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DOROTHY ALLISON AND THE POSITION OF WHITE TRASH SUBCULTURE

VANLALTANPUII LANGEL

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, MZU.

tanpuiilangel@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the position of white trash subculture in the works of Dorothy Allison- an accomplished American writer who describes herself as a feminist and working-class storyteller. The entirety of Allison's writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, focuses on the conditions under which white trash- poor socially outcast whites, live. As a member of the subculture herself, she is committed to telling the honest truth about the lives of white trash, a voice that is rarely heard in American literature since white trash have always been represented in literature by those on the outside. This paper, therefore, focuses on Allison's representation of white trash and examines how her literary pieces serve to demystify and deconstruct dominant stereotypes such as drunkenness, lechery, indolence, gluttony, drinking, violence, and clay eating to name a few, that mainstream society has long associated with the subculture. She negotiates her perspective as member of the subculture with that of an outsiders' perspective and invites readers to reflect on the social conditions under which white trash are subjected. Embracing certain socially stigmatized traits affixed to white trash and straying from others, she depicts poor white Southern life with a new pair of eyes, offering the notion of real people- flaws and virtues intact.

Keywords: Dorothy Allison; white trash; deconstructing; stereotypes.

This paper examines the position of white trash subculture as reflected in the works of Dorothy Allison through theoretical positions laid by Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault. Subculture may simply be understood as a cultural group within a much larger culture. A distinctive trait among subcultures is that they exhibit a distinctive shape and structure which makes them identifiably different from their parent culture. On the other hand, there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the parent culture. Likewise, white trash in meeting the colour component identifies with the other whites- those belonging to the upper and middle class, they are overly racist, and hold the false notion of being better off than African

Americans. Whiteness comes with a knapsack of privileges which is not accessible to white trash, their dirt encrusted skin may be white but their behaviour and attitude is not, this in itself sets them apart from other whites. Because whiteness is often associated with affluence and privilege, white trash with poverty as its hallmark is a sub-set of whiteness and may rightly be categorized as a subculture. Hall theorizes that "negotiation, struggle, and resistance constitute the relations between a subordinate and a dominant culture" (Hall and Jefferson 34). The white trash subculture represented in Allison's texts exhibit a "theatre of struggle' a repertoire of strategies and responses – ways of coping as well as resisting" (ibid).

As a subculture, white trash disturbs the homogeneity of the white group since they are white and poor at the same time. The existence of white trash poses an internal threat to the dominant white group and hence calls for the “creation of a specific space, designed to welcome white trash aberrations” (Grue 32). The ultimate aim for the creation of these quarantine spaces being to protect the dominant white group from contamination. Matthew Wray suggests that white trash “names people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic order” (*Not Quite White* 2). Hartigan further explains that “though white trash appears as a form of otherness, its most troubling aspect is its dimension of sameness” (60). Allison’s white trash constitutes the dominant in identifying with its parent white culture and the inferior which is signified by the notion of dirt/ trash. The term trash when operating at the physical level provokes disgust and abjection and pollutes the space of normality associated with whiteness. Foucault’s treatise on “heterotopias of crisis” and “heterotopias of deviation” can therefore be linked to the creation of quarantine spaces by dominant whites for white trash aberrations.

Stuart Hall provides the meaning for the word representation:

To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses... (16).

He provides a second meaning of the word as well: “To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for...” (ibid).

However, Hall sees representation as an act of reconstruction rather than reflection. A critical approach to cultural studies understands representation as an act of ideological recreation that serves the specific interest of those who control the discourse. For Hall, a discourse “is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (201). Exposing the control of representation is one of the chief concerns of Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies,

likewise, Allison has exercised the power to represent white trash and in doing so she reconstructs the misconceived images of white trash created by mainstream society in the form of stereotypes and fixed caricatures. Within the context of American pop culture, “to represent” means to faithfully carry the name of a certain area or group, to do it honour, and make others aware. It involves an experience of power, when one represents, one is in charge of how others see that group or area that is represented. Allison has therefore exercised this power for the sole reason that she identifies and belongs to this subculture. Allison’s representation of white trash calls forth the act of ideological recreation and reconstruction in the likes of Stuart Hall and Cultural theorists. She reconstructs white trash identity by negotiating the idea of white trash that mainstream society has projected with that of her perspective as an insider. The power to represent white trash is therefore shifted from that of mainstream white society to that of a member of the subculture itself. She also brings to light in her representation the complexity of white trash as a subculture highlighting how it lies both inside and outside of whiteness or its parent culture.

In an interview with Ulin, Dorothy Allison gives a painful description of her existence as a member of white trash subculture. She says:

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 (Claxton 94).

Born on November 11th, 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to a fifteen year old unwed poor white waitress, Allison spent eighteen years of her life being despised and treated with contempt. In the words of Carretero:

Apart from being a poor white outcaste, Allison was repeatedly raped by her stepfather from age five until age sixteen, when the sexual assaults ceased, the brutal

beatings began. It was not until she was eighteen that Allison managed to escape her family and the South to go to college. The only one in her family able to access higher education, Allison sees herself as a survivor of incest, domestic violence and social abuse (90).

As a member of a highly stigmatized social group, Allison draws an accurate picture of her people in her collection of essays. She describes herself as her mama's daughter, brought up with a feeling of unity and loyalty to her people, but also a sense of low self-esteem, ready to internalize the damage caused by society's labelling them as poor white trash. 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 (*Skin* 225).

It took years for Allison to overcome the damage of being poor white trash. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray have theorized the term white trash thereby shedding more light on the matter:

...white trash, 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 (Wray and Newitz 4).

Internalizing the stigma of being poor and white has been the result of years of social labelling and segregation from superior whites and Allison was quick to realize the awkwardness of such a state. It was very early in life that she decided to leave her family and her origins behind. In *Skin*, Allison remarks that "shame was the constant theme" of her childhood (229). She goes on to comment on her life:

...I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white

woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. The fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it. I have learned with great difficulty that the vast majority of people believed that poverty is a voluntary condition (15).

Poverty has long been considered as a hallmark of white trash, however mainstream society has held the belief that poverty is a voluntary condition or a choice for white trash. This assumption rises from the fact that white trash ancestry has been traced to lubbers and crackers who were known to be shiftless squatters. Idleness being their most glaring trait, these lubbers and crackers occupied the frontiers of Virginia and South Carolina. Crackers exhibited such qualities as criminality, violence, and cruelty, and these traits till date constitute popular stereotypes of what it means to be white trash. Allison on the other hand paints a different picture, in the sense that their poverty has nothing to do with idleness, she depicts how her people struggle to make ends meet but are nonetheless a hardworking lot especially the women. Instead of focusing on the poverty and deplorable condition of white trash, Allison turns the readers' attention to why they are poor, and in doing so she reconstructs the image of white trash by deconstructing some of the misconceived notions held by mainstream society.

In her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, she describes the Gibson women as "bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt" (32-33). She says,

We were all wide hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. Wide hands marked workhouses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species" (33).

Allison was proud of the stubborn determination of the Gibson women, but at the same time she was horrified by them and did not want to grow up to be them.

The women I loved most horrified me. I did not want to grow up to be them. I made myself proud of their pride, their determination, their stubbornness, but every night I prayed: Lord, save me from them. Do not let me become them (38).

Allison's writing represents an honest attempt to humanize the notion of poor white trash identity. Danielle Docka writes on the above subject:

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 inequality (np).

Through her writing Allison ultimate goal is to break down social misrepresentations of white trash, she therefore states:

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 (Claxton 44).

The caricatures referred to in the above quotation are those misconceived images of poor whites created by mainstream society. Watson states that, since the 1790s, a section of poor inhabitants in the American South have been characterized by "drunkenness, lechery, indolence, gluttony, violence, thick impenetrable accents, and creolized dialects" (12). The above mentioned traits were found in the Southern humorists' characters, and later on in Southern writing, the poor whites remained the objects of extreme representations:

They drink to excess, disfigure each other in brawls, lust openly after inappropriate people, eat clay, stage elaborate pranks that physically abase their victims, and in general exhibit a bodily excess and

indiscipline that flaunts bourgeois norms of bodily etiquette (Watson 14).

Coming from a poor white family in South Carolina, Allison is both a victim and an heir to these representations, since her characters are the targets of a typically Southern physical and ideological violence. In *Trash*, Allison defines two conflicting figures: the "good poor" who are "hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable," and the "bad poor," the group her family belongs to (vii). She further explains:

We were men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly become worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes" (ibid. vii).

Like Foucault's concept of "heterotopias of deviation" which refers to a quarantined space that welcomes individuals who deviate from a certain norm (80), the space that white trash occupies within the social sphere comprises of a quarantine or an "other" space reinforced by popular myths and stereotypes associated with the subculture such as dirt, perverse sexuality, incest, immorality, indolence, violence, drinking, stupidity, and drinking to name a few.

Similarly her memoir opens with a compilation of terms used to define and categorize her social group:

Peasants, that's what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum(*Two or Three* 1).

Allison gives an exposition of class relations in the South and denounces the unfair categorization she and her family fell victim to. She explores the strategies of othering and debasement developed by the Southern middle class in order to marginalize white trash. In most of her writing she draws a line between the white trash characters and the southern community that held them in disdain.

Allison presents an insider's view of white trash in all of her texts, and helps those on the outside understand the reality and diversity of those experiences. She says in her collection of essays titled *Skin*, "The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction" (14). According to Kathlene McDonald:

The characters that Allison constructs represent part of a long and paradoxical literary history. Whether as lubber, cracker, po buckra, redneck, hillbilly, or white trash, the southern poor-white character has been a popular literary figure as far back as the eighteenth century (16).

In *Bastard* for instance, Allison's characters reflect stereotypical white trash image in many ways, Bone is the illegitimate child of fifteen-year-old Anney, the adults drink, chain smoke, drive jacked-up cars, talk dirty, work in mills and diners, display frightening tempers, and frequently spend time in jail. In an interview, Allison discussed writing about her own family on whom she based many of her characters in *Bastard* :

I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that's exactly who we're supposed 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 as larger than that contemptible myth. And show 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, mean, cardboard figures (Hollibaugh 16).

Allison incorporates many elements of dominant stereotypes of white trash into her characters thereby reinforcing standard images of white trash but she simultaneously resists them by allowing her characters to move beyond them. Dominant stereotypes of white trash focus on the humorous or pitiable aspects of white trash culture

but fails to recognize the material conditions that make them true. When Allison shows the hunger, the despair, the limited choices, and the shame of contempt and class hatred, she forces her reader to confront the everyday realities of her characters. She makes the pain difficult to avoid by refusing to keep the reality invisible thus negotiating different perspectives in her representation of white trash.

Allison's construction of white trash identity and defiance of stereotypes is evident in the male figures of *Bastard*. The Boatwright brothers, Earle, Beau, and Nevil, have no respect for any situation that "could not be handled with a shotgun or a two-by-four" (10). The county both respects and fears their legendary tempers, and they are known for their drunken binges and rumored affairs. They love their wives but cannot stay away from other women. Even though the uncles embody stereotypical white trash characteristics, they are "invariably gentle and affectionate" toward their sisters, nieces, and nephews, "Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be" (22).

Kathleen McDonald observes that,

...the Boatwrights maintain fierce pride and loyalty towards their family, but they also suffer deep feelings of shame and hopelessness. Taught by experience that nothing ever changes, they refuse to believe that they will ever escape poverty. After Lyle Parson's death, Aunt Ruth tells Anney that she looks "like a Boatwright" now and that she will look that way until she dies. Both Ruth and Anney resign themselves to their lot in life. For Anney "it didn't matter to her anymore what she looked like" (20-21)

Much of the Boatwrights' shame and self-hatred derives from the contempt of those in the upper and middle classes. Labels such as "No-good, lazy, shiftless" (Allison *Bastard* 3) deeply wounds the Boatwright family. Bone sees the disdain in the eyes of others when they look at her family.

"How am I supposed to know anything at all?" she wonders, when "I'm just another

ignorant Boatwright, you know. Another piece of trash barely knows enough to wipe her ass or spit away from the wind. Just like you and Mama and Alma and everybody." I spit to the side deliberately. "Hell," I said softly to her face. "Hellfire. We an't like nobody else in the world" (258).

The marginalization of white trash and continued occupation of a quarantined or other space has resulted into a sense of deep shame and hopeless, for Allison's white trash have been conditioned over time in to believing that they deviate from the realm of normality unlike dominant whites and hence can never escape this stigmatized existence. Although Bone longs for middle-class acceptance and Anney tries extremely hard to cultivate such standards especially when visiting the Waddells, she knows for a fact that she will be judged by those on the outside inspite of how she behaves.

Allison describes how many men and women categorized as white trash internalize the shame and hatred from upper and middle-classes and consider themselves trash. In *Cavedweller*, Cissy internalizes this shame and hatred to the extent of hating herself, she imagines eating garbage, and wants to disappear. She dilates on the subject in *Skin*:

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 or lose ourselves, but most of all, simply to disappear as the people we really are (34).

In her article, Karen Gaffney talks about how men and women express this self-hatred through either hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine behaviour. She states that "men tend to be forced into an extreme version of their gender role, becoming violent, tough, hard, and abusive, often leading them into alcoholism and imprisonment" (49). Women, however, "tend to internalize their shame to the point of extreme self-hatred, sometimes compounded by abusive men" (ibid). Granddaddy Byrd is described as someone who has created such

a hardened shell around himself that he becomes impervious to emotions:

Just as hard as the parched red earth of his empty front yard, the kind of hard that only accumulates over a lifetime. There was no crack in him. He was of a piece, this old man, a piece of flint (Allison, *Cavedweller* 48).

Granddaddy Byrd has internalized this self-hatred by becoming what he has been labelled, he becomes dirt itself. Cissy also considers herself as this hard parched dirt and models herself after Granddaddy Byrd.

In *Skin*, Allison talks about presenting poor white trash as human and more importantly embraces her origin. She says,

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 life-long 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 (36).

Being labelled as a degenerate, disease-ridden class, "Allison confesses that she thought she was going to die young; either of cancer or that one of her lovers would kill her" (Carretero 95). In her memoir, Allison also writes: "My family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness – the women of my family most of all" (*Two or Three* 32). She uses parameters that are socially perceived to make the above statement, since till date the working poor are in some areas in the United States, considered genetically infected and diseased (Wray 66-67). In their attempts at maintaining privilege and superiority, dominant whites continue to subjugate white trash through such labels as being a degenerate and disease ridden class, and many of these labels have been appropriated by white trash themselves as Allison has rightly mentioned.

Allison empathizes with the notion that poor white women are raised to destroy themselves

and therefore speaks of the women in her family in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

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 and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid (33).

What can be gathered from the above quotation is that working women such as Allison's mother, aunts and sisters were born to endure abuse from men; white trash women, therefore occupy the lowest position among the lowest whites.

Allison herself explains "that much of the hatred and contempt that poor whites in the South feel toward African Americans derives from being hated and held in contempt themselves, and they can pass on that hatred to African Americans" (McDonald 22). Like upper and middle classes believe lies about poor white trash, the Boatwrights in *Bastard* believe lies about African Americans. Bone recognizes the connections between racial and class oppression when her friend Shannon tells her, "My daddy don't handle niggers," the word "nigger" strikes a chord, since Shannon's tone sounds "exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering 'trash' when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (170). The concept of internalized classism which Glenda M. Russel describes as "the process by which a person's experience as a member of the poor or working class becomes internalized and influences her self-concept and self-esteem as well as her relationships with others" (Hill and Rothblum 59) operates at a very deep level when it comes to Allison's white trash. For they have internalized the hatred and contempt from affluent whites which in some cases have translated into self-hatred and shame and in other instances they have passed on the same hate and contempt towards African Americans. It is rather interesting to note that African Americans themselves prior to the

abolition of slavery have held white trash with contempt and continue to do so till date.

Allison does not deal with race as explicitly as she does gender or class, however, *Bastard* signals the notion that surviving and escaping conditions of poverty seems greater for the Boatwrights than for African American members of the community. Laws like Jim Crow gave poor whites the false consciousness of being better off than African Americans. The African Americans that appear in *Bastard* are "niggers" or "peckerwoods," they are scorned by the Boatwrights who feel no shame in being racist. This racial hatred can be understood from an economic and historical context:

racism became "practical" during the colonial era as a means of preventing black slaves and white indentured servants from joining forces against the wealthy white landowners. Racism was not something "'natural' to the black-white difference, but something coming out of class scorn, a realistic device for control" (McDonald 56).

Allison's *Trash* which consists of fifteen short stories draws an accurate and honest picture of white trash:

Trash speaks not only of poor whites' virtues, such as their love for southern food, their passion for storytelling, and the need to care for each other, 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 (Carretero 103).

Through *Trash* Allison was able to communicate with her mother, the figure of authority in her life, she also holds the power to break away from her husband's abuse to protect her daughter. Allison's mother is also the same person who, in the end, failed to take measures against her husband's physical and sexual abuse on Allison, the child. At the time, Allison was unable to speak with her mother about the abuse. Years later, she found herself in

need of communicating her feelings of anger to her mother, and she did so through her writing. Allison states,

... it seemed to me that especially in my twenties I was writing for my mother, and I was writing stories directed at her, and having conversations with her in fiction that I could not have in person (Claxton 45).

Among the stories connected to her mother, "Mama" deserves close examination. The story reveals itself as a narrative in which the protagonist, a young woman away from home, reminisces her childhood years. The storyteller begins her tale on her stepfather's birthday.

The thing we do – as my sister has told me and as I have told her – is think about Mama. At any moment of the day, we know what she will be doing, where she will be, and what she will probably be talking about. We know, not only because her days are as set and predictable as the schedule by which she does the laundry, we know in our bodies. Our mother's body is with us in its detail. She is recreated in each of us, strength of bone and the skin curling over the thick flesh the women of our family have always worn (*Trash* 34).

The above quotation defies social stereotypes built around poor white women. Allison's mother is seen as conducting an orderly life in which cleanliness and routines are part of the daily chores. Her extraordinary features do not exhibit sickness or depravity, rather, they speak of strength and endurance. These same attributes have been passed on to her daughters. Allison has therefore in this instance controlled the discourse by deconstructing generally accepted stereotypes that white trash equals indolence and that they are weak and depraved. The narrative manages to demystify socially misconstrued notions about poor whites by pointing towards self-worth and family pride. In "Mama", the protagonist performs the ritual of gently rubbing her mother's hands and feet, and shares her thought with readers, "Sometimes my love for her would choke me, and I would ache to

have her open her eyes and see me there, to see how much I loved her" (35).

In 1994, Allison put together a collection of essays which offers a comprehensive view on the many aspects defining Allison's location of poor white feminist lesbian activist/writer. The collection is an exposition of class differences between middle or upper-middle class whites and lower or working-class whites. In these essays, Allison discloses her lesbian nature and even touches upon her fear of being hated by her own lover for belonging to a lower class, a class respectable whites do not associate with:

One summer, almost ten years ago, I brought my lover down to Greenville to visit my aunt Dot and the rest of my mama's family. We took our time getting there, spending one day in D.C. and another in Durham. I even thought about suggesting a side trip over to the Smoky Mountains, until I realized the reason I was thinking about that was that I was afraid. 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 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. I was afraid she would see me through new eyes, hateful eyes, the eyes of someone who suddenly knew how different we were. My aunts' distance, my cousins' fear, or my uncles' contempt seemed much less threatening (*Skin* 9).

Allison invites the reader to open their eyes to the fact that mainstream society is in need for further clarification on the nature of the 'Other' white, understood as 'different'. Much like Foucault's heterotopias of deviance, white trash have long occupied the other space within American society, for they pose an internal threat of polluting the white group. The above quotation clearly signifies how far Allison's white trash have appropriated their deviant status for they consider themselves 'different'. White trash does not enjoy the

normative status that other whites enjoy for they constitute the most visibly marked form of whiteness and deviate from the norm.

Two or Three Things I Know For Sure (1995) was published three years after that of her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). Allison's memoir relies heavily on storytelling, a style the author feels comfortable with and chooses amongst others.

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 be a curtain shut down, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than that intended.

The story becomes the thing needed (3).

As Timothy Dow Adams states, Allison "employs a kind of believe-it-or-not technique conducive to exaggerating and/or inventing" (85), therefore challenging the reader to willingly suspend their disbelief and rely on her writing. *Two or Three* covers the author's birth to her years of young adulthood, projecting a lifetime of social displacement, contempt, shame, violence, gender discrimination and love. Allison's narrative suggests that all women in her family have been subjected to male violence and none of them had the opportunity to escape:

My mama did not run away. My aunt Dot and aunt Grace and cousin Billie with her near dozen children – they did not run. They learned resilience and determination and the cost of hard compromises. None of them ever intended to lose their lives or their children's lives, to be trapped by those hard compromises and ground down until they no longer knew who they were, what they had first intended. But it happened. It happened over and over again (4-5).

The presence of old, faded family photographs in *Two or Three* plays a significant role in the sense that the idea of faded identities, suggest invisibility and

marginality that poor white trash experience firsthand. Through these pictures, Allison constructs stories around characters, rebuilding and reconstructing their lives and identities. Henninger claims:

It is the inclusion of photographs from Allison's family collection, particularly of women, that makes the texts mediations on evidence, roots, and accessibility especially urgent. Photographs in *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* stand on the border of public and private, and function as potent symbols of the paradoxical power of facades (representation, stories) simultaneously to permit and to deny access to the "truth" (95).

Allison's memoir draws the readers' attention to pictures of marginalized men and women in their best attire. By incorporating these pictures into the narrative, Allison draws mainstream public closer to the white trash stigma and through this display, she is able to blur out highly stigmatized social representations of white trash. Allison employs the use of old pictures in her narrative to reconstruct the image of white trash and has reinforced the power to control the discourse with visual aid as well. The power of language in this instance has been supported by that of old photographs in the act of representation.

Allison's novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Cavedweller* are a continuum of events narrated, at times in first, and, at others in third person. Her approach "moves back and forth between that of an observer, the outsider, to that of a person who experiences the stigma 'in the flesh'" (Carretero 108). The negotiation between what others think of white trash and the white trash perspective allows Allison to speak with propriety and depth and draws the reader's empathy towards the underprivileged. *Bastard* presents and resists numerous and varied myths surrounding the white trash existence amongst which invisibility and shame are worth noting. Bone is deemed 'invisible' in the eyes of the authorities as her mother was unconscious during the time of her birth and her birth certificate was stamped with the word 'illegitimate' which signifies the fact that she did not have a father to attest

paternity. The details of Bone's birth is presented in the text as follows:

I've been called Bone all my life, but my name's Ruth Anne. I was named for and by my oldest aunt – Aunt Ruth. My mama didn't have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasn't there...

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 under her chin, flew right over their heads, through the windshield, and over the car they hit. Going through the glass, she cut the top the top of her head, and when she hit the ground she bruised her backside, but other than that she wasn't hurt at all. Of course, she didn't wake up for three days, not till after Granny and Aunt Ruth had signed all the papers and picked my name...As for the name of the father, Granny refused to speak it after she had run him out of town for messing with her daughter, and Aunt Ruth had never been sure of his last name anyway. They tried to get away with just scribbling something down, but if the hospital didn't mind how a baby's middle name was spelled, they were definite about having a father's last name. So Granny gave one and Ruth gave another, the clerk got mad, and there I was – a certified bastard by the state of Carolina (2-3).

Without having a father to attest paternity, Bone is not given social recognition, and because her illegitimacy has been made official, Anney further appropriates the white trash identity for they are considered as the type that would give birth out of wedlock. This lack of social recognition or invisibility also implies contempt, leading the protagonist to a feeling of worthlessness:

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 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 man had done it for them – set a mark on her and hers. It was all she could do to pull herself up eight days after I was born and go back to waiting tables with a tight mouth and swollen eyes (3-4).

Bone's mother is compared to a rock- an inanimate object, which reinforces the idea of invisibility and worthlessness. Although Anney suffers the shame and humiliation of being labelled white trash, her frequent visits to the court house indicate the effort that she puts in to overcome the label. However, these visits prove futile as it only affords her the same birth certificate with a stamp across it "in oversized red-inked block letters it read, 'ILLEGITIMATE'" (4).

When Daddy Glen comes into the picture as Bone's stepfather, invisibility and shame continue to take a turn for the worse. Glen Waddell belongs to a middle-class family who consider themselves superior to the Boatwrights. The narrator makes the following observation:

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 the 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 lets us forget (98).

Nancy Isenberg comments on the difference in class and the friction that separates the Waddells and the Boatwrights:

Allison is fascinated by the thin line that separates the stepfather's family from the mother's; they might have more money, but they're shallow and cruel. Her cousins whisper that their car is like "nigger trash."...they feel compelled to snub those below them. It is shame that keeps the class system in place (295).

The narrative of Allison's first novel *Bastard* is a reflection of social stigmatization experienced by white trash, since mainstream society finds it shameful to be white and poor. Glen's hatred for Bone and for the lower class materializes into sexual and physical abuse. As the course of events unfolds, Bone manages to break away from Glen's hatred, but loses her mother in the process as Anney eventually abandons Bone and leaves town with Glen to start anew in California. With her interpretation of *Bastard*'s ending, Nancy Isenberg addresses the sad reality that poor white women face, that a solution out of poverty and social stigmatization seems unfathomable for women.

By the end of the novel, Bone frees herself from Glen, and in the process loses out to him when her psychically damaged mother decides to abandon the family and take off for California with him. In running away, her mother repeats the strategy of crackers a century earlier: to flee and start over somewhere else. Ruminating on her mother's life – pregnant at fifteen, wed then widowed at seventeen, and married a second time to Glen by twenty two – Bone wonders whether she herself is equipped to make more sensible decisions. She won't condemn her mother, because she doesn't know for certain that she will be able to avoid some of the same mistakes (296).

The cracker strategy that Anney applies in *Bastard* is reiterated in Allison's essay "A Question of Class". In the essay, Allison calls it "the geographic solution". Behind this solution lies the conviction that the life one has lived, the person one is "is valueless, better off abandoned, that running away is easier than trying to change things, that change is not possible..." (*Skin* 19-20). Allison herself claims

that the geographic solution is something she often contemplates when facing difficult situations. Allison therefore claims another popular stereotype associated with white trash – that they often opt for the geographic solution.

The very fact that Anney goes back to Glen in spite of the fact that he sexually and physically abused Bone indicates that not only class but gender as well becomes conditioned with invisibility and shame; that poor whites, the majority of them being women, "remain trapped in the poverty they are born" (Isenberg 296). Anney's ultimate act of love is found in the final chapter when she pays her daughter one last visit. The envelope Anney drops on Bone's lap contains a document that is "blank, unmarked, unstamped"(309)

Folded into thirds was a certificate. Ruth Anne Boatwright. Mother: Anney Boatwright. Father: Unknown. I almost laughed, reading down the page. Greenville General Hospital and the embossed seal of the county, the family legend on imitation parchment. I had never seen it before, but had heard all about it. I unfolded the bottom third.

It was blank, unmarked, unstamped (ibid).

At the novel's ending, no sign of having been born a bastard stands between Bone and her future. In the words of Allison herself:

I deliberately made a fiction, not a memoir. I made up a child very different from me. Oh, I gave her my dark eyes, my love of books and music and poetry, but in every other way I made her separate and unique. I made her brave and stubborn and resilient. I made her want to protect her little sister and her mother. I made her 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 to the reader that she was not hateful in any way (*Bastard* 314)

With *Bastard*, Allison deconstructs myths that surround the white trash identity and especially so with Bone she has carefully constructed a character who as a member of the working-class internalized a lot of the hate and contempt that surrounded her

existence yet somehow did not turn out bitter and spiteful. Allison seems to suggest through her writings that such people categorized as white trash are not what mainstream society perceive them to be.

Allison's work gives recognition to poor white culture which entails a group of people who practice traditional folkways that are not socially acknowledged and exercise other practices that mainstream whites deem highly contemptible. She depicts poor white folklore in abundance, where lying, cheating, and stealing, to say the least, are part of everyday living. She depicts poor white Southern life with a new pair of eyes, and does so by intertwining traditionally accepted folk practices such as cooking, storytelling, and, gospel singing with less orthodox practices such as drinking, drug addiction, sexual and physical abuse. Allison represents poor white culture as any other social group, flaws and virtues intact.

In the words of Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray,

White trash 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. White trash is "good to think with" when it comes to issues of race and class in the U.S because the term foregrounds whiteness and working-class or underclass poverty, two social attributes that usually stand far apart in the minds of many Americans...(4).

The entirety of Allison's work speaks of those hybrid and multiple identities, and at the same time invites readers to reflect on the social conditions to which stigmatized poor whites are subjected. She embraces certain socially stigmatized traits associated with white trash but defies others. Her literary pieces are saturated with images of self-destructive characters, telling their stories as they tackle life's problems with resilience. Allison voices her disapproval of overt racism and illiteracy amongst white trash, and builds characters who against popular belief hold a different view on the subject. In doing so, she allows her characters to

move beyond stereotypes offering the notion of real people and not just mere caricatures.

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