a vivid example of the causes and consequences of being affixed with prejudices about her class. In great need to abandon the stigma, Allison’s writing transpires both liberation and guilt from having lived a misunderstood lifestyle in and outside her environment. Her work symbolizes the struggle of the “other,” the outsider who is always in conflict with herself, always striving to come to terms with her own identity. Because her work is partly based on lived experiences, it unfolds as a written testimony of all marginalized, collective and individual, encompassing those whose class, gender, race and sexual orientation have been the target of society as a whole.

But Allison’s work does not represent only a denouncement of social discrimination but it redirects the predicament of white poverty towards finding a solution out of the “point of no return.” Allison’s two novels —*Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998)— demystify misconstructions of poor whites while proposing new forms of identity. Through the eyes of their young protagonists, Allison weaves an intricate process of subjectivity formation that places them on the road to self-rediscovery. The novels also portray “white trash virtues and flaws” in an effort to humanize them. With this in mind, “Individual and Collective Identity” revisits Allison’s literary work from beginning to end as a process of identity reconstruction in which the feelings of rage, denial, guilt and agency take center stage. Starting off with Allison’s first written testimony about her condition of “white trash” lesbian in her

collection of poems *The Women Who Hate ME* (1988), this article analyzes the different steps for identity reconstruction proposed by the author. In such a fashion, the reader is afforded with a comprehensive interpretation on a wide array of genres such as short stories—*Trash* (1988); essays—*Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature* (1994); a memoir—*Two or Three Things I know for Sure* (1995); and two novels—*Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998)—, which not only draw out Allison’s proposal for “white trash” subjectivity formation, but also expose the stigma of “white trash.”



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TÍTULO:

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: DOROTHY ALLISON'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION TO DEMYSTIFYING THE POOR WHITES/„WHITE TRASH“ STIGMA.

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RESUMEN

En la era actual, cuando la incertidumbre para los grupos minoritarios parece haber resurgido en el ámbito político de los EEUU, merece la pena reseñar el trabajo que autores como Dorothy Allison han venido realizando durante los últimos cuarenta años. Decidida a derribar las barreras que separan a los blancos pobres de la mayoría, la obra de Allison parece ahora tan actual como lo fue en los años ochenta. Firme en que las cosas se cuenten como son, la vida y la obra de Allison representan un esfuerzo incansable por acercar al lector a aquéllos con los que creció, los blancos pobres, también conocidos como, “basura blanca”. Este artículo sirve de introducción al compromiso literario de Dorothy Allison de revelar la verdad escondida detrás del estigma de ser blanco y pobre. Para ello, se examina la contribución literaria de Allison a construir la verdadera identidad de los blancos pobres desde un análisis de sus objetivos literarios, de los mecanismos de búsqueda de su propia identidad así como su sincero intento de mostrar el aspecto humano en ser blanco y pobre. Una visión de su obra en la que se identifica claramente la búsqueda de una identidad individual y colectiva concluye este artículo.



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5.3 “Trashing the Myth of the ‘Old South’: ‘White Trash’ Identity-Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*”

“Trashing the Myth of the ‘Old South’: ‘White Trash’ Identity-Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,”¹⁴⁷ henceforth “Trashing,” centers on Allison’s proposal to rebuild and reconstruct new identity(ies) for poor whites/“white trash.” Though not extensive, Allison’s literary contribution to condemning the stigma of “white trash” has been multifaceted. She has attracted the general public’s attention through a wide array of genres, such as poetry, essays, short stories, a memoir and two novels. This article focuses on Allison’s first piece of her long fiction writing, her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) to explore Allison’s proposal for poor white subjectivity formation. This article condenses this thesis’s analysis of resistance, demystification and identity reconstruction presented earlier.

In her fiction writing, Allison appears to perceive identity as a growing-up process in which the individual undergoes several stages of learning before acquiring awareness for the reconstruction of the self.¹⁴⁸ In addition, faithful to her writing style, Allison demystifies the romanticized notion of a genteel “Old South” by debunking descriptive paragraphs of southern landscapes upon introducing signs of decay and poverty. After a brief introduction to the literary background against which “white trash” authors like Allison started to make their presence known, “Trashing” examines Allison’s style of taking down the barriers of southern lyricism. In the first pages of the novel, Bone’s recollections of the past sound nostalgic and almost bucolic, yet her own child-like memories reveal a different reality about Greenville, her hometown. In the rosy picture of a landscape where lush greenery dominates the scene, the presence of “dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars” (*Bastard* 17) does not go

¹⁴⁷ Published in *Verbeia*, vol. 3, April 2018 103-118. <https://www.ucjc.edu/wp-content/uploads/NUMERO-3-ISSN-2444.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ Bone, the narrator and child-protagonist of the story, experiences a learning process which helps her gain awareness of the world around her; this knowledge enables her to make life-changing choices leading her to find her way towards the building of an identity of her own.

unnoticed. Against the backdrop of a row of weeping willows marching across the yard, stands Aunt Alma's house, a dwelling surrounded by a patch of yellow grass, burned up by the sun. Class-based social inequality signaled by the use of opposite terms in descriptive passages are abundant throughout the narrative, especially in the first pages of the novel. It is Allison's way to attract the reader's attention to the issue of southern poverty, a reality ignored in the Agrarian notion of the "Old South." The reconstruction of the "South" along with the exposure of southern white poverty is the device by which Allison will initiate Bone into a process of identity reconstruction. As the girl begins to be aware of her surroundings, she realizes there are differences in social status. Upon comparing her own looks to the looks of other children more economically favored than her, Bone knows she is far from the ideal of southern beauty, but rather closer to the stereotyped image of a "white trash" girl. Her origins are not only questionable but contemptible.

The story of Bone's life starts with the story of her birth, setting the stage for immediate conflict.¹⁴⁹ Being born as a consequence of recklessness defines the protagonist as "white trash" from the start. Product of drunk-driving and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the child's status of lower class is reaffirmed by the words "bastard" stamped on her birth certificate in the absence of a known father (*Bastard* 3). Bone's state of illegitimacy will remain with her until the end of the story, when her mother finally manages to have it erased off her birth certificate. In Bone's case, illegitimacy equates a dirty past, another defining mark of a tainted class.

The conflicting issue of illegitimacy allows Bone to start a process of identity discovery, initiated by the desire to attain social recognition among other white members of her community. As the story evolves, Bone's awareness of her tainted origins begins to emerge, a fact that leads the protagonist to connect with a past worthy of social acceptance. It is then

¹⁴⁹ Bone was delivered after the car where her single expectant mother was travelling crashed against another, due to her uncle's driving under the influence.

when the protagonist begins to fantasize with a “glorious past.” Through her veins flows the blood of courageous Indian warriors, the blood of Native Americans (*Bastard* 207-208). In such manner the misconstrued conception of dirty blood has been overridden by the idea of blood purity and dignity. The use of opposites is again present in this passage as Bone finds a way out by which to cleanse herself of her tainted, dirty nature. Furthermore, justifying pure blood lineage permits Bone to tear down the barriers between her and the true Anglo-Saxon whites who think so less of her. As the girl-protagonist-narrator of the story grows, so does her acquiescence of her surroundings.

In a gradual process of awareness of social stigmatization, myths and prejudices are replaced by better-suited alternatives on the road to demystifying the stigma. Traits such as alcoholism, poverty and idleness are explained to draw empathy and understanding in an effort to disassociate them from makers of white poverty, while making them “universal” to any group. Even the term “trash” is found stripped of its pejorative meaning to appear as a potential fact of life one can overcome. Trash floats and as such it will eventually pass (*Bastard* 180). Moreover, “trash,” as a social signifier, is in the eye of the beholder. This mind-set is represented in the figure of Aunt Raylene, Bone’s “white trash” lesbian relative entrusted in the end with Bone’s upbringing. This character is chosen as the role model for Bone to follow and learn from, a fact that goes against the socially accepted values of the community.

Bone’s process of identity-seeking restoration has started with class-stratification awareness which leads to a state of rage, triggered by the realization of the helplessness of her class, those different from others. At this point in the narrative, Aunt Raylene’s mentoring helps to debase while “normalizing” the term trash in different contexts. Trash is an unfortunate fact of life in which anyone can fall, but, most importantly, anyone can overcome. Secondly, Aunt Raylene teaches Bone that class categorization is contingent upon the notion of “the other.” The article analyzes a passage in which both perspectives are presented to conclude that “the

other” is just a reflection of our own image onto someone else’s who, in turn, becomes “the other” themselves. Said passage illustrates how dichotomies such as “us/them” can be relativized depending upon perspectives, a didactic tool needed for awareness of subjectivity reconstruction that works best within the fictional reality of the novel. By granting pliability to the term “trash,” the traditionally conceived notion of shiftless or unchangeable has been deprived of any prior social negative connotation. The negativity inside the term trash can be reversed to signal positive meaning.

Presenting alternatives to Bone’s feelings of rage and anger towards the impossibility of class change, however, entails a gradual process of trial and error, of teaching and learning, upon mediating between right or wrong choices and decisions. At times, Bone’s anger still dominates her persona, yet the narrative allows the protagonist to redirect her negative feelings towards both her stepfather, the perpetrator of her physical and sexual abuse and her mother, for allowing it to take place.

Though not viewed upon as autobiographical by the author, the novel has been deemed by some scholars as “semi-autobiographical,” as the story at one point relates some of Allison’s own life’s details (Tokarczyk 150). But even in these pages, anger is revealed as positive. It is the vehicle by which Bone will ultimately exert the agency required to escape her “white trash” location. Moreover, anger serves as the grounds to expose the state of despair that “white trash” women find themselves in. Poor white women’s existence is dependent upon their husbands inside a patriarchal society, a fact that places them at a point of no return.

The love Bone so desperately needs from her mother finally arrives in the form of her newly changed birth certificate —proof of class-stratification erasure and deprivation of social recognition— which grants the protagonist a fresh start. The outcome of the story showcases a protagonist who finally accepts her family origins as part of her, who acknowledges her mother’s inability to remain with her and surrenders herself to the care of her aunt Raylene.



With this ending, *Bastard* also vouches for unconventional family units allowing Raylene to become Bone's mentor, the one who will teach her courage and agency. In spite of being so unconventional, Raylene takes on the responsibilities typically carried out by the traditional family unit upon functioning as a catalyzer in Bone's learning process. She will nurture the girl's desire to reconstruct her identity while strengthening her with the love her mother could not possibly offer.

Upon analyzing Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), "Trashing" explores novel writing as a suitable medium for Allison to expose and demystify misinterpreted notions of both the "Old South" and the "South of the poor whites." The story takes down idealized and romanticized notions of the South while calling into question numerous myths built around the term "white trash." The narrative attempts to debunk the pejorative denotation of the term upon putting it into perspective. As a result, the concept of the "other" —personified in the figure of the poor whites— is hereby relativized and thought through. Furthermore, and as already discussed, the narrative's proposal of unconventional families —becoming the "other," the "unacceptable"— as role models for childrearing, is another way to tear down inflexible, socially-defining marking barriers.

Bastard Out of Carolina (1992) is ideal for proposing outside-the-norm newly constructed identities. The fictional reality of the story displays different stages to acquire subjectivity formation. First, the subject is made aware of the reality of their surroundings— Bone's stories tell of her social awkwardness since birth; her desire to fit in and her rage upon the impossibility to have the social order changed. Next, feelings of rage and hatred play a decisive role in coming to terms with accepting imposed-upon social locations. Last, acceptance of one's position in the social hierarchy becomes a desire to exert agency on the road to rebuilding an identity with which the subject feels more at ease.

"Trashing" closes by highlighting Allison's skillful ability to provoke understanding

of stigmatized low-income whites. Yet it is not only understanding and sympathy what the author intends to transmit in *Bastard*, but also a glimpse of hope —a silver lining to an otherwise socially stagnant situation. With this purpose in mind, Allison’s characters unfold not only as intricate, complex and always in turmoil, but also willing to find a way out of their despair and helplessness. No matter how mistreated or contemptible they may appear, Allison’s protagonists’ trials and tribulations become “universal,” sharing strengths and weaknesses with both minorities and the superior white class. It is the universal nature of Allison’s “white trash” characters what allows them to be as human and as reachable as any other member of society.

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TÍTULO:

TRASHING THE MYTH OF THE “OLD SOUTH”: WHITE TRASH IDENTITY SEEKING IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S *BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*.

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RESUMEN

La realidad de los blancos pobres del sur de los Estados Unidos no ha sido reflejada con justicia en la tradición literaria americana del sur hasta hace algunas décadas, cuando autores como Dorothy Allison, nacidos en el seno de la pobreza, han comenzado a hablar con claridad en nombre de los suyos. Al derribar el mito literario del “viejo sur”, Allison deja al descubierto la situación social de los blancos pobres o basura blanca a la vez que propone una alternativa al estigma, consiguiendo que sus personajes busquen una identidad en la cual dicha etiqueta social deja de ser insultante o despectiva. Este artículo analiza los mecanismos por los cuales Dorothy Allison derriba representaciones literarias del “viejo sur” así como su enfoque de “la búsqueda de la identidad de la basura blanca” en su novela *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Para ello, se ofrece una introducción a la literatura de la clase trabajadora, a la que Allison se encuentra vinculada, seguida de un análisis de los recursos literarios de Dorothy Allison en la desmitificación de la noción del “viejo sur” de camino hacia la construcción de la identidad. Una breve reflexión sobre la importancia del trabajo de Dorothy Allison para que otros autores de literatura “basura blanca” sigan sus pasos concluye este artículo.



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5.4 “‘White Trash’ Resistance, Women’s Interactions and Identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*. An Intersectional Approach”

“‘White Trash’” Resistance, Women’s Interactions and identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*. An Intersectional Approach,”¹⁵⁰ henceforth “Interactions,” explores women’s resistance through women’s interactions against “white trash” stigmatization at the juncture of class, gender, race and other axes of convergence in Dorothy Allison’s second novel *Cavedweller* (1998). Though the novel presents parallel processes of identity reconstruction in Delia Byrd, the mother protagonist of the story and Cissy, her California-born daughter, this paper centers on Delia’s interactions with women of all classes in the community and within her family, in order to overcome social stigmatization and forge new subjectivities.¹⁵¹

“Interactions” argues that, contrary to some scholars’ opinions, the presence of a plurality of women characters in the narrative is an added value to Allison’s literary representations of the oppressed; *Cavedweller* “universalizes” female social locations (points of no return) by allowing other female characters to participate in fighting mechanisms of oppression, thus the novel becomes a tool with which to expose not only “white trash” female stigmatization but stigmatization of women in general. In the text, themes such as male domination and violence, though present, have come to be the backdrop to seek manifestations of the female self. Other themes, such as Delia’s need for social acceptance and a family she can call hers, take center stage.

For the purpose of analysis, Delia’s story may be summarized as follows: having abandoned her daughters, Delia returns home with Cissy, her California-born daughter, to find out that the community still thinks of her as “white trash” and her family has not forgiven her

¹⁵⁰ *ES Review*. *Spanish Journal of English Studies* 41 (2020): 35–55 E-ISSN 2531-1654 | ISSN 2531-1646

¹⁵¹ This thesis examines Cissy’s individual identity seeking as the continuation of a process initiated in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The present article further elaborates on female subjectivity formation/ reconstruction through the careful examination of complex female interactions.

for running away. Delia will have to gain social respectability and her daughters' trust. After a difficult transition into the community, Delia takes over the management of a beauty parlor, which will eventually become the place of gathering for other oppressed women of the community. While, in time, Delia manages to establish a solid relationship with the women of Cayro, she is yet to consolidate a family unit in which she and her three daughters can build their "home." Interacting with her daughters proves challenging, as each member of the family needs to undergo their own process of self-identification. In the end, mother and daughters can reconstruct their own subjectivities within a "family unit" where to feel safe and fulfilled.

Delia's success in gaining the community's acceptance involves a multitude of women characters bringing to the table their own personal circumstances which have led them to a position of inferiority in a man-dominated society. By virtue of being victims of oppression, the women in *Cavedweller* find common ground to share their stories and be united to resist the establishment. Solidarity and resistance, therefore, become key in the formation of the self.

Due to the complexity in *Cavedweller's* women relations, "Interactions" employs an intersectional perspective as the theoretical framework for the analysis of female oppression. On this plane, female conflicts have been studied through the application of McCall's, anti-categorical, inter-categorical and intracategorical approaches to individual social locations by exposing stigmas of repressed female identities. Traditionally constructed notions of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender, as well as new ones, are challenged as the story evolves. To illustrate the point from the perspective of race, *Cavedweller* (1998) refutes the values of the white establishment upon introducing Rosemary, a black independent singer from L.A., as Delia's best friend, a suggestive indicator of alliances¹⁵² between minorities; that is, blacks getting together with "white trash" to undermine the authority of superior whites. In addition,

¹⁵² This thesis has examined alliances between two oppressed groups, African Americans and poor whites in section 2, which explains the revisionist historical approach taken in the analysis of the "white trash" stigma, and section 3, which details the tracing of its origin.

Rosemary posits a challenge to the system, for her success in the world of business—a world typically dominated by men—is unheard of. Here, the categories of race, class and gender, considered facilitators of oppression, have been subverted, as they no longer hinder identity development.

On the subject of sexuality, Nadine Reitower, a middle-class white woman, takes down preconceived notions of “female white respectability”—a newly emerged category. Despite the narrative depicting Mrs. Reitower as an elderly widow, “superior” to many for her condition of white middle-class woman, her character suffers a transfiguration when she shows signs of “insanity.”¹⁵³ Having lost all sense of decorum—attributed to her senescence—and lacking “a man to answer to,” Mrs. Reitower lets her sexual desires run wild. Wheelchair-bound, Nadine Reitower tells Tacey, her housekeeper, how she feels about sex: “If I could get up out of this chair, I’d go sit naked on the garbage cans in the morning just to see if the boys would let me suck on their shoulders and put my heels up on their hips.” She sighed again, a perfect heartbroken sigh. (*Cavedweller* 291). In the previously quoted lines, the new category of “white female respectability” intersects—as in an intracategorical approach—with the traditionally perceived female sexuality, hence debasing white conventionalisms on both notions.

As for gender, the novel exposes women’s hardships for having committed “unacceptable acts.” Illustrative of this is Marcia Pearlman’s confession of having given her newborn child up for adoption:

Marcia nodded and closed her eyes. A trickle of water ran along her jaw. Deli wiped it away with the towel. “I had a baby when I was a girl,” Marcia said. “Fourteen and stupid as they come. Didn’t go out of the house for six months and had the baby at home. My daddy took it to St. Louis and gave it to this lady

¹⁵³ In drawing an exaggerated portrayal of the new Reitower, Allison exposes the nearsighted and narrow views of the conventional community of Cayro.

who found good homes for babies like that. We never talked about it. Didn't even tell my husband when I married." (378)

In the above-quoted passage, it is the category of gender alone (as women, not men, bear the burden of pregnancy out of wedlock) what helps to expose social oppression.

Though the article's interest pivots around women's interactions —public or private in the community —as a form of resisting the establishment, it also analyzes women relations outside the South. On this plane, this article focuses, first, on the relationship between Rosemary and Delia and, second, on the presence of the Bonnet as the physical representation of female solidarity.

Regarding the former, the narrative makes explicit the absence of race and class boundaries between Delia and Rosemary, her black friend from California and an outsider to the South's prejudices. The first chapter of the novel, which takes place in California, already reveals Rosemary's transgressing boundaries because of her profound connection with Delia. She is the first one to report the news of Randall's death (*Cavedweller 2*), and the one who cautions her about returning to Cayro: "'Oh, Delia," Rosemary shook her head. "Lord, gurl, you do not want that. Those children are half grown now. They an't seen you in more than ten years. Nobody there is going to welcome you, honey'" (5-6). Lastly, Rosemary's friendship with Delia has solidified through the years they spent together. The two women have strengthened their bonds to the point of empathy and understanding for each other, erasing the divisory lines between two "supposedly" opposing social groups. Despite their differences in class and background, Delia and Rosemary know what oppression is like. They can relate to each other's pain and suffering. The following passage shows Rosemary's understanding of Delia's hardship:

I am a cactus rose myself, "Rosemary told Delia once. "I'm prickly and sweet-centered and dangerous to the unwary." Delia could hear her chuckle, a deep growl of satisfaction. "And I'm like you," Rosemary said. "I can survive on just about nothing. And nothing is enough when you know who you are. (*Cavedweller* 149-150)

Rosemary also challenges the social imagery built around black women upon the text questioning traditionally perceived notions of white female beauty. The following text, which takes place during Rosemary's first visit with Delia in Cayro, discloses Rosemary's stunning beauty:

Rosemary was the most beautiful black woman they would ever meet. [...] She was flawless, her face clear and glowing. She had dark mahogany skin that gleamed with reddish highlights, and a gorgeously shaped mouth, dark red and pursed like a rosebud. Her short brown hair glistened with sweet oil and showed the delicate shape of her skull. When she climbed out of her rented car, Amanda was startled and intimidated. Dede was simply enthralled. (153-154)

Rosemary's beauty centers around her facial and hair attributes, more in tune with white Anglo-Saxon female beauty standards. Furthermore, the eloquent description of her beauty only goes to show Allison's defying stance to social stigmatizing and, in turn, social stratification. For Rosemary symbolizes the sophisticated world of show business, of a place so very distant from the South, not to mention so very atypical for a black woman. In addition, Rosemary is financially independent, capable of supporting herself, "I'm your granddaddy's worst nightmare, child, a black Yankee woman raised to be rich and bossy" (163). Here, the intra-categories of Rosemary's beauty (more resembling that of a sophisticated upper middle-class

white woman) and financial stability (a feature more in accordance with the white businessman type) favorably factor into the equation of resisting popular beliefs.

Regarding the presence of the Bonnet as another resistance mechanism, women characters gather around in Delia's beauty parlor, the Bonnet, which represents the physical place from where to derive a sense of unity, safety and belonging. It signifies, in a way, the home of the displaced, those towards whom others feel contempt and hatred. As the Bonnet represents the gathering place for the women in the community, the notion of community also plays a role in women's resisting prejudice. In this regard, the community of Cayro does not appear hostile, but becomes the place where women's interactions, as a form of resistance to traditional hegemonic norms, start to occur. Sharing mechanisms of oppression, such as, for instance, "acceptable" behavior dictating what can or cannot be done, female characters create "common politics born out of necessity" (Moraga xix). In this context, collective agency (women's resistance against social oppression) resembles what Moraga has come to define as the "theory in the flesh," originated in the suffering and survival of the collective. Put it in her own words, collective agency "is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives" (xxviii). Intimacy and privacy are fostered in places, such as the Bonnet, where women gather together to "make sense of their experiences of oppression and eventually confront it" (Henze 237).

Resisting the establishment occurs not only in women interactions in the community, but also in Delia's interactions with her daughters. She wishes to provide them with a place of safety in which to build a functional, loving family nucleus. The next section of this article deals with female relations within the family itself, where mother and daughters will have to find a way to communicate to solidify a family unit so atypical of poor whites. In doing so, this publication analyzes Delia's efforts to construct a solid family unit through interactions between mother and daughters, as well as among the three sisters.

Delia's dreams of a stable family vanish in the same fashion as her idea of Cayro as a place of shelter to call "home." Upon her return, her daughters seem detached from the idea of family, a notion they have never quite understood, once their mother had run away. To make matters worse, Delia has come back to town bringing a stranger with her, Cissy, whose identity belongs in California, a place far away from the South. As with the community of Cayro, Delia will have to work at strengthening ties between the members of her family, while her daughters will need to learn how to become family themselves.

Regarding Cissy, the girl does not feel compelled to find any connection with her sisters as, in her mind, her origins are in California; a world in which the categories of gender, class, race and sexuality are dismissed. Cissy's mind-set parallels McCall's anti-categorical approach as she does not identify herself with her mother's origins, nor is she willing to initiate any relationship with her half-sisters: her stance to "white trash" is that of denial.

As for Amanda and Dede, they too are forced to embrace a new reality in their lives, represented by the presence of a mother they hardly know and a sister they had never met. Amanda's deep religious beliefs is the only thing that keeps her from falling apart in a family pulling her away from the world of her grandmother, the only representation of home she has ever known. Similarly, Dede's despondence drives her away from any hope of familial belonging into the sad reaffirmation of her condition of poor white. Standing at the intersection of class, gender and origin, the women in the Byrd family are at odds with each other, while trying their best to rediscover themselves.

The pursuit of individual identity leading to a state of self-accomplishment —once family ties have been established— requires "breaking free" from all social misconstructions through self-acceptance, or acknowledgement of one's origins, to start anew. As soon as each of the women in Delia's family accepts their "white trash" side, the realization of the self as well as the consolidation of their "family" interactions start to develop. Family ties eventually

strengthen, as Delia and her daughters find a way to seize control of their lives, turning therefore to each other for love and support. In the end, Delia has managed to construct a family quite contrary to stereotyped notions of poor white families, in which abuse and neglect are at their core. The idea of resistance to the stigma of “white trash” is, therefore, implied in Delia’s concept of family, which opposes the popular belief that “white trash” families are dysfunctional and incapable of forging stable family relations.

“Interactions” closes by establishing several claims for the building of new “white trash” identities. First, resistance to the stigma is carried out through female interactions to oppose oppression in both the public and the domestic spheres. Second, the process of subjectivity formation engages upon the acknowledgement of one’s oppressed origins. Third, in exposing oppression to forge identities, social categories cannot be studied in isolation, but, on the contrary, they need to be examined along with other categories. For identities, whether marked by old social stigmas or newly formed, are made of different and multiple aspects of one’s own lived experiences, all equally important.

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TÍTULO:

‘WHITE TRASH’ RESISTANCE, WOMEN’S INTERACTIONS AND IDENTITY IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S *CAVEDWELLER*: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

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RESUMEN

La realidad de los blancos pobres del sur de los Estados Unidos no ha sido reflejada con justicia en la tradición literaria americana del sur hasta hace algunas décadas, cuando autores como Dorothy Allison, nacidos en el seno de la pobreza, han comenzado a hablar con claridad en nombre de los suyos. Al derribar el mito literario del “viejo sur”, Allison deja al descubierto la situación social de los blancos pobres o basura blanca a la vez que propone una alternativa al estigma, consiguiendo que sus personajes busquen una identidad en la cual dicha etiqueta social deja de ser insultante o despectiva. Este artículo analiza los mecanismos por los cuales Dorothy Allison derriba representaciones literarias del “viejo sur” así como su enfoque de “la búsqueda de la identidad de la basura blanca” en su novela *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Para ello, se ofrece una introducción a la literatura de la clase trabajadora, a la que Allison se encuentra vinculada, seguida de un análisis de los recursos literarios de Dorothy Allison en la desmitificación de la noción del “viejo sur” de camino hacia la construcción de la identidad. Una breve reflexión sobre la importancia del trabajo de Dorothy Allison para que otros autores de literatura “basura blanca” sigan sus pasos concluye este artículo.

6. Conclusion

As the analysis of the origins, development, and consequences of “white trash” has been drawn on several disciplines such as revisionist history, whiteness studies and literary criticism, the nature of this project unfolds as not only multidisciplinary but also interdisciplinary. This multifaceted outlook on “white trash” as a socially oppressed “white” group, proves appropriate for a thorough understanding of the notion behind the term, which is paradoxical and contradictory, thus making its meaning highly complex. From a semantic perspective, for instance, “white trash” consists of two opposing words, “white,” indicating clarity and purity, and “trash,” equating taintedness and dirtiness. In addition, and socially speaking, “white trash” is also contradictory, as it symbolizes both a hegemonic class and a contemptible one. From this approach, “white trash” denotes a conflict of class, as those named after it cannot possibly relate to one category or the other. They are, figuratively speaking, “in-between places,” in a liminal location extremely difficult to escape. The phrase still evokes another conflict: that of race, as the whiteness in “white” is tainted by the “blurring meaning” of dirt that “trash” embeds. Such complexity has begged for the use of several disciplines to arrive to an extensive examination of the myth, concluding that “white trash” entails many forms of discrimination not limited to class and gender only, as seen. Lastly, the complexity embedded in the phrase “white trash” to arrive to identity reconstruction also calls for a theoretical framework of study, such as intersectionality, used in one of the articles included in this project.

This dissertation has been an opportunity to ascertain the existence of the “white trash” stigma, leading to the following claims. First, history has revealed that whiteness is no longer synonym of power and privilege. With the help of revisionist historians, one comes to find out that not all Europeans arriving in the colonies did it on their own free will, but some —“the socially undesirable”— were shipped off in chains, being their status of slaves kept as such in

the new world for decades. As for the conditions under which these people set foot on British-owned land, chronicles of the time period relate that approximately eighty percent of the newly white comers perished in the first twelve months after arrival. Only the strongest, capable, therefore, of withstanding strenuous labor, survived.¹⁵⁴ Whites who managed to escape indentured servitude/slavery, as Ronald Takaki has pointed out, found themselves living on the margins of the territories and, as a result, were soon deemed “social outcasts.” These landless whites resigned themselves to their misfortune, acquiring methods of survival and “a modus vivendi” highly criticized and exaggerated by the rest of society. Later, as the greatness of America spread to blood lineages, its “trash” became invisible in the eyes of the “honorable” citizen. With the passage of time, stigmatized whites have been defined as lazy, promiscuous, outlaws, tricksters, violent, racist, abhorrent, dull-witted, intellectually degenerate, recipients of tainted blood, criminals, and parasites of society, to name a few. The list is long, with old traits falling out of use and new ones emerging to society’s liking.

Having proved the existence of an oppressed white class from the beginning of the history of the U.S.A., this project reaches the conclusion that the notion of white, as intrinsically hegemonic and superior to other races, has been challenged. The general assumption of whiteness as upper-middle class, privileged, highly educated and dominant must not be taken, nowadays, to face value. On the contrary, the concept of whiteness needs to be revisited and re-examined to encompass aspects, such as poverty, stigmatization, illiteracy and oppression, once ignored or, at the very least, undermined.

The second claim of the present research leads to the realization that the social

¹⁵⁴ It must be noted that white slavery had started before the mythical and idealized arrival of the Mayflower on American shores took place in 1620. Indeed, free labor and indentured servitude were encouraged in territories before then. On this note, Nancy Isenberg documents that in 1616 white settlers in the English outpost of Jamestown, along the Chesapeake Bay, were given additional land (fifty acres) should they bring over an indentured servant. It was the beginning of a long-standing poor white oppression: “indentured servants were hoarded, overworked and their terms unfairly extended” (26).

repercussions that the term “white trash” has brought forth can be appropriately examined and analyzed under the scope of whiteness studies. Whiteness studies is suitable for “re-examining” whiteness, as the discipline has shed light on this notion, which manifests itself in multiple and diverse variants, being the “white hegemony” the most salient, yet not the only type. As seen, whiteness studies branches out into three trajectories of inquiry, be those the “traitor school,” the “white trash” studies, and the “class solidarity” school.¹⁵⁵ This project has leaned on theories proposed by scholars of “white trash” studies with the aim of, first, dismantling the traditionally conceived notion of whiteness as a sole defining marker of superiority; and second, examining the situation of oppressed whites —viewed upon as the “other”— by the superior, dominant, and hegemonic type. “White trash” studies, therefore, centers on demonstrating that there has existed, and still exists, oppression of whiteness by whiteness itself. To illustrate the point, the present project looks into different manifestations of white oppression in contemporary American mass communication through an analysis of selected films, TV series and documentaries. Though the scope hereby presented may seem small, these illustrations of white oppression on whites constitutes a sample of many popular culture-driven stereotypes and stigmas alive in U.S. today. In addition, an analysis of the newly emerged forms of “whiteness” (other than poor whites) has been performed to further reflect upon the pervasiveness of the superior white oppression on its kind. As discussed, these new forms “celebrate” trendy images of “white trash,” as a means to keep appearances with their political correctness, allowing them to hide their abuse, manipulation and undermining of the group. In contemporary America, the “oppressive whites” are successful members of society who have turned the “white trash” image into a lucrative commodity in a capitalist-driven society, becoming the new “socially acceptable” contemporary form of oppression. As Cornell West has stated, the modern American democratic society relies on “the ever-expanding market

¹⁵⁵ For more information, see Chapter 2, section 2.1 of this thesis.



culture that puts everything and everyone up for sale” (xvi). Despite their appearance of modernity, nonetheless, one must conclude that the liberal and hegemonic whites of the twenty first century are not very different from the dominant, oppressive type of earlier times. It is only the manner by which oppression takes place what may have changed.

Upon assessing the state of affairs in twenty-first century American society, it seems that stigmatizing of whites has transgressed social borders to take root in the political arena. In 2016, the poor whites’ stigma became the subject of a most controversial electoral battle between the candidates to the presidency, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. It was Hillary Clinton who, in the midst of a political and social turmoil,¹⁵⁶ publicly expressed her disgust and contempt for Trump’s “electorate.” By referring to his voters as “rednecks” and “hillbillies,” Clinton made “white trash” stigmatization “official” in the eyes of many. Put it in other words, her derogatory speech translated into not only an acknowledgement of “white trash” discrimination, but also the reaffirmation of it. On the other end of the spectrum, however, no sooner had Donald Trump become elected president than the resurgence of superior whiteness started to take place. As remarked, Nancy Isenberg stated that Trump’s administration had allowed manifestations of white hegemony, such as the KKK, to re-emerge, demanding social entitlement, thus opening “old wounds” among the general population. In this climate, whiteness, in its several and various representations, has been in the spotlight for several years. Let us remember that Trump’s own “unpresidential” comments on current events have prompted social activism on advocacy groups against forces of “white empowerment.” While long-standing movements such as the “Defend Science Movement,” “Pro-choice Movement,” “the Anti-Islamophobia Movement,” and the “LGBT Movement,” to name a few, saw their cause threatened, new ones, such as the #MeToo Movement, started to fiercely defend

¹⁵⁶ For more information, see Chapter 3, section 3.3.1 of this thesis.

the rights of the excluded.¹⁵⁷ The end result has been that discriminated-against citizens have come out to vindicate their cause. As a reaction to the troublesome political atmosphere, since the 2016 electoral campaign and all throughout Donald Trump's presidency, the "white trash," poor whites' or working-class juncture has also awakened interest among U.S. citizens. The issue is too blatant to be ignored. As Nancy Isenberg puts it: "perhaps, too, it is clearer to more Americans that the rural as well as the post-industrial wasteland can no longer be overlooked as a site of meaningful social and political discontent" (xxix).

The third claim of this thesis proposes that, in the present state of affairs, when U.S. politics has publicly admitted to and purposely used the stigma of white poverty for its own agenda, Dorothy Allison's activism for the under-favored unfolds as a suitable choice of analysis. Her work seems as contemporary today as it was thirty years ago, when the second wave of feminism vouched for the equal rights of minorities, including those of "white trash." In her essay "A Question of Class" (1994), Allison describes a societal system which has barely changed since the nineteen nineties: "the horror of class stratification, racism, and prejudice is that some people begin to believe that the security of their families and communities depends on the oppression of others, that for some to have good lives there must be others whose lives are truncated and brutal. It is a belief that dominates this culture" (35). These words, uttered a few decades back, prevail in American society today, which still discriminates, categorizes and undermines those who have not been born among the upper-middle white class. Moreover, there pervades that divisory line between hegemonic and superior forms of whiteness and the non-white others, among which, as this project has shown, the "white trash" exists.

Allison's work has been deemed exceptional for her time, due to its boldness and straightforwardness in addressing white poverty. Her work, however, means more than a

¹⁵⁷ See <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/5-Social-Movements-That-Have-Galvanized-in-the-Age-of-Trump-20170112-0025.html>



simple address of the issue of class. It reveals the urge to expose social injustice, while taking on a proactive stance towards minorities in general, and white poverty in particular. As a writer who has devoted herself to vindicating “white trash,” Allison has published few but pioneering pieces of both non-fiction and fiction, which this thesis has introduced in-depth. Her books represent an attempt to let the reader know of the trials, tribulations, feelings, and consequences of social labeling and stereotyping. Apart from debunking and debasing popular beliefs, nonetheless, Allison’s work, especially her long fiction, reveals itself as a process of finding alternative identities for the stigmatized self. Furthermore, she manages to subvert the deprecatory term of “white trash,” thus appropriating it by making it non-insulting.¹⁵⁸ In doing so, she “narrows” the social divide between white poverty and middle-class whites with her tender and moving style, while her narrative “points the way” to a “new white trash identity.” The feelings of rage and denial that Allison’s characters experience on account of their discrimination become the motivation to reconstruct their identities without rejecting origins and beliefs. The result is that the term “white trash” is no longer a social insult, but rather a signifier of newly reconstructed identities.

As seen, the articles on which the present project rests have been selected with the purpose of, first, introducing Dorothy Allison’s literary work and, second, reflecting upon her contribution to debunking the “white trash” image in her long fiction writing. In introducing Dorothy Allison’s literary work, this dissertation has presented “Individual and Collective Identity: Dorothy Allison’s Literary Contribution to Demystifying the Poor Whites/‘White Trash’ Stigma” (2017), as a mode of contextualization. A second article, “Trashing the Myth of the Old South: ‘White Trash’ Identity-Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of*

¹⁵⁸ This strategy has been used as a vehicle for social resistance by minorities in today’s American society. For instance, the Pussy Hat Project is a movement initiated by a group of women who appropriated the derogatory term “pussy” to stand up to Trump’s chauvinistic comments which came to light during the 2016 electoral campaign. See <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/>

Carolina” (2019) explores alternative “white trash” identities through a process of deconstructing the myth of the “Old South” in order to highlight the presence of the poor whites, strip them of their social stigma, and allow them to “take in” newly conceived notions of subjectivity which do not reject markers signaling social discrimination, or poverty. To carry this out, Allison predicates a new perspective on “white trash;” one that appears as inclusive, realistic and proud of its heritage, instead of exclusive, made-up, and contemptible. In doing so, this article brings to the table social issues, addressed by “white trash” studies, visible in the narrative, such as the sense of defenselessness of poor white women, illiteracy, physical and sexual abuse, mother and daughter relations, and children’s abandonment, to name some. Once the consequences of poor white living have been brought up, the narrative is suggestive of an escape route out of social hopelessness which entails experiencing a series of feelings and emotions needed to acquiesce awareness of the self. As seen, the awareness of one’s social predicament signals the beginning of a process of identity reconstruction on which this first novel ends.

The last article of this selection, “White Trash Resistance, Women’s Interactions and Identity in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*. An Intersectional Approach” (2020), still deals with identity reconstruction, yet from a different perspective. If *Bastard* centers on Bone Boatwright’s life, *Cavedweller* (1998) concerns a wide range of “white trash” characters on whom to study one’s own identity. While criticized by some for exploiting social stereotypes and not affording anything new to the situation of “white trash” (Guinn 2000), the fact is that *Cavedweller* (1998) contains richness in character portrayal, making its narrative all the more appealing for those willing to get involved in their predicament. Because of the complexity of the characters’ interactions in the novel, which allows each character to present a different prism on “white trash” stigmatizing, the present article takes on an intersectional approach as the method of examination. This time, attention is being paid to Delia’s (the mother protagonist

of the story) own process of identity regeneration. As the female characters in *Cavedweller* (1998) come from distinct social classes and races, their stories unfold as both intricate and complex, an ideal scenario for the use of an intersectional perspective. As mentioned in the present project, Leslie McCall's theories on intersecting categories facilitating mechanisms of oppression help to provide the reader with an understanding on the effects of long-lasting social labeling, prejudice and misconceptions on white poverty. Setting the basis for identity reformation, the article draws an analysis on Delia's own interactions in both the public and domestic spheres. The end result is a display of the intricacies of one's actions interwoven with the actions of others in search of social acceptance, and in turn, social reconstruction.

As a final word, the exposure of the "white trash" myth, as well as the introduction of Allison's literary work on the subject, opens the door for future research. The convolution of the social category of "white trash" invites the scholar to further explore the topic in all its manifestations. Because this group has become subject of public attention in today's U.S. politics, one necessitates to research the implications of its existence in its broadest meaning. The discipline of whiteness studies, and within it "white trash" studies, can be of help in this academic enterprise. In addition, as whiteness studies has pointed out the emergence of newly formed contemporary notions of whiteness, the juncture of the "poor white trash" calls for a more detailed attention. In this regard, we cannot ignore the work that the first "poor white" writers, such as Dorothy Allison, have done to expose, denounce and vindicate the predicament of their people. Therefore, in studying activist literary trends vouching for the rights of the underprivileged, Allison's style is worthy of analysis, for she writes convincingly from the heart, knowing what feeling contemptible is like.

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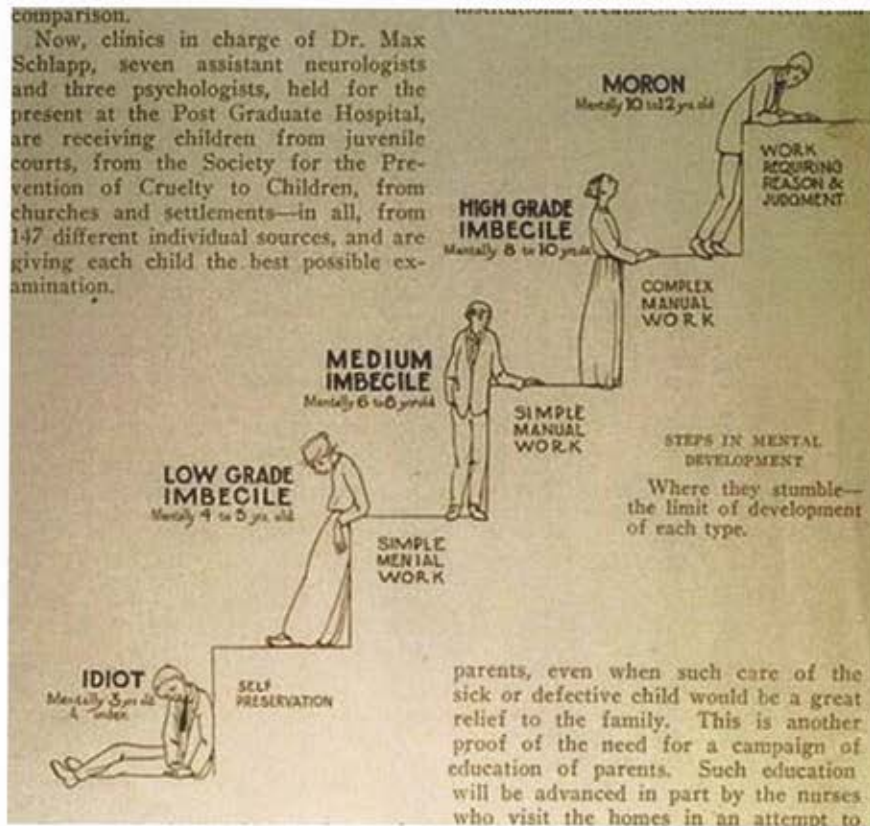


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8. Appendix: Figures

Figure # 1

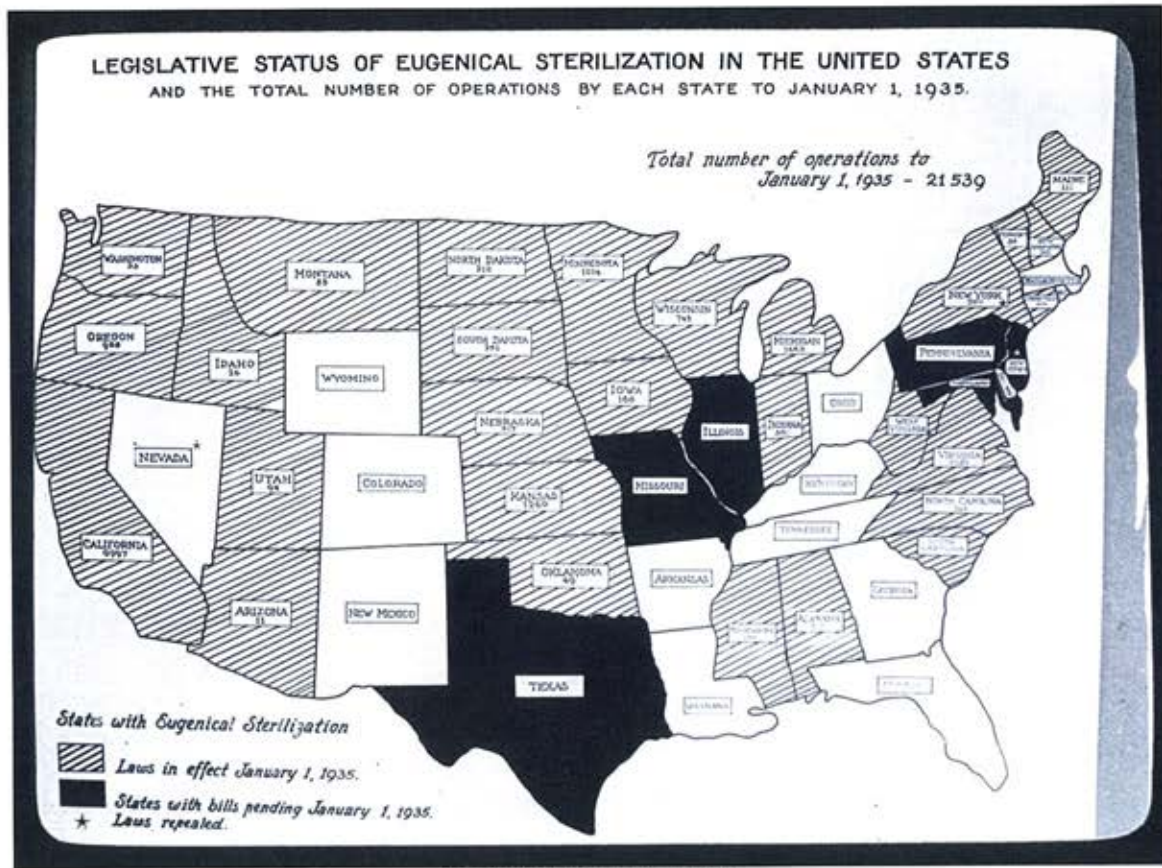
Newspaper clipping showing various degrees of feeble-mindedness (1923).



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Figure # 2

By 1935 sterilization laws had been passed in two thirds of the U.S.A. Eugenicists were firm believers in eradicating defects through the process of forced sterilization.



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