

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: DOROTHY ALLISON'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION TO DEMYSTIFYING THE POOR WHITES/ 'WHITE TRASH' STIGMA

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ABSTRACT

In this day and age, when uncertainty for minority groups seems to have resurfaced in the political arena of the USA, it is worth noting the work that writers such as Dorothy Allison have been performing during the past forty years. Determined to take down the barriers that outcast the poor whites from the mainstream, Allison's work feels as contemporary now as it did in the nineteen eighties. Adamant on telling things how they are, Allison's life and work represent a relentless effort to draw the reader closer to the people she grew up with, the poor whites, also known as 'white trash.' This article serves as an introduction to Dorothy Allison's literary commitment to revealing the truth behind the stigma of being poor and white. In doing so, Allison's literary contribution to building poor whites' true identity will be examined through the analysis of the objectives behind her writing, her own identity seeking mechanisms as well as her honest attempt to show the humanness in being white and poor. A look into her work in which her contribution to collective and individual identity seeking can be clearly identified is being offered to conclude this article.

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.

1. LIFE AT THE MARGINS: DOROTHY ALLISON'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

When asked to give a definition of herself, Dorothy Allison's harsh past life transpires, painfully and defiantly:

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. (Ulin 94)

To say that for Dorothy Allison's life has not been kind would be an understatement. Born on November 11th, 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to a fifteen year old unwed poor white waitress, Allison spent the next eighteen years of her life knowing what being despised and treated with contempt was like. Apart from being a poor white outcast, Allison was repeatedly raped by her stepfather from age five until age sixteen when, though 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. Needless to say, life for Allison has been anything but easy.

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 pass the time drinking, gambling, or collecting welfare checks; the women were not any different for they would marry at an early age and get pregnant just as fast to qualify for a somewhat steady income to live on. A very grim picture of what an 'American' family is thought to be like. In her collections of essays, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (1994), Allison herself 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, ready to take in the damage caused by 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, or in other words, of being poor white trash. Because the myth has been engrained in the minds of the poor for so long, poor whites/white trash have internalized the idea of being different from mainstream, yet not inferior, for they bear the mark of whiteness. 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)

Dorothy Allison's words transpire the juncture between race and class white trash find themselves at. Along this line, the term white trash has been theorized by Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray who have shed 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. (Newitz and Wray 4)

It goes without saying that internalizing the stigma of being poor and white has been the result of years of social labeling and segregation from the superior whites and that Allison quickly realized the awkwardness of such a state of affairs. Very early in life the writer would make up her mind to leave behind her family and origins.

2. DOROTHY ALLISON'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION TO POOR WHITES' IDENTITY-BUILDING

According to J. Wayne Flynt, popular literature about the South has been concentrated in three periods: the first happened shortly after the nineteenth hundreds and corresponded to the Democratic Party's attempt to enact the reforms wanted by the Populists; the second took place in the nineteen thirties when novelists and journalists dramatically portrayed the degradation of poor whites; and the third, during the nineteen sixties as a result of concerns for the rights of the blacks and the poor (Flynt 75). Yet, in my opinion, there has been a fourth attempt to write about the poor whites or the working-class made by writers such as Dorothy Allison who were raised poor and endeavored themselves to present a more approachable perspective on the road to understanding this highly stigmatized group.¹

For Allison, writing represents an honest attempt to humanize the notion of poor white trash identity(ies). On the subject, 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 inequality" (Docka). Along this line, Allison's portrayal of white trash lets us have a taste of poor white tradition, none of which should be looked upon as contemptible. It is J. Wayne Flynt, on closing the gap between mainstream society and poor whites, who states:

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. (Flynt 166)

¹ Dorothy Allison defines herself as a southern working-class writer. She has stated 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 (Birnbaum 104).

Dorothy Allison gives recognition to poor white culture upon writing about all that such notion entails: a group of people whose lives are led by the practice of traditional folkways needing social acknowledgement and other practices deemed highly contemptible by the mainstream whites. Greatly influenced by the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Allison's work depicts abundant poor white folklore in which lying, cheating and stealing, to say the least, are part of everyday living. In other words, Allison's writing examines poor white southern ways with a new set of eyes, intertwining the most traditionally accepted folk practices such as cooking, storytelling, gospel singing and care-taking with other less orthodox practices such as drinking, drug addiction, sexual and physical abuse. All of this represents, for better or worse, poor whites' culture. In her disclosing poor white culture, Allison's intentions are to present poor whites as any other group of society with their flaws and also virtues.

On a different plane but equally important, Dorothy Allison conceives writing as a way by which either the writer, or their characters, would tell a story. Since early age, Allison grew up listening to the stories of her mother, aunts, and grandmother eventually continuing the generational chain of storytelling herself. In time, she ceased to be part of the audience and started to build stories as a way to entertain a younger audience as she would often babysit for her family (Anderson 34). Gradually, storytelling became not only a form of entertainment but also a mechanism by which to dream a better life and survive. Writing and/or storytelling allowed Allison to rebuild her identity and the identity of her people. It was upon her relocating to San Francisco that Allison decided to devote herself to writing her untold story, the story of her family and, by extension, the story of her people. Writing and/or storytelling also serves as a vehicle by which Allison may heal the trauma of her past: her harsh childhood exacerbated by the poor, hopeless and neglecting environment she was forced to live in. Storytelling, then, contains more than one purpose for Allison. Not only does it mean a tool for us, readers, to better grasp the notion of poor whites but also a form of self-redemption from the feeling of guilt the author had suffered for having being the only survivor² to her kind.³ Having been

² The word survivor is intentionally used to signal having survived trauma that was manifold, that is: physical, psychological and sexual abuse; poor living conditions; and gender as well as sexual discrimination.

born poor white and female, victim of incest and violence and a lesbian, Dorothy Allison has always had a story to tell.

3. ALLISON'S PURPOSE FOR WRITING

The distortion of poor whites' social image has been done, according to Katherine Henninger at three different levels: nationwide, the South and within the white trash culture itself; she states:

[Poor whites' social image] has historically functioned as a representational repository of national racism, class exploitation, religious fanaticism, and gender/sex oppression;" at a regional level (that is, in the South), the term took in "the regional legacies of violence, incest, racial brutality, and indolence," and in the social hierarchical order of the white trash patriarchal culture "women, girls, sexual transgressives, and blacks of all ages represent the low other, the source of disorder. (Henninger 94).

All of these aspects will be reflected in Dorothy Allison's literary work as she writes with two objectives in mind: firstly, she feels the need to break down misrepresentations forged upon poor whites' public identity; secondly, in writing to save her people, Allison is also saving herself, as if atoning herself from the guilt of having been able to escape such a social condition. Yet this feeling of guilt never goes away: Allison feels remorseful for not having remained among her people. A closer look at Allison's two writing objectives follows.

Concerning the first objective, Allison's writing as the vehicle to break down social misrepresentations, when asked what she wanted her writing to do, Allison's answer is pure and simple:

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 44)

The caricatures Allison is referring to are those misconceived images of poor whites created by the mainstream for so many years. As Matt Wray states, the image of poor whites, often times known as

³ In this context, understood as the members of her family, for they were unable to escape the myth of poor white/white trash.

the low working-class, has changed along the years: in the colonial period, poor whites were considered an oddity among the general white population with the figures of the 'blubber' and the 'cracker' being made subject of extensive public debates. Indeed, these types were observed by sociologists as living under the most deplorable and degenerate conditions; by the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans had already formed a clear idea about the poor white trash: to the hegemonic whites, poor white trash were poor and trashy "either because they were of social and economic exclusion or because of tainted heredity" (Wray 137). Sadly, in this day and age, on caricaturing the poor whites, the image of Longstreet's Ransy Sniffle still comes to mind in most of the South of US. Allison's writing represents an honest-to-goodness effort to take down the barriers of public identity misrepresentation and present poor whites or low working-class as another social group with 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. (*Skin* 36)

In order to present poor whites as human, Allison will embrace her poor white origins. Allison has admitted having inherited some of her family traits. Speaking of poor whites' social degeneration, Allison confesses that she thought she was going to die young; either of cancer or that one of her lovers would kill her.⁴ Allison also states: "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 Things I know for Sure* 32). Allison is using socially perceived parameters to make such statement, as the working poor were and

⁴ Upon poor whites being labeled as a degenerate, disease-ridden class, scientists insisted upon the fact that such lifestyle would only be conducive to short life expectancy. Just in the twentieth century alone, the US conducted several health campaigns to eradicate hook-worm disease, malnutrition and whooping cough, to name a few. Lastly, the existence of many diseases have been attributed to living under dirt-poor conditions and even in today's world, contracting specific health threatening conditions such as lice and hookworms brings about the socially stigmatized idea of 'living in filth.' (Flynt 38-44).

still are, in some areas in the US, considered genetically infected and diseased (Wray 66-67).

Allison also empathizes with the social notion that poor white women are raised to destroy themselves. In a passage from her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), Allison speaks of the women of 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* 33)

Working women such as Allison's mother, aunts and sisters were born to endure the man's abuse; white trash women, therefore occupy the lowest position among the lowest whites.

Poor whites, whether men or women, also trigger a feeling of contempt in the hegemonic class. And contempt breeds self-doubt, low self-esteem and the fear that one will never be allowed to be something else; feelings of resigning to their hopeless situation and falling into complacency are very common among the so-called lower classes. In Allison's case, the desire not to be labeled as poor white trash⁵ motivates her to pursue her identity as a person. It is not surprising, then, that Allison would want to be an advocate for her rights and the rights of her own. In addition, being held under contempt triggers a desire to endure social labeling with resilience; in other words, oppressed classes have found a way of carrying on with their survival. 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

⁵ In her early career days, Allison breaks away from her people only to come back ten years later, when she was mature enough to come to an understanding with her poor white origins. From then onwards, Allison will be more open and straightforward towards the stigma of being poor white.

way just to remember my mother, the survivor, the endurer, but the one who could not always keep quiet about it. (*Trash* 36)

If being tougher than kudzu⁶ is the result of knowing yourself utterly contemptible, poor whites' survival depends upon their dexterity to make believe, to hide the true self, to disguise identity. Hiding true feelings and weaknesses keeps poor white women safe as well. For, let us not forget, that if poor white men have it hard, poor white women do not have it any easier. A young woman, victim of physical violence, Allison had to hide her feelings from the man 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. (*Trash* 34)

Storytelling constitutes another poor white trait that Allison adopts at the start of her literary career. Through listening to others tell stories, Allison acquired knowledge of life and for life, which in turn inspired her to do her own writing/storytelling. For Allison, storytelling somehow parallels gospel music, especially as the characters become narrators,⁷ "like choruses that repeat... and essentially they repeat each other's stories to a certain extent. Just different versions" (Megan 74).

A taste for gospel singing is another identifiable trait of the working-class that Allison is proud to possess. A practice passed on from generation to generation, gospel singing is intrinsic to the south and, within it, to the poorest rural classes. Rooted in the tradition of seeking individualism against the British Empire during the pre-revolutionary times, poor rural southerners and mountaineers

⁶ Kudzu, also known as Japanese arrowroot, is native to Eastern Asia, Southeast Asia and some Pacific islands. First introduced in the States as an ornamental bush at the Philadelphia Continental Exposition in 1876, the plant has various uses for farming and cattle breeding. What was not expected was its tough and resilient nature. Once it latches on to a host tree, it grows quickly and rapidly, stifling the host by covering it completely and killing it by sunlight deprivation. Kudzu has invaded the majority of North America forestry, and is commonly found along the motorways in the southeast of the US.

⁷ Such is the case in her collection of short stories *Trash* (1988), and her two novels *A Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998).

crafted a religious music of their own.⁸ These common folk rejected the lyrics of hymns from established churches and, in time, composed hymns whose lyrics reflected values and beliefs exclusively theirs. In this day and age, a sector of the poor white population still relies heavily on religious music as a realistic attempt to deal with their isolation and powerlessness. The practice of gospel singing by rural poor whites in the south of the US is a tradition that allows them to have a sense of belonging, a sense of community (Flynt 32). Allison acknowledges going to the Baptist Church services as part of her southern poor white upbringing; her passion for gospel music is such that it is reflected in her stories. The following passage belongs to one of her short stories, “Gospel Song,” published in *Trash* (1988):

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)

Though Dorothy Allison feels closely related to some of the inherited traits of the poor whites’ stigma, she disassociates herself from others. Indeed, as a writer who has broken free from the myth of white trash, Allison cannot help but feel differently in some aspects of ‘everyday poor white living.’ As Wayne Flynt notes, the most negative stereotype of southern poor white subculture has been centered on race.⁹ Having lived among people who, though poor, they thought themselves superior for being ‘white,’ Allison’s expresses her disgust for racist beliefs. In “Gospel Song,” the narrator tries to talk Shannon Pearl (from the Pearl family, gospel event organizers in town) into asking her dad to hire some gospel singers whose music she thought was the sweetest. This is Shannon’s response to Allison’s plea:

⁸ For more information on religious music in poor white culture see J. Wayne Flynt’s *Dixie’s Forgotten People* (2004), chapter 2, “Dogtrots and Jack Tales.”

⁹ Flynt explains: “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” (Flynt 117).

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.' (*Trash* 60)

Shannon's response could not have been more racist; as a result, the narrator cannot hide her stupor, "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 her girl character/narrator. A message present in her life since she went off to college.

As a person who holds an ambivalent stance towards the stigma of poor whites, Allison has a distinct perspective on the use of agency. While other underprivileged groups have been cognizant of their oppression and have done something about it,¹⁰ poor whites do not seem to have grasped the gravity of their situation, or if they have, they are yet to do something about it. 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; yet it begs the question as to how Dorothy Allison was capable of exerting agency while fighting against all stigmatypes and stereotypes. As the writer explains, education is everything in a person's life, and it is education what poor whites, and more specifically women, still lack. Thanks to her mother,¹¹ Allison became an avid reader early in life, getting to love reading about people and places. Such passion paved the way for her to get a real education outside of her family environment. Being the recipient of a National Merit Scholar award, at the age of eighteen, Allison enrolls in Florida Presbyterian College (now Eckerd College).

The second objective of Allison's writing directly concerns Allison's lived experience: as Alexis Jetter explains, Allison is also writing to save herself, "for Allison's stepfather, who raped her from

¹⁰ For instance, African Americans fought against oppression and for the building of an identity of their own.

¹¹ Allison has always talked about her mother's enthusiasm for reading and her help to get Allison out to college (*Conversations with Dorothy Allison*, 2012).

the time she was five, left her with an enduring sense of shame” (Jetter 73). Despite having distanced herself from her stepfather’s mistreatment, years of sexual and physical abuse did take a toll on Allison. Hers was a situation more aggravated by the fact that she was raised in a poor, hopeless and violent environment. Yet, once she managed to break free from such a toxic environment, Allison experienced an overwhelming feeling of guilt unfolding on two different planes: first as a survivor of trauma, who would eventually be able to come to terms with what her father had done to her; and secondly, as a member of a higher class, the upper-middle class, resulting in having crossed over to the enemy’s line. For Allison felt she had betrayed her people upon acquiring status and recognition in the world of the mainstream whites.

As a survivor of trauma, Allison had to withstand the horrors of both living with her rapist and keeping quiet about her abuse. 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. It is shame what prevents survivors from speaking out. Shame is an attack on the survivor as a person (‘I am a bad person because this happened to me’). It is the feeling one gets that others may think poorly of them because they were assaulted. Shame is more harmful and longer lasting to recover from than guilt. 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. ‘Writing it all out,’ for Allison, has been the best defense mechanism. For her, writing became an act of resistance; only in that way could Allison control how the story [of her identity-building process] would end (Jetter 73). Writing, however, can also be a way to become conscious of brutality and fear needed to be unlearned (78). Either way, writing serves for Allison as a strategy to cope with her traumatic past. As a result, guilt and shame are fought against by writing down memories of past stories, people’s failures and accomplishments.

Regarding Allison’s crossing over to the enemy’s line, Allison’s guilt surfaces upon reaching a higher economic status on account of her success as a writer. Guilt resembles, for instance, that of survivors of fatal accidents who blame themselves for having been the ones to come out alive. In such a scenario, the survivor always questions their existence, their being there. Writing also means for Allison a therapeutic mechanism to cope with guilt.

On the whole, Allison's writing saved her life as it kept her going, propelled by the notions of not only saving her people by displaying their humanness with virtues and flaws, but also freeing herself of the violence, hopelessness and despair she suffered. Yet Allison perceives her successful writing career as an act of treason towards her kind. The bottom line is that writing has granted Allison a purpose in life by helping her tear down misrepresentations of her class and granting her atonement for her survivor's guilt. 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 the moment she started putting in writing the story of her life and her people's.

4. ALLISON'S LITERARY WORK: A LOOK AT POOR WHITES' IDENTITY-BUILDING

In the long run, Allison's acceptance of her poor white or white trash origins as part of her identity-building process did not happen overnight, but rather over a period of years. Although her writing aims to oppose and resist social misconstructions of poor whites while freeing herself of her guilt for becoming middle-class, Allison does not disassociate from her poor white origins; on the contrary, she will ultimately embrace all aspects of her subjectivity in order to grow as a southern poor white lesbian writer.¹² Allison's first piece is a collection of poems entitled *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983). Such a collection originated as a reaction to the events of the Barnard Sex conference in 1982 in which a group of women (mostly women 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. *The Women Who Hate Me* consist of 27 poems written between 1981 and 1982. The series signifies Allison's resistance to a deliberate misconception of her artistic persona while demystifying lesbian romanticism by 'telling it like it is.' Despite the fact that the collection denotes identity growth upon the poetic persona reaching acceptance of the

¹² Indeed, Allison's identity building process has reached a stage of not only acceptance but also self-satisfaction for being a femme lesbian of poor white origins, preoccupied by the same tasks and problems as anybody else in society (Anderson 98-99).

self, few scholars can deny that rage, anger and resentment may be underlying factors in the writing of this poetry; on the other hand, the poems are saturated with extreme nostalgic tenderness. To illustrate the point, the opening poem to the series, “dumpling girl”, proves ideal as the introduction to the series:

“dumpling girl”
 A southern dumpling child
 biscuit eater, tea sipper
 okra slicer, gravy dipper,
 I fry my potatoes with onions
 stew my greens with pork

And ride my lover high up
 on the butterfat shine of her thighs
 where her belly arches and sweetly tastes
 of rock salt on watermelon
 sunshine sharp teeth bite light
 and lick slow like mama’s
 favorite dumpling child. (*The Women Who Hate Me* 9)

Setting the stage, “dumpling child” immediately pulls the reader into the culture of the ‘Deep South.’ The use of food idiolect denotes preference for intrinsically southern foods. The first stanza claims ownership of traditionally southern practices such as eating biscuits, sipping tea and preparing quintessentially southern meals as are stewed okra, potatoes with gravy and turnip greens. Once the origins of the poetic persona have been well established, her sexual preferences and practices are quick to follow. The second stanza lets the reader visualize a carefully orchestrated dance between two females feasting in the pleasures craved by an appetite for both, sex and food. Indeed, very little is left to the imagination upon revealing the gender of Allison’s lover (‘her’), while the mix of different kinds of pleasure (sex and eating) comes across as ecstatic, erotic and self-indulging. Lines such as “I ride my lover high up,” or “where her belly arches and sweetly tastes,” resonate intense pleasure of whatever kind. The last two lines of the poem (“and lick slow like mama’s favorite dumpling child”), though not straying from the sexual theme, go back to the southern childhood memories with which the poem started. Not so much composed with rage as with brutal honesty, “dumpling child” speaks against discrimination, social slandering and intolerance. In a nutshell, this introductory poem reveals

Allison's intentionality to stand by her identity and the identity of her kin; in other words, she discloses herself as a female lesbian from the South, of poor white origins. Yet, in these lines, there is no regret; no feeling of guilt or remorse, just acceptance and joy.

Dorothy Allison's second literary work comes to us in the form of a collection of short stories dealing mainly with her poor white origins. *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 fifteen short stories, *Trash* 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.

Trash is also a means for Allison to communicate with her mother, the figure of authority in her life, the one who held the power to break away from her husband's abuse to protect her daughter. Paradoxically, Allison's mother is also the very same person who, in the end, did not, could not, or would not do anything to stop her husband's physical and sexual abuse on Allison, the child. There was not a way for Allison to speak with her mother about such terrible things at the time. As a result, years later, she still needed to communicate her feelings of anger to her. The best way she knew how to do so was 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" (Dietzel 44). Among those stories intrinsically connected to her mother, "Mama" deserves especial attention. Written when the author was in her twenties, the story reveals itself as a closed structured narrative in which the protagonist, a young woman away from home, reminisces her childhood years. It is on her stepfather's birthday that our storyteller begins the tale. Both her sister and she have picked such a date not to honor their stepfather, who always mistreated the girls, but to remember her mother:

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 details. 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* 30)

The description of the narrator's mother in the text defies social stereotypes built around poor white women: first, this 'white trash' woman seems to conduct an orderly life in which cleanliness and routines are part of the daily chores; second, her extraordinary physical features do not signal sickness or depravity; on the contrary, they speak of strength and endurance, attributes that have been passed on to her daughters. This woman's strong bones and her toughness are made for survival and survival is as well a common denominator to all women in this family. The narrative has managed to demystify socially misconstrued notions about the poor by pointing the way to self-worth and family pride. As the story evolves, the narrative relates moments of intimacy between the child narrator and mother that translate into times of reassurance, sense of belonging and family lineage written with immense love and tenderness. As the protagonist performs the ritual of gently rubbing her mother's hands and feet, she shares her thoughts directed to her mother with us, readers,¹³ "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" (*Trash* 30).

Shortly after the publication of her first novel *Bastard Out of South Carolina* (1992), Allison put together a series of essays and a short memoir. Her collection of essays, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (1994), henceforth *Skin*, was born out of the need to continue to be an activist. 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 shines light on to social stigmas ranging from myths and legends about poor whites to mainstream white misconceptions on sexual lifestyles such as femme-but

¹³ This passage is reminiscent of Allison's own life, for her mother never had time for moments of intimacy with her. It is in this fashion that writing out moments of intimacy that never happened becomes for Allison another vehicle of communicating with her mother.

relationships still considered, by some, as taboos. "Context," introduces *Skin* by directly exposing 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 by her own lover for belonging to a lower class, the 'other,' a class respectable whites do not associate with:

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 essay, Allison incites the reader to open their eyes to the fact that mainstream society still is in urgent need for further clarification on the nature of the 'other,' understood as 'different.' "Context" sets, therefore, the stage to bring to the table, via the discursive text, topics, issues, and social stigmas including but not limited to class, race, gender and sexual orientation. What follows "Context" is a series of essays giving out detailed descriptions, theories and beliefs on the complicated and contradictory notion of being different.

Allison's essays deal with a vast array of preconceived myths around poor whites, poor white women and poor white lesbians, such as those of being disease-ridden, violent, sexually perverse, inbred and homosexually deviant, to name some. The collection is insightful as it proves a direct source of information on which to draw upon analyzing Allison's literary work.

Two or Three Things I Know For Sure (1995), henceforth *Two or Three*, comes to us three years after the publication of Allison's first novel *Bastard Out Of Carolina* (1992). The fact that Allison decided to publish the story of her life and her people's some time after having disclosed many aspects of such in her novel has awakened the curiosity of many. Timothy Dow Adams wonders why Allison decided on a memoir for her purpose. To him, memoirs are somewhat placed in a no man's land, somewhere between reality and what the narrator/protagonist perceives of it (Adams 84). Allison's memoir, however, relies heavily on storytelling, a style she feels comfortable with. She explains:

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 Things I Know For Sure* 3)

Because 'the story becomes the thing needed,' such a combination of memoir style and storytelling narrative, as Adams states, "employs a kind of believe-it-or-not technique conducive to exaggerating and/or inventing" (Adams 85), challenging the reader to 'suspend their disbelief' and rely on her writing. Composed of ten sections, each ending in a reflection upon lessons learned, *Two or Three* neatly flows to cover from the author's birth to her years of young adulthood. It represents a learning process as is life itself. In such sections, tales concatenate to project a lifetime of social displacement, contempt, shame and violence, gender discrimination from within, beauty and love. Tales of women in Allison's family seem to be the central point during the author's early years. We learn about the author's wishes to leave such a toxic environment where her stepfather would subject her to beatings without rhyme or 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 do away with "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). Allison's sisters and cousins become mothers themselves, wrapped up in their own world of endurance and survival.

The presence of family photographs in *Two or Three* reinforces the idea of faded identities in Allison's world, the poor white trash, only to come up stronger and clearer by the end of the memoir. Faded faces suggest invisibility, oblivion and marginality, the consequences of being white trash. Conversely, the sole presence of these old pictures provokes the need to tell, to construct stories around those characters, on the path to rebuilding their lives and their identities. Katherine Henninger states:

... it is the inclusion of photographs from Allison's family collection, particularly of women, that makes the text's 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 façades (representations, stories) simultaneously to permit and to deny access to the "truth." (Henninger 95)

Two or Three calls our attention to pictures of marginalized men and women in their best attire, attending special family celebrations, enjoying their life as best they can to reflect perhaps the hidden 'truth' about Allison's people. The author's intentionality behind such a display is to show the ambivalence, fluidity and blurring of highly stigmatized social representations. By incorporating family pictures into the narrative, Allison succeeds in drawing the mainstream public closer to the white trash stigma, a strategy needed to reveal both collective and individual identity. On the subject of individual identity, Allison's memoir also represents a learning process through life. A reflection upon the events narrated can be found at the end of each section. As a result, Allison leads us through her own conclusions on the road to subjectivity formation; listed are hereby some of the 'lessons learned' Allison acquires at the end of each section: "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" (*Two or Three* 12); "change, when it comes, cracks everything open" (48); "if we are not beautiful to each other, we cannot know beauty in any form" (86); "telling a story all the way through is an act of love" (90);). Allison's conclusions resemble a 'decatalogue' of maxims to self-acceptance in hopes of constructing an identity unique to the self. From the stigma of the poor white collective, such reflections extend towards the singular self.

Dorothy Allison has also explored the stigma of poor whites, collectively and individually, through long fiction writing. Her novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998) showcase her ability to instill empathy and relatedness in the reader while pointing to the multiple aspects behind her characters' social junctures. In addition, Allison's narrative sustains itself, once again, by storytelling. The novels are a continuum of events narrated, at times in first person voice while, at others, in third. Her approach, therefore, moves back and forth between that of an observer, the

outsider, to that of a person who experiences the stigma 'in the flesh.' This negotiating between public identity (what others think of us) and individual identity (what we think of ourselves) allows Allison to speak with propriety and depth about topics and issues otherwise undisclosed, thus building an intimate relationship between reader and writer. In addition, the novel's narrative provides a form of dealing with and accepting the whole self. Lastly, Allison's style, crude and direct yet lyrical and tender, thrives to touch the reader's mind as well as their empathy towards the underprivileged.

Bastard Out of Carolina, henceforth *Bastard*, was born out of grief, the next step on the way to healing. The novel was finalist for the 1992 National Book Award, won the Ferro-Grumley Prize, and an ALA¹⁴ Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing; it also became a best seller and an award-winning film.¹⁵ *Bastard* presents, exposes, denounces and resists numerous and varied myths around white trash identity. Among them, the feelings of invisibility and shame as well as the idea of abandonment are worth noting. Considered by the critics as semi-autobiographical, the novel is the story of Bone, Ruth Anne Boatwright, a poor white child, from the moment she is born until she becomes a preadolescent. The narrative opens up with the child protagonist's tale about her own birth. Bone's arrival into this world already carries the seal of the poor whites' stigma: born to an unwed poor white teenage girl, who, victim of a car accident, was unconscious at the time, Bone's birth certificate will be stamped with the word 'illegitimate', signifying, literally, of 'unknown father' and, figuratively, of 'unknown mother'. Bone is deemed 'invisible' in the eyes of the authorities as not even her mother was there at the time of her birth.¹⁶ The text reads: "Of course, she [Bone's mother] didn't wake up for three days, not till after Granny and Aunt Ruth had signed all papers and picked out my name" (*Bastard*, 2). Invisibility brings forth the notion of poor white trash by twofold: first, not having a father to attest paternity, the protagonist is not being given social recognition and, therefore, she is left out of her own community as if non-existing; secondly, because it has been made official that Bone is illegitimate, Bone's mother is defined as white trash for it is this type that would give birth out of wedlock. Being

¹⁴ American Library Association

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.dorothyallison.net/>

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, Anney, Bone's mother, was not present at the time of birth; she was unconscious.

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 (Bone's mother) to the image of an inanimate object such as a rock reinforces the idea of invisibility and worthlessness by which white trash are known. However, Anney would not give up on reclaiming her identity and Bone's that easily. She tries to get her daughter's identity back, but her frequent visits to the court house only afforded her the same birth certificate with a stamp across it "in oversized red-inked block letters reading 'illegitimate'" (4). On each of her visits, the clerk would produce the same piece of paper; and on each visit, Anney would feel the humiliation and shame of being labeled white trash, a category she does not identify with. It will be years until Anney is finally able to reclaim Bone's and her identity.

Invisibility and shame only take a turn for the worse when Glen comes into the picture. Glen Waddle will become Anney's husband and Bone's stepfather. He belongs to a middle-class family who think themselves superior to the Boatwrights. The young narrator in the story knows it:

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.' To make matters worse, Glen has been a disappointment to his own family as he is the one who married 'down' and lacks the means to accumulate wealth like his brothers. Glen's position within his family became invisible the moment he chose to marry Anney Boatwright. Glen's low self-worth translates into resentment against the Boatwright men who, despite their poor economic status, tend to protect and care for all of the women and children in their family. This constant class struggle between the Waddles and the Boatwrights represents a microcosm of a much bigger picture. Referring to the friction separating both families in Allison's narrative, Nancy Isenberg's comment is elucidating:

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. (Isenberg 295)

Bastard's narrative is a reflection of the social stigmatization that white trash are subjected to in real life, for it is shameful to be white and poor. In the fictional reality of the novel, Glen's resentment does not stop at the Boatwright men, but it extends to Bone who, in his mind, is the quintessential symbol of white trash. Bone is the 'bastard' of his family, a constant reminder of his failure. His hatred for Bone, the lower class, will quickly materialize into, first, sexual and, later, physical abuse. Bone will be the target of Glen's rage against the stereotype of white trash. As the course of events unfolds, Bone manages to break away from Glen's hatred, losing her mother to him, however: Anney will abandon Bone and leave town with Glenn to start anew in California. Nancy Isenberg's interpretation of *Bastard's* ending seems to address the sad reality poor white women face: for a woman, a solution out of poverty and social stigmatization seems almost unfathomable:

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. (Isenberg 296)

The fact that Bone's mother goes back to the man who sexually and physically abused her first born indicates that invisibility and shame are conditioned upon not only class, but also gender; that many poor whites, the majority of them women, "remain trapped in the poverty they are born" (Isenberg 296); and that, for some, it is extremely hard to break off the cycle of poverty and abuse. The novel's ending is hopeful as Anney is given the opportunity to show her love for Bone. Already in the middle chapters of the novel, Anney entrusts her sister, Raylene, with the care and nurturing of her daughter. Raylene, then, would pass onto to Bone, Anney's motherly love. Anney's ultimate act of love is found in the final chapter when Anney pays her daughter one last visit. The envelope Anney drops on Bone's lap contains a document that is "blank, unmarked, unstamped" (*Bastard* 309). No indelible sign of having been born a bastard now stands between Bone and her future. *Bastard* is the story through which Allison wanted to convey that while social categories such as 'white trash' could make people feel invisible, ashamed and hateful, such people are not in any way, shape, or form what they are perceived to be. 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).

Cavedweller saw the light of day in 1998 and has been so far the second and last novel written by Dorothy Allison.¹⁷ As with *Bastard*, this 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. It has been taken to the stage, adapted by Kate Moira Ryan and to the big screen, directed by

¹⁷ A third novel, *She Who*, is forthcoming.

Lisa Cholendenko.¹⁸ *Cavedweller* centers on the story of a mother who, having left her two daughters behind in the South, decides to return in order to start anew. Delia brings Cissy, her daughter born in California, along with her to a community that despises her for abandoning her children. *Cavedweller* also represents a return to conflicts and issues already addressed. It brings to the table some exact themes dealt with in *Bastard* while expanding and elaborating on others. The abandonment with which we were left at the outcome of Allison's first novel will also be present in her second. Love returns to this novel as well. It is Delia's longing for her lost girls what prompts her to come back to her birthplace; it is her desire to build a safe place for all of them what keeps her motivated. In Delia, the sense of belonging and safety is an in-between feeling difficult to apprehend. 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 process of self-identification; unlike Bone, however, Cissy will rebel, analyze and negotiate with the idea of white trash from a dual perspective, absent in *Bastard*. Being born in California offers Cissy a unique image of the world, a world in which she will act as the outsider/insider agent in the discovery of her own identity and the identity of others. It only takes the young protagonist a few days after she has been forced to move to Cayro to realize that her newly inflicted 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" (*Cavedweller* 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, first, come to terms with her condition of white trash while, second, opposing and objecting to the stigma. Next, Cissy will resist the myth to, lastly, abandon the stereotype to become her own self. Such process of self-identification takes place throughout the story as Cissy starts to interact with the community of Cayro.

Cissy's first reaction to being associated with the stereotype of white trash is that of disbelief and anger towards her mother who, ultimately, is to blame for her position. At home, Cissy decides not to

¹⁸ Source: <http://www.dorothyallison.net/>

have any part of her new southern family, but instead she shows indifference towards her mother and stepsisters; at school, Cissy is the subject of gossip and rumors, "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" (*Cavedweller* 60). Her strength and determination, triggered by the hatred she professed for anything identifying her with white trash, places her, in her eyes, on a higher plane than that of the inhabitants of Cayro. The irony of this resides in the fact that, pages later, the young protagonist will realize that white trash is a stigma built around those considered socially inferior. Cissy's attitude towards white trash will start to change as Cissy volunteers to care for Clint, Delia's sick ex-husband. Spending so many afternoons taking care of bed-ridden Clint, about to die of cancer, creates a strong bond between the two. Remembering back to the days Clint exerted control over his wife, he confesses to Cissy that Delia was right to leave him (179). As Clint breaks the silence of his actions, Cissy becomes more skeptical of the term white trash, for she can see that Clint is not the cruel, violent and physically abusive white trash husband she thought he would be. Nevertheless, on her end, Cissy fights against the myth of white trash by positing resistance to the idea of 'dirt.' Dirt means polluted, not cleaned. It does not come as a surprise that Cissy, then, 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:

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)

In the familiar place of the laundry room inside the unfamiliar home, Cissy questions her own identity by comparing herself to those around her, "Between them all, who was Cissy?" (283). In the midst of her identity searching, Cissy takes up a new hobby, cave exploring. Intrigued by her friend Nolan's passion for spelunking, Cissy embarks herself on adventurous trips into the caves of Paula's Lost and Little Mouth. Visiting the caves allows Cissy's subjectivity to grow. On a metaphorical level, the caves guide Cissy towards the

construction of the whole self; they become central in Cissy's last stage to identity reconstruction. Caving helps Cissy understand not only herself but also those around her. This process of self-understanding and understanding others is both confusing and necessary: the caves Cissy visits are made of a series of tunnels intersecting with each other to eventually become one. Figuratively, the caves mimic the twists and turns one encounters on the road to knowing oneself. The image of the cave serves Allison as a device to point out that categories of origin, class, gender, sexuality, and others intertwine and intersect in order to piece together one's subjectivity. It is this introspect view of ourselves and others what leads us to a reflection on the different categories that hold us down. For Allison, *Cavedweller* is a written effort to arrive to understanding and reconciliation from the inside. In her 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 2002, Allison published an expanded edition of her short story collection *Trash* to include a new story entitled "Compassion." In it, healing from physical, emotional and psychological trauma has already taken place. Though the author has not published anything since 2002, surviving and healing for the author seem to have reached the point of completion. Allison has come to grips with the notion of forgiveness as part of an ongoing healing process to acceptance:

There is this notion that forgiveness is something that happens, that it's a discrete event. And one of the things I've become clear about is that it's not. Forgiveness is something where you get up every day and you set out on this path again [...] I'm still working on forgiving myself. For not dying" (Ulin 96).

Now, thirty something years into the process of working towards reconciliation, resolution, healing and acceptance, Allison admits to be changing as a writer and it seems a little scary to her. She sees change as a welcome, fundamental even, necessary part to the story she now wants to tell (Ulin 97).

5. ONE FINAL THOUGHT

As Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray have stated:

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... (Newitz and Wray 4)

Allison's writing speaks of those hybrid and multiple identities, inviting her readership to reflect on the social conditions to which the poor whites, working-class or underclass are subjected. Dorothy Allison belongs to a generation of writers that have taken upon themselves to make us aware of existing conflicts between race and class, among others; categories with no boundaries when it comes to social stereotyping. A member of a generation of writers born white and working class,¹⁹ Allison brings to the table the white trash juncture to awaken social conscience in the general public. Her literary career constitutes more than a mere denouncement of the underprivileged. It questions the stigma and looks for answers; it deconstructs the myth by reconstructing both collective and individual identities; and it demarks the different steps for identity discovery. The author concentrates her efforts on drawing out an in-depth analysis of the stigma of poor whites (white trash), asking questions such as why and how poor whites came to be. In so doing, Allison's literary work embraces some of the socially stigmatized traits affixed to the poor whites' culture while straying away from others. Her poetry, short stories, essays, memoir and novels are saturated with images of short-lived and self-destructive characters who reveal themselves as storytellers while facing up to life's problems with dignity and resilience. On the other hand, Dorothy Allison does not hesitate to put in writing her disagreement with other aspects of the poor whites' tradition, such as racism and illiteracy which she so adamantly fights against by allowing her characters to have a different view on the subject. Her straightforward writing style as well as her literary tenderness aim to

¹⁹ The generation writing about and for the poor whites or white trash, in my opinion.

break down small categories in order to offer the notion of real people and not caricatures (Dietzel 44).²⁰ Offering such a human depiction of poor whites, one must conclude, affords Allison to place all of us, understood as different and diverse social categories, groups or classes, on one level from which to comprehend the complexities of lived experiences of not only the collective but also the individual's, thus making her writing all the more appealing to the inquisitive scholar.

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²⁰ Allison stays away from flat stereotyped characters, such as whores, drunks and people who kill each other.

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