

**REPRESENTATION OF WHITE TRASH SUBCULTURE IN THE  
WORKS OF DOROTHY ALLISON**

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**Representation of White Trash Subculture in the Works of Dorothy Allison**

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*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements*

*for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.*

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Representation of White Trash Subculture in the Works of Dorothy Allison” written by Vanlaltanpuii has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down under the Ph.D regulations of Mizoram University. The thesis is the result of her own investigations. Neither the thesis as a whole or any part of it was never submitted to any other University for any research degree.



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**DECLARATION**

I, Vanlaltanpuii, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the content of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institute.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Dorothy Allison is an American writer who claims to be a feminist and working-class storyteller. She has also made her mark as a speaker who openly discusses issues of gender, class, violence, and sexual orientation. In an introductory piece to a collection of short stories, Allison briefly traces her background and asserts:

The central fact of my life is that 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 the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she birthed me... My family's lives were not on television, not in books, not even comic books. There was a myth of the poor in this country, but it did not include us, no matter how I tried to squeeze us in. There was this concept of the "good" poor... hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. We were the bad poor. We were men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became 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. My cousins quit school, stole car, used drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables. I worked after school in a job provided by Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, stole books I could not afford. We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight for or struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and those who did try to escape failed (Allison *Trash* viii).

When her mother remarried, Allison had just turned five, and the union marks the beginning of the author's nightmare realm. Her stepfather was a salesman, who struggled financially and otherwise. Apart from the economic strife that hit the family hard, Allison's



stepfather was violent and abusive towards her. Allison was only five when her stepfather sexually abused her, she dilates on the incident in her memoir:

The man raped me. It's the truth. It's a fact.

I was five, and he was eight months married to my mother. That's how I always began to talk about it – when I finally did talk about it. I'd say, "It was rape, the rape of a child." Then I'd march the words out – all the old tearing awful word.

For years, every time I said it, said "rape" and "child" in the same terrible sentence, I would feel the muscles of my back and neck pull as taut as the string of a kite straining against the wind...I started saying those words to get to that release, that feeling of letting go, of setting loose both the hatred and fear. The need to tell my story was terrible and persistent, and I needed to say it bluntly and cruelly, to use all those words, those old awful tearing words (*Two or Three* 39-42).

After six years of silence, Allison opened up about the abuse to a close relative. The revelation did not serve as an exit from the traumatic ordeal. Unfortunately, Allison's mother reunited with her stepfather when he vowed he would stop the abuse. The stepfather's vows were empty in that the abuse and molestation continued through the next two years, however Allison who was thirteen by this time managed to redirect and discourage his inappropriate advances.

The whole family re-located to Florida where Allison found acceptance from her schoolmates and teachers, in the sense that, she was recognized for her intellect which somehow overshadowed her "white trash" background. She, therefore, observes, "because they did not see poverty and hopelessness as a foregone conclusion for my life, I could begin to

imagine other futures for myself” (Allison, *Skin* 13). She procured a scholarship to Florida Presbyterian College, which promised her an alternative future.

Since early adolescence, Allison was fully aware of her attraction to women, she participated in the women’s movement during college, and lived amongst the queer community. By 1971, Allison graduated and worked all kinds of jobs for sustenance. As an activist she continued to volunteer at a feminist magazine, and center for victims of rape amidst taking up other odd jobs. Allison procured a master’s degree in anthology, and diligently pursued her writing career, she wrote and edited for early feminist, lesbian, and gay journals including *Quest*, *Conditions*, and *Outlook*. She was a founding member of the “Lesbian Sex Mafia” a group which aids and supports the LGBTQ community.

In his article, Eric Bledsoe discusses changes in the treatment of white lower-class characters, which began with Harry Crews and continued through the fiction of Dorothy Allison, Tim Mc Laurin, and Larry Brown. He further asserts that white lower-class characters had long appeared in Southern fiction without receiving realistic treatment for their creators belonged to the middle or upper classes and were only able to look at them from the outside. Crews, Allison, McLaurin, and Brown write about life from the perspective of the poor white. Crews and his disciples write from within the class and force readers to re-examine long held stereotypes and beliefs and challenge the literary role traditionally assigned white trash. These so called “Rough South” writers, a term originated by documentary filmmaker Gary Hawkings, invariably present white trash with realistic detail and forthright empathy. These “Rough South” writers are therefore instrumental in bringing the lives of poor white trash to the forefront. As early as the 1700s, the lives of poor white trash have been documented in literature without receiving serious treatment which is most clearly typified in the comical portrayal of August Longstreet Baldwin’s *Ransy Sniffle*. They have graced the peripheries of literature from the South for many decades, without ever receiving realistic treatment in the

hands of their creators. With Crews and his disciples a new genre came into light which focused primarily on the life the poor white underclass. This new genre referred to as “Grit Lit” primarily associates itself with a Southern rural background, comprising of poor white characters belonging to the working-class, it documents the life of white trash without romanticism or false nostalgia.

Allison published a collection of poems titled *The Women Who Hate Me* in 1983. The collection honoured and dissected her sexuality, and her working-class background. The publication of *Trash* secured two Lambda Awards in 1988. She claims that *Trash* is “the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope, who has made the decision to live” (Allison, *Trash* 7). Around the same time that Allison explored her Southern working-class background through literature, she reconnected with her mother and sisters. Allison as a young adult had distanced herself from her family, but eventually came back to her roots and re-established ties with her family. Allison established a mainstream reading audience with *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), the critically acclaimed novel secured her position as a bestseller and was a finalist for the “National Book Award”. Allison’s first novel *Bastard*, presents an affectionate yet unsentimental and amusing depiction of a girl belonging to the infamous white trash subculture. Apart from her reality as a member of a marginalized group of poor whites, she is a victim of incest and sexual abuse, which began at the tender age of five. The stepfather and perpetrator, however, denies the abuse till date.

In 1994 Allison released a collection of essays titled, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*. The collection won the – “American Library Association’s Gay & Lesbian Book Award”. The following year, the *New York Times Book Review* considered her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995) as a notable book. Her second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998), reverts to themes of poverty, violence, familial ties, liberation, and

redemption. Allison has made her mark as a renowned member of the *Fellowship of Southern Writers* and former board member of *Feminists for Academic Freedom*. She is deeply influenced by fellow “Rough South” writers such as James Baldwin, and Flannery O’Conner, and feminist activist writers such as Audre Lorde, and Jewel Gomez.

Founded by Dorothy Allison in 1998, *The Independent Spirit Award*, administered by the “Astraea Foundation” is an annual accolade awarded to individual writers who are instrumental in sustaining small presses and independent bookstores. She won the “Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction” in 2007. Allison resides in the San Francisco with her partner of many years, Alix Layman, and son, Wolf Michael. She continues to maintain a busy speaking schedule as a feminist activist and as a writer. She served as a Distinguished Visiting Professor in Emory University Center for Humanistic Inquiry.

This thesis examines the representation of white trash subculture in selected texts of Dorothy Allison. “White trash” is a derogatory term which refers to poor white people in America, especially in the rural South, suggestive of lower social class and low living standards. The term, references a marginalized group of subordinate whites perceived by the elite whites as victims of laziness and immorality and, as Matthew Wray puts it, “stigmatized, dishonored and despised identity” (Hill 170). The phrase “poor whites” is said to have become part of the American vernacular since the 1700s and has a revelatory history, having shifted over the years from “poor whites” to “poor white trash” to merely “white trash.” The romanticized story of the “Old South” or the antebellum South and its plantation legend with aristocratic planters, southern belles, faithful household slaves and, fieldhands, also contains the image of poor white trash- an ever present yet insignificant figure. This is most famously typified in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. The Slattery family identified as white

trash are an ever present although virtually invisible, accepted yet insignificant pieces in the scene of Tara.

The question of representation is very relevant in the present time and the concept of representational control has been integral to the critique of culture since W.E.B. Dubois. Dubois was specifically concerned with representations of race: “The whites obviously seldom picture brown and yellow folk, but for five hundred centuries they have exhausted every ingenuity of trick, of ridicule and caricature on black folk” (59-60). The disenfranchised on seeing these representations, become ashamed of their own image. Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies give due importance to the control of representation, and exposing that control is their chief concern. Allison’s representation of white trash in both her fiction and non-fiction exposes the control of representation, which simply means that the image of white trash has been constructed over time through literary texts and media representation. However, Allison herself has exercised the power to represent white trash for the sole reason that she herself identifies and belongs to this subculture. In doing so, she enriches the field of Whiteness Studies, revealing that social categorization is artificial, unfair, and unnecessary. Whiteness Studies is an area of academic enquiry, proponents of this arena describe it as the historical, cultural, and sociological aspect of individuals identified as white. It also examines the social construction of whiteness as an ideology that is closely linked to social status. Gregory Jay is one scholar who believes that the way people tend to discuss issues related to race makes “whiteness” invisible. White identity necessarily defines itself against a “colored” presence. The irony lies on the fact that white Americans can only define themselves when they are compared to something they are not. This simply translates that whiteness depends on blackness for its very definition. Gregory Jay mentions in his speech that:

Whiteness, then, emerged as what we now call a “pan- ethnic” category, as a way of merging a variety of European ethnic populations into a single “race,”

especially so as to distinguish them from people with whom they had very particular legal and political relations—Africans, Asians, American Indians – that were not equal to their relations with one another as whites (Yagelski 99-100).

Whiteness studies takes on the historical development and contemporary nature of white skin privilege as its subject. However, whiteness scholars struggle when the word “white” is followed by “trash”. If the term “white trash” reflected one’s economic or racial status, then it would most likely be interchangeable with the term “poor white”. Having said that, white trash also references cultural stereotypes of laziness, degeneracy, lewdness, criminal behaviour, and a plethora of negative images that contradict the very essence of whiteness. With the history of whiteness as a mark of privilege and social status, white trash merely classifies as a subset of whiteness and fails to meet the primary racial classification. This separation of white trash from dominant notions of whiteness is crucial to discussions of racial categories. Acknowledging distinctions – economic or cultural within whiteness serves to “destabilize and undermine any unified or essentialized notion of white identity as the primary locus of social privilege and power” (Hill 169). If the definition of whiteness depends on generalized parameters that classify all whites as advantaged, then, white trash culture and economic reality lies outside of whiteness or are different from other whites.

According to Nakayama and Krizek, many whites chose to deny any label for themselves, which works rhetorically as an excuse for privilege. Instead, it is quite a privilege to refuse a label because it demonstrates who has the power to apply those labels in the first place (Warren 193). However, they do not shy from using category judgements like “white trash” or “poor white trash”, or “okie” to maintain the positive image of the white ingroup and self esteem of its members. In keeping with the general understanding of whites as a racial group and the desire to understand the economic and social construction of whiteness, we see

economically driven internal white migrations, as important to the shaping of white identities. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, generations of white workers have left their families and communities in search of jobs and the promise of economic prosperity, and establishing new identities, communities, and families in far away regions and distant states.

As economic restructuring brought previously separate and distinct groups and communities into contact with one another, as southerners met northerners and new white immigrants met white ‘natives,’ new tensions and conflicts began to form. Out of these tensions new prejudices and new stereotypes arose. (Hill, 182)

White trash was one of the hateful terms given to those who seemed out of place, who seemed to pose a threat to the existing economic and social order.

This research also examines white trash as a subculture, drawing ideas and concepts from Stuart Hall who notes that since subcultures are sub-sets “there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the ‘parent’ culture” (Hall and Jefferson 7). Having said that, Stuart also claims:

Subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their ‘parent’ culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture. (ibid)

As Phil Cohen suggests, subculture is “a compromise solution, between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents...and the need to maintain ... the parental identifications which support them” (26).

Foucault's discourse on "crisis heterotopias" and "heterotopias of deviation" becomes extremely relevant on the subject of creating the Other space for white trash. Foucault gives the following description on the subject of heterotopias:

In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. For example, the boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form, or military service for young men, have certainly played such a role, as the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place "elsewhere" than at home. For girls, there was, until the middle of the twentieth century, a tradition called the "honeymoon trip" which was an ancestral theme. The young women's deflowering could take place "nowhere" and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers.

But these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons; one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation (24-25).



Allison's exploration of a regional space, that of the American South in the primary texts situates her in the tradition of American literary regionalism. American literary regionalism refers to fiction or verse that focuses on specific characteristics encompassing landscape, customs, characters, and history of a particular area or region.

American literary regionalism, as a genre, confines itself to a particular region or area, for regionalist writers the setting was central and not merely incidental – for instance Faulkner's Mississippi, Twain's Hannibal, Steinbeck's Salinas and so on. Authors in this tradition “focused on representing the unique locales of what they saw as a vanishing American past whose customs, dialect, and characters they sought to preserve” (Campbell 971).

Furthermore, as writers of a continuing national narrative implicitly focused on what it meant to be American, they often presented characters as types, sometimes as representatives of the collective traits of a community or region, and sometimes as outsiders or eccentrics whose attempts to fit into a community exposed both the community's values and their own (ibid).

Alongside the emphasis that is placed on setting, regionalist fiction also features dialect, which lends an element of authenticity to the tale. Regionalism has an element of “local color” in the sense that it has the quality and background exclusive of and specific to a particular region or place, and requires the voice and representation of a native. This type of fiction cannot be done from above or from the outside. The characteristics specific to American literary regionalism is evident in the writings of Dorothy Allison. In both her fiction and non-fiction Allison centers her stories in the locales of South Carolina and Georgia. As many critics have noted, regionalist literature defines itself as necessarily distinct from the whole, a literature of margins. Allison chooses as her subject the infamous marginalized social group referred to as white trash. The authenticity of her art lies in the fact that it contains the native

element, a trait specific to regionalism, since she herself belongs to this group. Representing a particular region, and a specific group of people with respect to landscape, customs, values, and dialect, rightly situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism.

The institution of slavery and its history has led to depictions of the American South as “a regional space in which a sense of place is paramount and whose ‘refusal to engage with the wider world and its concerns has locked it into a morbid past’” (ibid). Time and again, the South has been depicted as “insular and obsessed with its indigenous history and character”, and is “repeatedly derided for the incestuous nature of relations, be they family members or religious and political alliances” (ibid). Allison’s text perturbs and disconcerts the reader as it ventures into this region, and delves into intricate details regarding violence, loyalty, and love in a community of marginalized poor whites. With setting being a central element among regionalists, Allison does with Greenville, South Carolina what Faulkner does with Mississippi.

Because American literary regionalism has a rather broad connotation that implies a recognition from the colonial to the present of differences among specific areas in the country, Allison’s work may further be categorized as Grit Lit. Grit Lit has close associations with American literary regionalism in that it is confined to a particular region, that of the American south with explicit characteristic traits. The genre of Grit Lit focuses primarily on the American South – particularly that of the blue-collar Southerner. Grit Lit lacks clarity in terms of definition since it is a fairly new genre. “Grit Lit” is an amalgamation of “grit” – “the personality trait” (Jensen 4), and “literature.” An essay in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* defines “grit” as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals ...his or her advantage is stamina” (Duckworth1087). Jensen maintains that, “In 1988 three important voices published their first fiction: Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, and Tim Mc. Laurin” (4). Noted as

a pioneer writer in this genre, “Larry Brown has been lauded for his graphic, raw fiction about the rural South – stories featuring characters who are ordinary and poor, and struggling with such real-life issues as marital strife, alcoholism, suicide and the traumas of war” (Bledsoe 68). The traditional setting for stories in “Grit Lit” is “white, poor, and dirty with characters who drink, fight, fornicate, and drive trucks” (Jensen 8). The predominant characters of this genre are invariably male. Allison may be classified as a classic Grit Lit author but in certain areas she is not, the most glaring area is that she is a woman when most Grit authors are male, and she is homosexual. In a genre where women are hardly represented and homosexuality barely exists, Allison has a woman partake in the activity of creating the landscape usually perceived as inherently masculine.

Much of Allison’s work focuses on the conditions under which working-class and under-class people live. 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. Allison explores her class roots, and delineates the shame that stems from being poor and white. She contends that the kind of poverty associated with white trash is overshadowed by stereotypes of shiftlessness and indolence, and conjectures, “That 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” (*Skin* 15). The insidious nature of shame that is closely tied to internalized classism and the sense of feeling different and despised is highlighted both in Allison’s fiction and non-fiction.

Although Allison has authored only one memoir, all of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it. The autobiographical tendency in Allison is examined through

Foucault's treatise on disclosure. Foucault's description of human beings as "confessing animals" becomes very relevant within the context of this analysis (Pennebaker 13). Drawing on Foucault, Georges maintains that:

disclosure as a method of self-knowledge can be traced at least as far back as the Stoic philosophers of the first two centuries A.D. For the Stoics, daily inscription of one's thoughts and actions in diaries, journals, and letters was a means of knowing one's self in order to overcome flaws, and refashion the self according to specific ethos or model. The objective of this reflective process was both moral and medical well-being, and ongoing attention to health maintenance was one of the significant features of contemplative self-disclosure (ibid).

Allison's personal experience of incest, her lesbianism, and the trauma thereof is highlighted under the lens of trauma theorists such as Laura S. Brown and Judith Lewis Herman.

Laura S. Brown makes an argument regarding male trauma and female trauma. She argues that male trauma is public and acceptable whereas female trauma, which often remains hidden, has dimensions of aberrance surrounding it, and therefore differentiates between acceptable male trauma and unspeakable female trauma. According to Brown, "War and genocide, which are the work of men and male – dominated culture, are agreed upon traumas: so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean" (101).

Brown further argues that these male traumas are "rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims" (102). Women, however, have been "victims of rape, incest, and domestic violence who are subjected to disbelief, criticism, blame, and hostility" (Massey 9). Allison recounts that she struggled for many years to become "a woman who can talk about rape plainly, without being hesitant or self-conscious" (*Two or Three Things* 42). Women are

thus doubly traumatized in that they experience a sense of shame about the violence they have endured and continue to endure.

A majority of Allison's work revolves around the construction of the poor white woman's identity through storytelling. Storytelling is intrinsic to Allison's existence as a member of an oppressed group of socially outcast whites. These stories are in essence a "mix of lesbian community stories, love stories, love-gone-bad stories, and family stories" (*Trash*, 12). Allison basically demonstrates through these stories the difficulty as a member of a stigmatized group to come to terms with her sexuality.

Dorothy Allison as an American poet, novelist, and essayist, securely locates her work on the precincts of Southern and working-class literature, entrenched in feminist and lesbian-feminist activism and politics. Most of her writing focuses on the life of poor Southern "white trash" and the violence, poverty, and abuse that accompanies the conditions under which such working-class and under-class people live.

For this research, six of Dorothy Allison's works have been selected. These are: *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983), *Trash* (1988), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994), *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995) and *Cavedweller* (1998).

*The Women Who Hate Me* (1983) consists of twenty-seven poems written between 1980- 1990. The collection denotes the poetic persona's growth of identity and acceptance of self. Dorothy Allison writes poems that speak of shame rooted in her class background, her southern heritage, strength, and lust. According to Dennis Kulp, "The poems leave one shaken, fully aware of Allison's forthright use of language, and impressed by her voice which commands attention" (21). In *The Women Who Hate Me* she explores her past – her childhood in South Carolina, her relationship with her mother and sisters, the earlier days of her

lesbianism and her present everyday life in Brooklyn, New York, and relationships with lovers – “with both the women who hate her and the women who love her” (Kulp 21).

*Trash* (1988) unlike the typical collection of short stories has a distinct narrative structure. The anthology employs a female first person narrator who in her own voice introduces and presents other female characters – protagonists of the anthology’s many stories. The narrator in each individual story is a poor white woman who identifies as a lesbian. The reader comes to the consensus that the lives of all the protagonists in the anthology are in retrospect closely intertwined and interlinked with her own existence. Through these stories, Allison paints a mirror image of her real-life friends, her family, and her partners.

In “Stubborn Girls and Mean Stories”, an introductory piece to *Trash*, Allison explains, how the term “trash”, “had been applied to her and to her family in crude and hateful ways” (xv) and how she subverted present interpretations and implications of the term by way of claiming it as a badge of honour. She purposely titled her collection of short stories after the hateful phrase and claims her reason for doing so was none other than self-defense.

....I took it on deliberately....As an adult I saw all too clearly the look that would cross the face of any...woman in the room when that particular term was spoken. It was like a splash of cold water, and I saw the other side of the hatefulness in the words....Even rednecks get sensitized to insults....I titled this short story collection *Trash* to confront the term and to claim it honorific....  
(xv)

In *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Allison presents an affectionate yet unsentimental and amusing depiction of a girl belonging to the infamous white trash subculture. Apart from her reality as a member of a marginalized group of poor whites, she is a victim of incest and sexual abuse, which began at the tender age of five. Allison does not subscribe to fixed

caricatures in depicting her characters, in *Bastard*, for instance, Bone is projected as a victim and also as a character that possesses strength of character. Allison does not resort to stereotypical representations when portraying her characters, despite her traumatic ordeal, Bone does not fit the victim mould which requires her to be weak, helpless, and without voice. The novel has been subjected to translations amounting to a dozen different languages, and was adapted into a movie in 1996.

Dorothy Allison has lived much of the poverty reflected in her novel *Bastard*; her book completely defies the myth of classlessness in America, and that no white people live hungry. Allison's images compel readers to fathom the reality of the poor and despised. The image painted by the author interrogates the physical and psychological implications of such deplorable conditions that white trash have been subjected to over the years. The novel traces the protagonist's illegitimate birth as Ruth Anne Boatwright in Greenville, South Carolina, through her rift with her mother at the age of twelve. Allison delves into the deep intricacies of a family's life behind closed doors, exploring the close bond as well as terrible betrayals that dictate the complex nature of relationships. *Bastard* primarily discloses the complex nature of Bone's relationship with her mother; it showcases the mother's love for her daughter as well as the repercussions of incest within the family unit which estranged mother from daughter at the novel's end. As a storyteller, Allison is in control of this rendition of the fable, and she insists that the Boatwright family exhibit fierce pride, love, and loyalty towards family, and juxtaposes that with despondency and hopelessness which translates as the legacy of being poor and without voice.

In *Bastard*, Allison has two primary objectives: "to put in print everything I understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place" (*Skin* 54) and to recount "the complicated, painful story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl" (34). Her work contradicts other novels that deal with the theme of incest, and examines the mother's

part, be it her action or in this scenario inaction, “as she tries to come to terms with how the mother’s action or inaction further traumatized the daughter” (Grogan 147). Instead of portraying Anney as a “collusive mother”, Allison “reflects on why the mother doesn’t leave her abusive husband and finally chooses him over her daughter” (ibid).

As a member of a highly stigmatized social group, Allison draws an accurate picture of her people in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (1994). 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 being labelled “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 (225).

Allison’s *Skin* is a compelling collection of essays, autobiographical narratives, and performance pieces. Allison probes into her personal experience of being a feminist activist, a controversial sex radical, and a Southern working-class writer with an attitude. She addresses her sexuality with a hint of humour, and passion, amidst the controversy that surrounds the queer identity.

*Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), Allison’s memoir, is a telling commentary on the Gibson women – Allison’s mother, sisters, cousins, and aunts. It explores the relationship that these women shared with the men folk highlighting the bond, and the domestic violence and abuse they suffered from the same hand that held them with love. As Allison interrogates the dynamics of familial relationships within the Gibson family she ultimately resorts to the consensus that they share the same destiny for poverty is a foregone



conclusion for her people. Told entirely from the perspective of a young girl as she experiences these events, it was widely praised for its unique, vivid storytelling style and its in-depth look at the dynamics of a dysfunctional but often loving family. With *Two or Three*, Allison explores themes of feminism, sexuality, abuse, poverty, and finding one's true identity. Credited as a notable book by the *New York Times Book Review*, Allison's memoir remains a highly acclaimed work.

*Cavedweller* (1998) is the second novel from critically acclaimed author Dorothy Allison. With this book, she reverts to themes of domestic violence, friendship among women, mother-daughter bonds, and poverty. Set in Cayro, Georgia, the narrative shifts from Delia's perspective to that of her daughters' throughout the novel. The novel opens with the death of Delia's ex-husband and band-mate. Delia who once shared the limelight as a famed artist with her late partner, feels it is her duty and obligation to return to Georgia. She embarks on this venture along with her daughter Cissy, reverting to an abandoned past that continues to haunt her psyche. A decade earlier, she had abandoned two of her daughters and fled from her then abusive husband only to return years later and reclaim her tarnished reputation. The mother-daughter duo venture off to Cayro, Georgia, where Delia, is remembered as "that bitch [who] ran off and left her babies". She aids her cancer-stricken ex-husband, and bides in Cayro as her girls undergo stages of confusion and empowerment. The setting is very much emphasized as she does with most of her work, paying much attention to minute details in terms of description.

Cayro, Georgia, was just another wide patch off the side of Highway 75. Most people on their way north from Atlanta never saw it. Downtown consisted of a triangular intersection no bigger than a good-sized basketball court. There was a sign that read WELCOME on one side and COME BACK SOON on the other.

The cutoffs at each corner of that intersection were marked with little directional arrows on which someone had drawn smiley faces. The road north led back to Highway 75 and the route to Nashville, but another smiley-face sign indicated that it was also the way to the county hospital. The route south was marked MARIETTA, but the road west was a mystery, with only the silhouette of a chicken beside the smiley face (43).

The texts mentioned above will be analyzed in the proceeding chapters. Theoretical perspectives from trauma studies, Stuart Hall, and Michel Foucault will henceforth be drawn within the context of the analysis on aspects related to representation, subculture, autobiography, and the marginalization of white trash and the Other space they tend to occupy. The analysis will examine how Allison interrogates the notion of regional, class-based, and gender-based prejudice in her depiction of white trash subculture.

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## **Chapter 2: Dorothy Allison and the Position of White Trash Subculture**

This chapter examines Allison's representation of white trash subculture in the selected texts 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" (Hall and Jefferson 100). On the other hand, "there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the parent culture" (ibid). Likewise, white trash in meeting the colour component identifies with the other whites- those belonging to the upper and middle-class, they are often described as being 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).

Whites are generally perceived as wealthy, educated, and competent. Stereotypes of white people focus on holding or achieving high status, imply that material characteristics, at least in part define the racial category. White trash represents an incomplete version of whiteness. Contrary to general perceptions of whiteness, stereotypes of white trash are some of the most negative characteristics in modern culture. These stereotypes portray white trash as dirty, uneducated, incompetent and lazy, lacking all other characteristics associated with whiteness besides being marked as white.

Richard Dyer points out that all white cultures tend to foster a white identity that is built on compelling paradoxes of representation and universal claims to the prototypical humanness of whites which expresses itself as “narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception” (Dyer, 12). In short, white supremacy is taken as a norm, and anyone who cannot live up to this norm is perceived to be a failure. These narratives may lead to the othering of lower-class whites, sexual minorities and other whites who do not fit into the framework of the mainstream whiteness. As the fate of white trash in the selected texts show, people of different race or ethnicity are not the only others for the affluent whites. White trash do not fit into the discourse that presents whiteness as a form of power, they defy the assumed superiority of whiteness with their mere existence. They are often objects of unreserved prejudice and contempt from upper and middle-class whites, when they are referred to as “white trash”.

As a subculture, white trash disturbs the homogeneity of the white group since they are white and poor at the same time. As a subordinate culture, 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 is 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. Crisis heterotopia refers to “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to human environment in which they live, in a

state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly etc” (Foucault 24). Heterotopias of crisis, however, have been replaced by heterotopias of deviation: “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). 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, for Hall, representation does not merely translate reflection, it is rather an act of reconstruction. From a critical standpoint, Cultural Studies interprets representation as an act of ideological recreation which exclusively caters the 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). Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies give due importance to the control of representation and exposing that control is their chief concern, 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. The chapter therefore primarily focuses on Allison’s representation of white trash which 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, Dorothy Allison paints an excruciatingly painful image 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 11<sup>th</sup>, 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to a single mother, 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 *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*. 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 being labelled as

“poor white trash”. It took years for Allison to overcome the damage of being labelled white trash. She therefore 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 (225).

Newitz and 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 (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 white trash culture and identity. Allison, however, paints a different picture, in the sense that their poverty has nothing to do with idleness, and 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 critically acclaimed memoir, Allison 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” (*Two or Three* 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. Through her writing Allison's 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. Sociologist Matt Wray has observed how the image of white trash has changed considerably along the years.

In 1728, William Byrd II discussed the issue of "poor whites who inhabited the borderlands of the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina" (Wray21). "I am sorry to say it," he observed,

but Idleness is the general character of the men of the Southern parts of this Colony [Virginia] as well as in North Carolina...Surely there is no place in the world where the inhabitants live with less labor than in North Carolina. It approaches nearer to the description of Lubberland than any other, by the great felicity of the climate, the easiness of raising provisions, and the slothfulness of the people...To speak the truth, 'tis a thorough aversion to labor that makes people file off to North Carolina, where plenty and a warm sun confirm them in their disposition to laziness for their whole lives (Byrd 21-22).

In *The History of the Dividing Line*, and his secret diaries, Byrd gives the “earliest stigmatizing depictions of poor, low-status whites in the North American colonies” (Wray 22). His fellow elites later joined him in criticizing the “habits and morals of socially outcast whites” (ibid). His survey of the “disputed boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina” (24), took him “from the shores of the Atlantic...to the rising plateaus of Appalachia” (25). En route, he came across frontier settlers and squatters living in rude huts and cabins, resembling a nomadic lifestyle with small herds of cattle or pigs, only on rare occasions did he come across modest plots of cultivated land. The whole region had long been a refuge for runaway servants and slaves, and criminals. Byrd dubbed these backcountry dwellers “lubbers”, a term he borrowed from English culture.

Lubberland was known as an imaginary place of plenty without labor, a land of laziness where inhabitants lolled about without purpose...Through these associations, Lubberland symbolized a place of relaxed, lusty ease, a place of unimpeded libidinal energies and uninterrupted flows of carnal desire that stood in sharp contrast to the disciplined, ordered, and morally upright culture of Byrd’s world – the social and cultural universe of the eighteenth-century tidewater planter. Any place that even approximated Lubberland’s social conditions would have been a symbolic and moral threat to a budding, yet fragile colonial order (Wray 25)

Byrd’s lubbers occupied an ambiguous place: their dirt-encrusted skin was white, but their behavior and attitudes were not.

Sociologist Matt Wray observed that prior to the phrase “poor white”, the terms “lubber” and “cracker” were used by elite whites and ethnic minorities to refer to poor, socially outcast whites. Wray offers a rough chronology of the development of white trash over the

course of two centuries of American history from the 1720 to the 1920. Tracing their ancestry, he focuses on the precursors to white trash in colonial America – “Lubbers” and “crackers,” who “either failed to achieve or resisted the cultural mould planters sought to establish and refused to respect the dominant moral boundaries regarding property, work, gender arrangements, and color lines” (Wray 17). Lubbers threatened the economic and political order while crackers with their violence and criminal tendencies posed a physical threat towards the then society. Byrd noted significant similarities between lubbers and Native Americans, whom he considered “were dirty, lived in filth, and both tended to have disregard for personal property” (Wray 29).

A few decades later, the image of poor whites changed once again. Social observers of all kinds debated over the reasons for the degeneracy of poor white trash. Northern abolitionist reformers and southern proslavery apologists based their argument on the following grounds:

...the existence of poor white trash in the South was evidence of the moral corruption and debasement that a slave society visits upon all its members...southern proslavery apologists argued that a “degenerate” class of poor whites in the south existed as a result of “natural inferiority,” the inherited depravity that comes from generations of “defective blood” (ibid).

By the 1920s, eugenicists like Dugdale argued that white trash “depravity” was “‘defective germplasm’ – heredity impurities that resulted from incest and from racial and class miscegenation” (ibid). Alternatively, a faction of doctors and educationists led by Charles Stiles in the early 1900s contended that poor white trash “suffered from a recently discovered and eradicable parasite, the American hookworm” (Wray 138).

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). These 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 herself is a victim of the above exaggerated representations of white trash. In *Trash*, Allison defines two conflicting figures: the “good poor” who are “hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable,” and the “bad poor,” which primarily refers to white trash (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 cultural 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 *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* opens with a compilation of terms which define and categorizes the subculture she belongs to:

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 (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 the white trash perspective in all of her texts, offering a glimpse of their reality. Traditionally, white trash has been represented in literature by those belonging to the upper-class. Individuals who are ignorant of their reality subscribe to an exaggerated display of dominant stereotypes, distorting the already tarnished image of white trash. In her collection of essays titled *Skin*, Allison claims that, "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*, Allison's characters exhibit typical stereotypical images of white trash such as Anney, an unwed mother at fifteen. Bone's uncles are known for their scandalous affairs, they drink and smoke excessively, exhibit fierce tempers and are prone to violence which often lands them in jail, and engage in menial jobs. Allison discusses her views on 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 of the 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 amusing, and pathetic aspect of white trash culture but fail to recognize the material conditions that make them true. When Allison shows the liminal experience of white trash with respect to their identification with the white group, the choices that they have or the lack thereof, the poverty and hunger, and the contempt and hatred from other classes of society, she relates to the reader, the material reality and subjugation that lies behind fixed caricatures and popular stereotypes. She highlights aspects related to the excruciatingly painful existence of white trash, making it visible for those on the outside, thus negotiating different perspectives in her representation of white trash.

With *Bastard*, Allison made a crucial decision as she incorporated the language of poor and working-class white Southerners – a voice traditionally mocked in literature, media representations and popular culture. In an interview, Allison discusses issues regarding the language of poor white folks and makes the following observation:

I've been thinking about the language in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Where I grew up, I was taught that the language you put in that book – the speech of poor white folks – was worthless. Just like I grew up being taught that African American language was worthless. And when I read *Bastard*, it was the first time in my life that I read a book that accepted the language of poor and working-class white people, that said that speech was beautiful, lyrical, eloquent. They said, "This is the voice of humanity speaking." The language of *Bastard* was so important to me. In other ways in my life, my eye had been distorted in its looking. When I read your novel, I realized how my ear had its hearing distorted. But I was finally hearing this language spoken with its real lyrical imaginative force (Claxton 29).

Allison describes the traditional mode of representing this language in literature, "as if it is in the back pages of men's magazines with the letters cut and a whole lot of extra letters thrown on. It's barely intelligible and has an aura of stupid about it" (ibid). Allison attempts to incarcerate the rhythmic quality of gospel music and country music which deeply informs this dialect. For instance, in the statement, "The law never done us no good. Might as well get on without it" (Allison 1992, 5) she refuses to correct the grammar, and in the statement, "An't nobody says nothing to my little sister, an't nobody can touch that girl or what's hers" (ibid 14) she refuses to conform to the conventional spelling of "ain't". This shows Allison's acceptance of her characters' dialect and makes the following commentary about them: "the people whose voices I am using are very smart people. They are simply uneducated" (Claxton 30).

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, hold no reverence toward a scenario that "could not be handled with a shotgun or a two-by-four" (10). The county, simultaneously admire and express trepidation of their frightful temperament, and

are renowned for their scandalous affairs. As much as the Boatwright men love their wives, it is against their very nature to remain faithful. Although they clearly embody lewdness and violence, Bone's uncles are "invariably gentle and affectionate" with close relatives and are protective of their sisters, and their 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 is rooted in the contempt of those from the upper and middle-classes. Labels such as "No-good, lazy, shiftless" (3) deeply wounds the Boatwright family, for they are well aware of the scorn and disdain from other people when they witness Bone and 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 craves the acceptance and acknowledgement of the privileged class and Anney attempts 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 discusses 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 *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, 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” (32). She employs socially perceived parameters to make the above statement, since till date the working poor are, in some areas in the United States, considered genetically infected and diseased. 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:

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 (*Two or Three* 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. 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 had held white trash with contempt and continue to do so till date. As a

subordinate subculture white trash maintain identification with other whites by exhibiting overt racism and yet experience hate and contempt from their parent culture. The problematic category of white trash simultaneously identifies and expresses autonomy from dominant whites.

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 instilled the notion among poor whites that they are a class apart from African Americans. However, this notion signals a sense of false consciousness since their material realities resonate with one another. 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).

In “Unpopular Culture”, Hartigan suggests that “the ‘white trash’ myth allows an insidious belief to stand: that it is only ‘those people’ who are racist; only those women who are so licentious; only those men who are that cruel and violent” (323). Hartigan’s argument highlights the widespread repercussions of cultural stereotyping, pointing to the ways that class differences divide the United States and interferes with attempts to understand and solve social problems. Although Hartigan focuses here on the white trash myth in general, this myth also allows white southerners in particular to shift the region’s history of violent racism to white

trash, despite the fact that organised racism in the South has often been instigated by middle and upper-class whites.

Allison alleges that, “One real thing about the working class in the South is that they are not ashamed of being racist. Unlike the middle class” (Claxton 33), she acknowledges the fact that her family and white trash in general are “deeply and inherently racist” (ibid). She interrogates how those belonging to the middle class have the notion that “they are supposed to be ashamed” (ibid) of being racist while the white trash version of being racist comes without the element of shame. Allison claims another popular stereotype, which depicts the brutal honesty behind her attempts at representing white trash.

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, who 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. Allison had her own reservations about articulating the abuse especially with her mother. 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 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 position as a poor white feminist, lesbian activist, and 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 has 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 it reinforces the idea of faded identities which suggests the 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 successfully 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 bore the term "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"



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 (309).

At the novels 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 much of the hate and contempt that surrounded her existence, and 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 whites' 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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### **Chapter 3: Autobiographical Impulse in the Works of Dorothy Allison**

This chapter focuses on the autobiographical strain evident in much of Dorothy Allison's writing. Allison's personal experience of incest, her lesbianism, and the trauma thereof will be highlighted. When one writes the self, as autobiographers do, the focus is often events in one's life which have had an affect on identity formation. Michel Foucault's description of human beings as "confessing animals" becomes very relevant within the context of this analysis (Pennebaker 13). Drawing on Foucault, Georges maintains that:

disclosure as a method of self-knowledge can be traced at least as far back as the Stoic philosophers of the first two centuries A.D. For the Stoics, daily inscription of one's thoughts and actions in diaries, journals, and letters was a means of knowing one's self in order to overcome flaws, and refashion the self according to specific ethos or model. The objective of this reflective process was both moral and medical well-being, and ongoing attention to health maintenance was one of the significant features of contemplative self-disclosure (ibid).

Writing the self can be especially beneficial for victims of traumatic experiences. It lends a voice to those who have been silenced by psychologically painful events.

Whether this silence is self-imposed or socially demanded, the effect is the same: an alienation which damages and fragments identity, and keeps the wounds of trauma open; though intermittently suppressed, trauma often presents itself and continues to negatively impact the already damaged psyche of the trauma sufferer (Massey 2).

In her article, Kristin M. Langellier asserts that:

Personal narrative is a performance strategy with particular significance for socially marginal, disparaged, or ignored groups ... Personal narrative as cultural

performance has transformative power to assert self-definitions about who matters and what matters: the existence, worth and vitality of a person (134).

Trauma has a negative impact on identity, where self-worth needs to be rebuilt and re-established. Studies conducted by researchers reveal that traumatic memories are different from regular memories in the way they are stored in the brain. Judith Lewis Herman, surmises that the problem with traumatic memories, is their lack of integration with regular memories hence the tendency to resurface repetitively. However, telling the trauma story “actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). Herman describes the character of traumatic memories as:

wordless and static...One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a “prenarrative.” It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller’s feelings or interpretation of events. Another therapist describes traumatic memory as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie (ibid).

Traumatic memories are invasive repetitions which stagnate identity development. For trauma victims, a verbal or written account of the experience serves as an outlet or a productive method of self-disclosure. Written accounts in particular provide the narrative structure needed to remedy stagnation and fragmentation of traumatic memories and enables integration with regular memories.

The genre of autobiography has developed into an increasingly popular mode of communication for marginalized groups. By way of responding to the question “Why Memoir Now?”, the title of her article, Vivian Gornick surmises that the recent surge of memoir’s popularity, particularly those authored by groups on the outskirts of society, is the result of “...thirty years of politics in the streets [which] have produced an outpouring of testament from women, blacks, and gays that is truly astonishing” (1).

The recent surge in memoir popularity reflects a changing political atmosphere, where entire groups of people who once experienced mass silencing now feel it is their right to express their experiences in writing, to verbalize their lives in a way that validates them personally and before society. It is especially important for groups outside the societal mainstream (i.e., white, male, straight, middle-class) to feel authorized to write their stories. Often this authority comes slowly and painfully, and the writing may come first; beginning to write may help writers feel authorized to continue telling their life stories (Massey 3).

Dorothy Allison became a memoirist with *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). The year 1994 marked the publication of a collection of autobiographical essays, many composed earlier and published elsewhere. In her memoir, “Allison constructs a personal account of the poverty, incest, and physical abuse she endures as a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina” (Massey 3), drawing readers into “Allison’s world of intense self-disclosure” (ibid). Although *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is Allison’s first and only memoir, all of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it.

Trauma victims often experience the urge to write their trauma, something Allison herself experiences, and her urge in particular comes with the need to write the same tale in different ways. This compulsion to write of trauma is seen in Allison’s work, both in her fiction and her nonfiction. From her acclaimed novels to her collection of short stories, and essays, “Allison has grappled with the topics of poverty and incest, something with which she is painfully familiar” (Massey 4). Timothy Dow Adams conjectures that the reason for Allison’s decision to represent her trauma initially in fiction has to do with the “difficulty of telling such a humiliating story through autobiography” (1). Although this may undeniably be the case, “a more significant and telling factor of Allison’s return to the topics of incest, abuse, and poverty proves trauma has a repetitive and insistent nature” (Massey 4). What is evident from Allison’s



work is that, writing does not necessarily cure emotional trauma, however it brings upon the individual a calmer state, continually maintained through writing.

In her memoir, Allison describes her need to write autobiographically. She says,

“When I began [writing fiction] there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive ...But where am I in the stories I tell? Not the storyteller but the woman in the story ” (4).

In writing her life story, Allison “becomes the woman in the story” (ibid), one that she creates and brings to life. Massey conjectures that:

After writing fiction, after creating and bringing characters to life, it seems she needs to do the same with herself: create herself and her life through a story from which she derives satisfaction. Writing her life stories allow her to construct, or more accurately, reconstruct herself through her writing, creating a necessary narrative (4-5).

“Autobiographical writing validates experiences” (5), Massey states, writing about one’s traumatic experience fosters a deeper understanding of the event, as something that happened to an individual and not something that defines the individual. Janet Ellerby makes the following observation with regards to autobiographical writing:

. . . if our narratives cannot always offer us the pellucid map we long for in our quest for a safer, more just, more benevolent world, if our stories do not always lead us to clear horizon of resolution and closure, they may, we hope, lead us to a greater measure of understanding of the ineluctable past (xxi).

Through her writing, Allison re-defines herself, working towards an understanding of her traumatic past and henceforth take necessary steps towards the process of healing.

In both her fiction and non-fiction, Allison constantly returns to the highly personal topics of incest, poverty, and lesbianism. Writing about past trauma does not force the

traumatic experience out of her psyche but allows her to sustain an emotional composure. Based on numerous studies on the healing benefits of writing, psychologists establish that “writing about trauma is proven to have therapeutic effects on the writer” (Massey 7). For Allison as well, “writing becomes the only way to express the unspeakable, and speaking through writing becomes the only way to express pain and make sense of traumatic events” (8).

Laura S. Brown makes an argument regarding male trauma and female trauma. She argues that male trauma is public and acceptable whereas female trauma, which often remains hidden, has dimensions of aberrance surrounding it, and therefore differentiates between acceptable male trauma and unspeakable female trauma.

War and genocide, which are the work of men and male – dominated culture, are agreed upon traumas: so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean (101).

Brown further argues that these male traumas are “rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims” (102). Women, however, have been “victims of rape, incest, and domestic violence who are subjected to disbelief, criticism, blame, and hostility” (Massey 9). Allison recounts that, she struggled for many years to become “a woman who can talk about rape plainly, without being hesitant or self-conscious” (*Two or Three Things* 42). Women are thus doubly traumatized in that they experience a sense of shame about the violence have endured and continue to endure.

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison states:

. . .thirty years later one of my aunts could say to me that she didn’t really believe it, that he had been such a hardworking, good-looking man. Something else must have happened. Maybe it had been different (42).

Allison’s aunt chooses not to believe her story, but telling the story makes Allison “...strong enough to know her aunt had chosen to believe what she needed more than what she knew”

(43). Writing stories of trauma may not change how others feel about Allison's experience, but it changes how Allison feels about others' reaction to her trauma. She therefore contends that she is "no longer a grown-up outraged child but a woman letting go of her outrage, showing what she knows: that evil is a man who imagines the damage he does is not damage, that evil is the act of pretending that some things do not happen or leave no mark if they do, that evil is not what remains when healing becomes possible" (44).

Allison claims that African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, encouraged her to voice her opinions on feminism through her literary pieces. She makes the following commentary on *The Bluest Eye*: "Besides James Baldwin, nothing ever hit me as hard as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*...it was about incest, about that terror, and it was about suicide" (Claxton 28). The novel reverberated the "speech," "rhythms," and "language," of white trash and echoed the same working-class sentiment (ibid 29). Allison herself stated, "It didn't read to me black,;" "It read to me working class" (ibid). Pecola's tale reflected Allison's story in that it encompasses similar themes of sexual violation, shame, and social contempt. *The Bluest Eye* was a ground breaking novel, in that, a young black girl served as the protagonist, *Bastard* in the tradition of Morrison's novel showcases a character rarely portrayed within the realms of literature – a young girl who belongs to the white trash subculture. Both novels chart and witness,

...the breaking of a cultural silence surrounding child abuse as it shows what can happen when a father internalizes class hatred and unleashes his frustrations on his daughter. This semi-autobiographical novel marks a significant departure from Morrison's account of father-daughter incest in that the story of sexual violation is told entirely from the perspective of the female victim herself (Grogan 147).

In this vexing, “more bitter than sweet Bildungsroman,” Allison “authors a story that illuminates the insidious trauma surrounding the domestic violence which culminates in a graphic rape scene at the novel’s end” (Kenan 815).

Allison enables the incest victim to claim narrative as an agency towards healing. For writing becomes the only way to express the unspeakable, and speaking through writing, for many victims may be the only way to initially express the pain and begin to make sense of traumatic events. In *Bastard*, Allison has two primary objectives: “to put in print everything I understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place” (*Skin* 54) and relate “the complicated, painful story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl” (34). Her work is seminal in examining the mother’s pivotal role in cases of incest between father and daughter, “as she tries to come to terms with how the mother’s action or inaction further traumatized the daughter” (Grogan 147). Allison refrains from portraying Anney as a “collusive mother”, she, instead, “reflects on why the mother doesn’t leave her abusive husband and finally chooses him over her daughter” (ibid).

Several figures in the narrative experience trauma in their own right, which is evident in the case of Glen, Anney, and Bone herself. In the novel’s end, Aunt Raylene assumes the maternal role, and is instrumental in Bone’s transition from victim to survivor. Allison initially restricted her publications to small presses that exclusively addressed issues pertaining to the queer community, but *Bastard*,

...moved her work to a mainstream press and readership. The novel that had begun as a poem in 1974 was bid on by two female editors; no male editors were interested. Carol De Santi at Dutton got the contract and gave Allison a \$37,000 advance, a significant sum considering Allison had \$200 to her name before publishing the book. It received flattering reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Village Voice*. It was

even discussed favorably in Katie Roiphe's "Making the Incest Scene". Although it was mainly received as a novel written in the tradition of Southern regionalist fiction that told the story of working-class families, many reviewers also emphasized the issue of sexual abuse. The novel garnered the attention of the group Allison calls the "big boys" of literature and received many accolades. It was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award; it won the Ferro Grimly prize, the ALA Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction. It became a best seller and spawned an award-winning (although for Allison, disappointing) film. Allison, the first in her family to graduate from high school, also reached another milestone: her first novel established her as a major contemporary American author credited with altering the literary landscape (ibid).

*Bastard* brings to the forefront, facts that remain unsaid with respect to socially marginalized individuals, giving the reader a glimpse of poor-white experience and father-daughter incest. It discloses the aftermath of trauma which manifests into physical and psychological afflictions. The novel also addresses the repercussions of oppressive systems within society that induces instigators like Glen to take advantage of and abuse helpless individuals such as the young female protagonist. Early critics faced the difficulty of addressing white trash culture and incest without reinforcing stereotypes such as lewdness, criminality, indolence, ignorance, stupidity, and a whole array of traits that point towards physical disgust. They question how one addresses these topics without implicating that incest and consanguinity is exclusive to the white trash community. Allison herself remarks, "What's a South Carolina virgin?" "At's a ten-year-old can run fast" (*Trash* 12). Bouson establishes that the novel "ends up legitimating, at least in part, the popular view that white-trash culture is a central site of social pathology and abjection" (36). Allison agrees that her representation of

white trash supports and validates certain extreme descriptions affixed to white trash, and claims that, “Some of that stuff is true” (Hollibaugh 16). Instead of justifying, defending or coming up with pretexts for these images;

Allison contextualizes the material realities of economic oppression and the romanticized view of heterosexuality to show how these forces can lead to vulnerability which, in Glen’s case, leads to violence, and, in Anney’s case, leads to her turning a blind eye to the abuse (Grogan 149).

Millard comments that *Bastard* “is at pains to delineate the social factors that condition” the lives of socially outcaste whites (161).

Allison herself acknowledged that “Bone is a thinly-veiled Dorothy Allison” (Grogan 151), and modelled Bone’s family after her own. Behind the realistic portrayal of her flawed characters lies the compassion and desire to understand why her kind- white trash, subscribe to a particular behaviour and lifestyle, including Glen, the stepfather. She acknowledges the stereotypes that have been associated with her family, and therefore states,

I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that’s exactly who we are said to be. That’s what white trash is all about. We’re all supposed to be drunks standing in our yards with our broken-down cars and our dirty babies. Some of that stuff is true. But to write about it I had to find a way to pull the reader in and show you those people as larger than that contemptible myth. And show you why those men drink, why those women hate themselves and get old and can’t protect themselves or their children. Show you human beings instead of fold-up, mean, cardboard figures (Hollibaugh 16).

Allison avoids documenting her people as “case studies”. “One temptation,” Allison remarks, “is to make the Boatwrights something off *Tobacco Road*. Just dirt poor slutty horrible, you know, stealing and wenching and all that bullshit” (Graff 46). In her first novel,

the men folk, “chain-smoke, drive jacked-up cars, talk dirty, display frightening tempers, work in mills and diners, and frequently spend time in jail”; however, they also exhibit a strong sense of kinship and loyalty solely reserved for their family (McDonald 18). For instance, Bone notes that the same men who frequently land in jail for petty crimes indulge Bone and her cousins with hand-made gifts as sentiments of love and endearment.

Allison modelled Bone’s mother and stepfather after her own; Glen, who embodies her stepfather sexually assaulted her when she was five: “The man raped me. It’s the truth. It’s a fact. I was five, and he was eight months married to my mother” (*Two or Three Things* 39). The scene where Glen molests Bone for the first time is conveniently juxtaposed with Anney’s miscarriage in the hospital. These events are based on actual episodes of the author’s life.

Allison confided in an interview that “her stepfather gave her gonorrhoea when she was twelve, which left her sterile” (Grogan 152). In all probability, he sexually violated her sisters as well, although she herself admits, she has “no right to tell their stories” (Graff 47). Allison’s stepfather claims he never touched her: “When contacted by *San Francisco Focus*, Allison’s stepfather denied he ever physically or sexually abused her. ‘Everything she says against me is untrue. I never touched her at all. I did everything I possibly could for that girl all my life’” (Strong 62). In spite of everything, Allison empathizes with Glen’s character. She insists that “the first rule of writing is to love your characters,” “Even the one you hate. You have to get inside them,” when questioned about her feelings towards Glen’s character, she reverts to “the first rule”, and claims, “...I had to make somebody I could almost understand” (Strong 97). Allison writes from an empathetic space, a space that is not dictated by hatred or spite, she accordingly “shifts the responsibility for father-daughter incest away from the indictment of any one individual” (Grogan 153).

Allison herself says, “The woman that I made Bone’s mother, Anney, was so much of my own mother” (Hollibaugh 16). *Bastard* gives a graphic description of the events that

orchestrated Bone's entry into the world, "a drunk driving accident, an unconscious teenage mother, and the word 'illegitimate' stamped on her birth certificate—happened to Allison, whose mother was a grade-school drop-out, working as a waitress, and one month past fifteen when she gave birth" (ibid). Allison's mother who was unconscious during the birth of her daughter, refused to acknowledge her daughter's abuse. Allison makes the following observation regarding her mother:

She could not say the words—incest, violence, betrayal. She couldn't say: I knew he was fucking you. She could only say: I never meant for those things to happen. She'd say 'those things.' And she'd say: I know you'll never be able to forgive me (Hollibaugh 16).

It therefore follows that Allison's mother fails to accept or articulate the painful act; she knew what was happening, but "naming the incest was impossible for her" (Grogan 153). Through writing *Bastard*, Allison eventually forgives her mother for ignoring her daughter's abuse. Allison has reached an understanding of why her mother was so evasive with respect to the abuse, and eventually forgives her through writing *Bastard*. Allison accepted that her mother could not leave her stepfather, and attributes the prevailing laws regarding unwed mothers at that time as a primary factor:

Aware of the harshness of South Carolina's laws in the 1950s regarding unwed mothers (the state went so far as to enact "a substitute parent law" that denied "aid to children whose mothers had even a casual, short term relationship with a man"), she notes that many women in her culture wished to marry in order to escape the ingrained shame of class prejudice (Grogan 153-154).

Allison comments on the matter, "I think the shame [my mother] felt was one of the reasons she stayed with my stepfather. She wanted to be respectable" (Strong 95). She acknowledges the psychological nature of her mother's attachment to her stepfather: "My



stepfather broke her, broke her in a way that she couldn't imagine life without him" (Jetter 56). Allison's mother remained by her abusive husband's side until she died at fifty-six. Tokarczyk remarks that "In her final days, Allison's mother apologized to her for the abuse she had endured; trying to explain that she never wanted their lives to be so horrifying, that she always hoped things would get better" (168). Allison acknowledges these statements, commenting that her mother "fought desperately to get us through our childhood intact, but she failed utterly" (Strong 64).

By way of unveiling Bone's resilience and focusing on the complexity of Anney's character, Allison explains: "I had to forgive my mother, really forgive her in order to show a child who couldn't forgive her" (Hollibaugh 16). In *Bastard*, Allison dramatizes the incest in such a way that it problematizes easy categorization of the characters as victim and instigator. It becomes rather glaring that "forgiving rather than hating marks Allison's aesthetic" (Tokarczyk 192).

Allison has her own reasons for recounting factual events in fiction, she explains, "The element of fiction" provided "the necessary distance" (Garrett 3). Her statement is supported by critical theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Ronald Granofsky who have construed valid statements on the subject of "traumatic experience": "literary symbolism allows for a safe 'confrontation with a traumatic experience'" (Di Prete 5). Although Allison recounted her personal story in fiction, her decision was not made from a professional point of view. It was a personal decision which was conveniently appropriate with reference to the time frame of publication. The nineties experienced a publishing explosion of novels that addressed incest and sexual trauma. The genre of fiction transcended Allison's story from a personal to a universal level, appealing to a larger reading public.

Allison is disturbed by "how a classist society contributes to the problem of father-daughter incest" and "she is concerned with depicting her father figure as something other than

a villain” (Grogan 155). In first person narrative, told retrospectively by Bone, Allison questions what induces individuals to acts of incest. In Glen’s situation, “his pathology takes the form of paternal incest because of the pressures of trying to compensate for what his father sees as his failures in a capitalistic and patriarchal society” (ibid). Unlike the Boatwrights, Glen comes from an affluent family,

Strikingly, Glen does not come from the poor white class: his family is comfortably and consciously middle class, part of a patriarchal southern culture that prides itself on property ownership. His father, Mr. Bodine Waddell, owns Sunshine Dairy; the oldest brother, Daryl, is a lawyer; and the other brother, James, a dentist. Their wives are housewives, enjoying the luxury of not having to work outside the house and frowning on women who do. In contrast to the men in his family, Glen works menial, low-paying jobs. When, at seventeen, he first meets Anney, he is a truck driver (Grogan 155-156).

As Bone points out in *Bastard*, “Skinny, nervous little Glen Waddell didn’t seem like he would amount to much, driving a truck for the furnace works, and shaking a little every time he tried to look a man in the eye” (10-11). Bone realizes that her stepfather’s insecurity is rooted in his inability to meet Mr. Wadell’s expectations. He compensates his failure by reasserting a masculinity defined by domination.

As Glen chooses Anney, the reader notices the underlying objective behind his decision. From the onset, it is evident that Glen is attracted to Anney as a person as well as to the Boatwrights’ reputation. Glen’s is determined to marry Anney for reasons that are far from noble, it rather points to an act of rebellion, with the sole purpose of disgracing his father. Glen is drawn to Anney’s working-class background and her family’s reputation; he secures his ties with the legendary Boatwrights who are oddly revered and dreaded by the county much to his father’s dismay. Allison portrays Glen’s perspective:

He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earle's baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers. He would carry a knife in his pocket and kill any man who dared to touch her (13).

Internalizing the ideals of a sexist, elitist, patriarchal society, Glen claims ownership of the female bodies of his new family members. Allison exposes the trauma Glen experiences through glimpses of his relationship with his father, projecting the perpetrator as a victim himself. The novel addresses Glen's need for love many times over. Within the ambit of the Waddell family, Glen stands out as a pariah. In spite of his subordinate status, Glen resorts to bragging about the Waddells and visits his family "at least once every other month" (99). Although he assures that these visits will not account to a prolonged period, it has become common knowledge for Bone and the rest of the family that, "he would not have the nerve to leave before his father had delivered his lecture on all the things Glen had done wrong in his long life of failure and disappointment" (ibid). Anney justifies Glen's behaviour and asserts, "Your daddy wants his daddy to be proud of him....It about breaks my heart. He should just as soon whistle for the moon," Bone notices alterations in Glen's behaviour:

It was true. Around his father, Glen became unsure of himself and too careful. He broke out in a sweat, and his eyes kept flickering back to his daddy's face as if he had to keep watching or miss the thing he needed most to see. He would pull at his pants like a little boy and drop his head if anyone asked him a question (99).

Coming to her husband's defense, Anney proclaims, "I an't never seen a boy wanted his daddy's love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get out from under his daddy's meanness" (132). Anney identifies Mr. Waddell as the source of Glen's insecurity as an individual which she eventually uses as an excuse to justify his actions towards Bone.

The novel projects Glen's many failures; he has tarnished the name of the Waddell family, struggles financially, and instead of maintaining his social status he has taken a step down the social ladder. Glen's list of failures and disappointments pile up as his sole progeny dies, arresting the possibility of a potential lineage. Glen's financial restraints debar him from buying a burial site for his son. This incident marks a turning point in Glen, he makes a transition from being grief stricken to wrathful. What follows is Glen's obsession with asserting dominance as head of the family and distancing Anney and the girls from the whole Boatwright clan. Glen opted horizontal mobility that is typical to white trash, "We lived in no one house more than eight months" (64).

Although Bone sees her stepfather as a victim of Mr. Waddell's abuse, she does not make excuses for his abusive behavior. She is well aware that Glen has assumed the role of oppressor. Earning less than the other routemen, and working for his father, Bone makes the following comment: "I looked down into the pot of potatoes, remembering the last time we had gone out to the Waddells', the way Daddy Glen had stuttered when his father spoke to him. That old man was horrible, and working for him must be hell, even I knew that" (207). She acknowledges the same shame, rage, and contempt she experiences in the midst of more privileged individuals in Glen's character. Nonetheless, she also understands that Glen's victimization does not justify his actions towards her, "I don't care if his daddy does treat him bad. I don't care why he's so mean" (209). In the near end of the book, "she painfully understands the difference between the Waddells' abuse of Glen and Glen's abuse of Bone—the Waddells attack Glen verbally; his abuse of Bone is emotional, physical, and sexual" (Grogan 159).

At its core, *Bastard*, recounts Anney's tale, as she embarks on life's journey as a fifteen year old unwed mother, documenting both Anney and Bone's formative years. The novel also exposes how women themselves have internalized patriarchal and capitalistic norms:

Anney's ideals of what a woman should be like are very much shaped by her sisters' beliefs, enlarging Allison's vision of criticizing the Boatwright women and constructions of femininity in general. Glen is not the only one to internalize patriarchal and capitalistic norms: Anney, along with most of her sisters, has bought into the standards as well (Grogan 160).

Allison criticizes certain aspects pertaining to the Boatwright women, she deplores their subscription to "heteropatriarchal practices" (ibid). Raised in a cultural environment where women age in their mid-twenties and men refuse to adult, Allison remarks that women are disposed to misery and suffering: "Even in this book with these strong women they all believe that suffering is what they are supposed to do. And they pass it on to their children" (Hollibaugh 16).

The Boatwrights breed uncertainty, suffering, insecurity, and self-doubt, and pass it on to their children. Because of the shame that is ingrained in the psyche of white trash, Anney obsesses over Bone's illegitimate status. Anney is deeply troubled by Bone's illegitimacy, the absence of Bone's biological father who Granny had dismissed "for messing with her daughter" (3) ushers in a host of unforeseen repercussions. By way of compensation, Anney agrees to marry Glen, hoping he would "make a good daddy" (13). Her actions backfire since her marriage to Glen enabled the incest and abuse, instead of protecting her and her children. The union gave Glen legal access to Anney's as well as Bone's body. For many readers, Anney emerges as an enabler in her failure to accept and articulate the act of incest. For example, when Glen exerts violence and anger towards Bone, Anney does not question Glen's actions, instead she questions Bone's actions in inviting that anger: "Oh, girl. Oh, honey. Baby, what did you do? What did you do?" (107), she even reprimands Bone, "Why, honey? Why did you have to act like that?" (234). Bone dilates on the subject and remarks:

When Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad (110).

The book documents a poignant scene where, Annie decided to buy vitamins for Bone since she always bruised herself. In all probability, Anney is aware of the abuse, her denial, however, places her as an accomplice in the act as she refuses to cut ties with the perpetrator.

Bone does not blame her mother for the series of bad choices that she makes, instead, she tries to understand why she was compelled to make such choices. She examines the circumstances under which her mother made life choices, exposing the amount of freedom or lack thereof she had when she made such crucial decisions in. She examined multiple factors within the dynamic of white trash culture that restricted her mother from disclosing the unspeakable act of incest to the rest of the family. Anney is thoroughly conditioned by “a patriarchal system that rewarded settled women with a small dose of respectability and, most importantly, threatened them with more hardship if they became single” (Tokarczyk 168). Grogan makes the following observation about Bone’s mother:

The stigma against being a single mother partly explains why Anney, who does move out temporarily, is ultimately unable to leave Glen, even after she witnesses the rape of her daughter with her own eyes (Grogan 162).

The women in the novel succumb to patriarchy and hence require “heterosexual validation’ (ibid). For instance, Aunt Alma leaves her husband due to extra-marital strife only to reunite in a couple of weeks, “when the baby got sick and the boys started running around at night, she gave it up and moved back in with him” (Allison, *Bastard* 91). Like her sister Anney, Alma comes to her husband’s defense ““I guess he an’t no worse than any other man”” (91). Through her observations of the relationships within her family, Bone learns of the unequal power structures in which men lack restrictions and enjoy the liberty to “do anything,”

while women grow old and haggard from working too hard, raising their children, and mothering their men. (23). Bone demarcates the disparate nature of men and women within the ambit of the Boatwright clan:

My aunts treated my uncles like overgrown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too. They looked young, even Nevil, who'd had his teeth knocked out, while the aunts—Ruth, Raylene, Alma, and even Mama—seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men. (23)

Bone observes the women in her family, and comes to the conclusion that, “This body, like my aunts’ bodies, was born to be worked to death, used up, and thrown away” (206). Anney’s physical beauty gradually declines with her union to Glen. Before Glen’s appearance she was often complimented for her good looks, the same goes for Alma as well. Wade’s departure left her looking “better than ever”: “Her face was smooth and relaxed, her skirt loose on her soft hips” (86), upon his return Alma resumed her old shabby look. Allison, in this instance, depicts how poor white women literally embody their hardships. She therefore suggests that: “healthy heterosexual relationships are impossible when masculinity and femininity are constituted in and through structures of oppression” (Grogan 163).

The Boatwright women emphasize the importance of physical beauty. For Aunt Alma, “love had more to do with how pretty a body was than anyone would ever admit” (Allison, *Bastard* 32). The same sentiment is shared by Ruth: “Being pregnant was proof that some man thought you were pretty sometime, and the more babies she got, the more she knew she was worth something” (230-31). Anney, is no different from Ruth, as she aches for a man despite his abusive nature. Bone is unable to fathom the sentiments shared by her mother and aunts “love for a man not already part of the family,” and finds herself initiated into a culture that

embraces matrimony and vanity (32). As her abuse escalates, she expresses her vain desires and questions “why couldn’t I be pretty? I wanted to be more like the girls in the storybooks, princesses with pale skin and tender hearts” (206). Bone is convinced that Daddy Glen’s hatred and abuse stems from her lack of beauty.

Bone makes a crucial decision to disclose her secret to a close relative. Bone had reservations regarding the disclosure and approached the topic in a very subtle manner. She manages an indirect confession and asserts, “‘Daddy Glen hates me’” (122). Ruth acknowledges that Glen envies the bond that Bone and her mother share. However, Ruth considers Glen’s behaviour to be archetypal: “‘There’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband. And that an’t so rare, I’ll tell you... ‘Men,’ she said, solemnly ‘are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can. Your mama knows it as well as I do. We all do’” (123).

During their intimate conversation, Ruth brings up the topic of sexual abuse which Bone denies. Ruth presses the question, “‘has Daddy Glen ever...well...touched you?’... Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?’” (124). Instead of disclosing the secret, Bone claims Glen disciplined her on certain occasions but denied he sexually abused her: “‘He just looks at me hard. Grabs me sometimes. Shakes me’” (124).

Ruth’s approach bears witness to the fact that the family has reservations about acknowledging the abuse and incest. Bone’s silence is rooted in her family’s sensitivity towards the topic. It therefore follows that even if Bone had been vocal and direct in terms of relating the horrendous act, her family would not be able to comprehend or accept it. The characters are in denial with respect to the abuse, an easy alternative to acknowledging a crime of such high magnitude as incest. Ruth and Anney fail to acknowledge Bone’s abuse for almost the entire novel, however, “Bone tells her mother’s story of insidious trauma, leading Leigh



Gilmore to describe the book as a daughter's autobiography with her mother's biography at its core" (Grogan 165). Bone comments on Anney's appetite for love and validation from a man:

No one knew that she cried in the night for Lyle and her lost happiness, that under that biscuit-crust exterior she was all butter grief and hunger, that more than anything else in the world she wanted someone strong to love her like she loved her girls (Allison, *Bastard* 10).

Likewise, she recounts how Anney suffered during her separation from Glen: "Mama lay on the couch, and cried so quietly I could just barely hear her through the closed door. I curled up on the far side of the bed and listened to the small sounds of her weeping until I fell asleep" (251). More than anything, Anney longs to be projected as a respectable member of society and erase Bone's "bastard" status, something she believes she can achieve through matrimony. She ignores her family's protests against marrying Glen. Great Aunt Maybelle, Uncle Beau, and Granny express their distrust of Glen: "'That boy's got something wrong with him....He's always looking at me out the sides of his eyes like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone. And you know Anney's the bone he wants'" (37).

Gwin remarks, "Because the actual rape does not occur until the end of the novel, we, like her, stay on edge, each time expecting it to happen" (434). The traumatic events building up to the actual rape reveals that Bone has been conditioned to victimhood. The psychological and emotional abuse may be more damaging than the rape itself, Allison herself comments that, "The sexual abuse is actually the least destructive part of it" (Strong 96).

Allison devotes many pages to recounting the events leading to the final rape scene. Bone, her mother, and sisters have left Glen upon the disclosure of her bruises. As Glen pulls up in his ford unannounced, Bone breaks her silence and stands up to him. He accuses Bone of her incestuous desires "'You're getting bigger...Gonna be ready to start dating boys any day now. Getting married, maybe, starting your own family....Breaking some man's heart just

‘cause you can’” (280-81). Glen demands that Bone reunite the family; instead of retreating into silence like she usually does, she replies: “‘No....I don’t want to live with you no more. Mama can go home to you. I told her she could, but I can’t. I won’t’” (281).

The narrative builds up and eventually unfolds into the actual rape scene which Anney witnesses. Glen accuses Bone of being the seductress and tells her: “‘You’ve always wanted it. Don’t tell me you don’t....I’ll give you what you really want’” (285), he, “reared up, supporting his weight on [her] shoulder while his hips drove his sex into [her] like a sword” (285). The ordeal is upsetting for Bone, as she is left to witness her mother reassure the perpetrator, “She was holding him tight, his head pressed to her belly” (291). What follows is the fatal question, “Is it more traumatic for [Bone] to experience Daddy Glen’s physical violence or to watch her mother comfort him?” (Cvetkovich 346). Allison struggles with this question till date.

The reader understands that Bone’s silence, stems from her fear of losing her mother. Assuming all fault, Bone identifies as a victim, however things change for Bone after the actual rape. She begins to distance herself from her mother as if breaking the chord that tied them together: “I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I didn’t care anymore what might happen. I wouldn’t hold still anymore” (Allison, *Bastard* 282). She makes the following confession, “I’d said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him”. Bone asks in anger, “Could she love me and still hold him like that?” (291). Bone makes the vital transition from victim to survivor, and unfastens the chord that tied her with her mother. She had revered her mother’s love above all things, but unavoidable circumstances and incidents compel her to be wary of that love. The traumatic rape scene serves as the climax of the story, however as the events unfold, the narrative becomes more fixated on Bone’s quest for identity.

Apart from her masturbatory fantasies, Aunt Raylene is instrumental in Bone's journey towards healing. She is a lesbian who does not adhere to patriarchal practices: "For all she was a Boatwright woman, there were ways Raylene had always been different from her sisters. She was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way" (178). Cousin Butch comments that, "Raylene had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She'd called herself Ray" (179). Raylene also confesses to Bone that she ran off to the carnival, "'yeah, but not for no man'" (263).

Raylene's role is pivotal with respect to Bone's healing as well as understanding and accepting her mother's choice. It is also significant that Raylene discloses the unspeakable abuse to the rest of the family. In sharp contrast to her mother and other aunts, who encourage Bone to be a good housewife and a mother, Raylene's life itself suggests that such practices and ideologies can be resisted. She questions "the system that defines women as selfless wives who mother their husbands sometimes at the neglect of their children" (Grogan 172). Raylene is a positive role model and her character gives the hope that Bone will resist her "daddy's meanness" (132), and will no longer be subjugated by people like "Daddy Glen".

The lesbian theme is understated in the novel, however, Allison makes subtle hints regarding Bone's lesbianism. In the final scene, Anney presents Bone's birth certificate "blank, unmarked, unstamped," leaving her under the care of Raylene (309). It is indeed ironic that Bone gains legitimacy through her disinheritance. Resting her head on Raylene's shoulder, Bone's thoughts veer towards her mother:

Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or to do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine. What

would I be like when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be as strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed? (309).

Bone examines the circumstances that compelled Anney to choose Glen over her own daughter, instead of questioning why she does not leave him. She understands that her mother is conditioned by a system that “makes Anney value having a husband above caring for her daughter” (Woo 696). She reflects on her own emerging identity: “I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (Allison, *Bastard* 309).

Bone’s sexuality will either be formative of her mother’s ideologies or her aunt’s values; what is clear at this point is that she is becoming comfortable with her “bastard” status. The statement, “I wrapped my fingers in Raylene’s and watched the night close in around us,” is suggestive of queer tendencies (309). Raylene also operates as “a displaced marker of Bone’s queer sexuality, if not her incipient lesbianism” (Cvetkovich 350). Allison leaves the reader with the image of Bone and Raylene: “When Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love” (309). The final scene implicates lesbianism as an alternative to the male dominated heterosexual relationship that Anney adhered to, and also serves as an exit from the cycle of abuse.

Allison has her own reasons as to why she leaves lesbianism “tantalizingly vague” in *Bastard* (Cvetkovich 350). An outright lesbian who has been vocal and articulate in terms of sex and sexuality in most of her writing, Allison affirms “being a lesbian is part of why I survived,” but she did not intend to chart Bone’s coming-of-age as a lesbian (Strong 97). She states, “The book is not about growing up queer successfully, and I got the real strong impression from talking to people was, what they hoped I would write would be the lesbian biography” (Hollibaugh 16). It seems likely that Allison purposely added the element of uncertainty with regards to Bone’s sexuality, since she refused to develop linkages between incest and queer identity, implicating such liminal identities as a remedy or a solution out of

father-daughter incest. As she herself alleges, “if that were the case, we’d have a lot more lesbians” (*Two or Three Things* 45).

Aunt Raylene instructs Allison’s protagonist to become the author of her own story, which proves to be the most important lesson she has learned thus far. Bone’s story so far has been conditioned and directed by voices other than her own. She has finally embarked on a journey where she is in-charge. By way of example, Raylene’s life illustrates the transformative power of the individual. *Bastard* does not confine itself to detailing the events that build up to childhood sexual abuse, it explores the journey towards survival and healing. Narrative, therefore, plays a very significant role in Bone’s and Allison’s healing. Storytelling is intrinsic to Bone’s existence, as it serves to alter her reality, “All the Boatwrights told stories, it was one of the things we were known for, and what one cousin swore was gospel, another sore just as fiercely was an unqualified lie” (53). As Granny relates her fantastic stories, she often failed to discern fact from fiction:

She would lean back in her chair and start reeling out story and memory, making no distinction between what she knew to be true and what she had only heard told. The tales she told me in her rough, drawling whisper were lilting songs, ballads of family, love, and disappointment. Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary. (26)

Reconstructing reality is mesmerizing for young Bone, for she has come to the realization that “tragedy can be rewritten as legend” (Grogan 175). Glen recognizes this shared nature of relating stories amongst the Boatwrights, and considers Granny’s tales as “threats to his patriarchal control” (ibid). Glen instructs his stepdaughters to avoid these tales, ““Your granny is the worst kind of liar,”” Glen condescendingly remarks, ““That old woman wouldn’t tell the truth if she knew it”” (52). Replacing Granny’s tales, Glen narrates stories about the

Waddell family claiming them to be his own children: “I’ll tell you what’s true. You’re mine now” (52).

After the gruesome rape scene, Bone is set on authoring her own story, her stepfather no longer has a hand in directing her life story. Granny’s tales of “grief and blood” (26) reverberates with Bone. Likewise, she resorts to telling frightening stories well into her abuse:

. . .boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives. Witches cut off the heads of children and grownups. Gangs of women rode in on motorcycles and set fire to people’s houses. The ground opened and green-black lizard tongues shot up to pull people down (119).

By creating fictional stories, it therefore seems that Bone maintains a necessary distance from painful experiences, which allows a state of composure as she embarks on the process of reconstructing and altering her reality. Much like Allison who heals herself through writing, Bone does the same with fictional stories for it provides the necessary distance from traumatic memories. Whilst the rape took place, damaging Bone’s innocence, she studies her stepfather’s face and compares it to, “a road map, a route to be memorized, a way to get back to who I really was” (288), with an intent to transform it into a story of her identity. The scene is critical, with commentaries on the role that narration plays for Bone and incest victims, in their transition from victim to survivor:

[Bone] is aware that in order to fully overcome this traumatic experience she will have to be able to tell a story of it to herself, fit it into a mental scheme....By fixing Daddy Glen’s face, and all the shame and trauma it signifies for her, in her memory, Bone will be able to assimilate it all into narrative language, a story she can tell herself about herself that she will be able

to use to transform emerging feelings of shame into a source of empowerment (Friedel 36-37).

Amidst the obstacles, Bone realizes that narrating her story in her own terms will enable her to become a whole person, inspite of past traumatic experiences. In writing *Bastard*, Allison recreates her life story and gives Bone the strength of character she herself did not possess at that same age. Allison states:

But I didn't get angry until I was in my late twenties. When I constructed this novel, I constructed it in such a way that Bone gets angry at thirteen, and I think it'll save her. I think it is the best ending I could put on the book. She begins to hold people responsible (Claxton 6).

Allison is cogent in rewriting her own story, and is satisfied with the book's final chapter in which Bone finally begins to develop a sense of her own identity and "goes to live with somebody who will teach her not to give her life away to a man who won't value it" (Strong 95). With storytelling as her weapon of choice, Allison finds herself resisting the shackles of a patriarchal society that erstwhile crippled her individual self and her protagonist.

For Allison, writing of past traumatic experiences is therapeutic, it allows her the necessary distance from traumatic memories while confronting them at the same time: "Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them" (*Trash* 3).

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## **Chapter 4: Situating Allison in the Tradition of American literary regionalism**

In the pre-revolutionary era, literature from the South primarily reflected the dominant social and economic systems of the southern plantations. The southern literate upper-class was shaped by the classical, Old World ordeal of a noble landed gentry made possible by slavery. Southern culture naturally evolved around the ideal of the gentleman. In his famous letter of 1726 to Charles Boyle, William Byrd describes the gracious way of living at his plantation, “Westover”.

Besides the advantages of pure air, we abound in all kinds of provisions without expense (I mean we who have plantations)...

Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flock and herds, my bondmen and bondwomen and every kind of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but Providence (VanSpanckeren 12).

William Byrd epitomizes the spirit of southern colonial gentry. *The History of the Dividing Line*, and his travel diaries contain the earliest stigmatizing depictions of poor low-status whites whom he dubbed “lubbers”. Lubbers are precursors to white trash and Byrd’s depiction of poor low-status whites may further be considered as the first documentation of white trash in Southern literature.

This chapter focuses on Allison’s exploration of a regional space, that of the American South in the primary texts and situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism. American literary regionalism refers to creative writing in fiction or verse that focuses on specific characteristics encompassing dialect, custom, landscape, history, characters, and history of a particular area or region. Tracing the history of American literature, it can be gathered that, “The earliest writings on this continent were colonial – the work by English men and women in a foreign land which for generations had little influence on their prose and verse” (McDowell 108). Time birthed a new nation whose citizens insisted on a

“national literature”. Eventually a new literature came to being; exclusive of a group of American writers living in a narrow strip of land – “the strip of the Atlantic seacoast from Salem, Massachusetts to New York City” (109). In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the literary capital moved from New York to Boston to New York again; and literature was distinctly and avowedly nationalistic...regional literature was identical with national literature, for a single region produced it all” (ibid).

The picture changed however well into the turn the century, for distinctions were sharp between the literature of New York, of New England, and of the South. The writers in the East were no longer “the authentic spokesmen of the entire nation, they were merely the voice of a very important section” (ibid). In the words of McDowell,

Regionalism appeared earliest and flourished and flourishes most vigorously in the South, fortunately “reconstructed but unregenerate.” A major center of regionalism is the Carolinas, where conditions are highly favorable for such activity. Here may be observed a concern alike with the past and the present – an interest colored by local pride but guided by scientists, particularly at Duke University and the University of North Carolina (112).

With Mark Twain as its predecessor, regional writers include, Ellen Glasgow, Thomas Stribling, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Elizabeth Roberts, and Paul Green in the south; Robert Frost, Mary Ellen Chase, Paul Green, and Marjorie K. Rawlings in the east; Carl Sandburg, Louis Bromfield, Phil Stong, and James Farrel in the midwest: and in the far west, John Steinbeck, Oliver La Farge, and Robert Cantwell. Even though there is evidence of regional awareness in southern writing it was only the 19<sup>th</sup> century that regional considerations began to overshadow national ones.

The setting is intrinsic to American literary regionalism; for regionalist writers the setting is central and not merely incidental – for instance Faulkner’s Mississippi, Twain’s Hannibal, Steinbeck’s Salinas and so on. Authors in this tradition “focused on representing the unique locales of what they saw as a vanishing American past whose customs, dialect, and characters they sought to preserve” (Campbell 971).

Furthermore, as writers of a continuing national narrative implicitly focused on what it meant to be American, they often presented characters as types, sometimes as representatives of the collective traits of a community or region, and sometimes as outsiders or eccentrics whose attempts to fit into a community exposed both the community’s values and their own (ibid).

Alongside the emphasis that is placed on setting, regionalist fiction also features dialect, which lends an element of authenticity to the tale. Regionalism has an element of “local color”, in the sense that it has the quality and background exclusive of and specific to a particular region or place, and requires the voice and representation of a native. This type of fiction cannot be done from above or from the outside. The characteristics specific to American literary regionalism is evident in the writings of Dorothy Allison. In both her fiction and non-fiction, Allison centers her stories in the locales of South Carolina and Georgia. As many critics have noted, regionalist literature defines itself as necessarily distinct from the whole, a literature of margins. Allison chooses as her subject, the infamous marginalized social group referred to as white trash. The authenticity of her art lies in the fact that it contains the native element, a trait specific to regionalism, since she herself belongs to this group. Representing a particular region, and a specific group of people with respect to landscape, customs, values, and dialect, rightly situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism.

In the words of Dickinson:

Dorothy Allison's first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) provides a graphic depiction of the domestic and sexual violence inflicted upon a twelve-year old girl by her stepfather in Greenville County, South Carolina, during the 1950s. Possibly the most demonised and scrutinised regional space within the national boundaries of the USA, "the South has long been that 'other country' which is both part of, and differentiated from, the rest of the nation" (74).

The institution of slavery and its history has led to manifestations of the South as "a regional space in which a sense of place is paramount and whose 'refusal to engage with the wider world and its concerns has locked it into a morbid past'" (ibid). The South has invariably been depicted as "insular and obsessed with its indigenous history and character", and is "repeatedly derided for the incestuous nature of relations, be they family members or religious and political alliances" (ibid). Allison's text perturbs and disconcerts the reader as it ventures into this region, and delves into intricate details regarding violence, loyalty, and love in a community of marginalized poor whites. With setting being a central element among regionalists, Allison does with Greenville, South Carolina what Faulkner does with Mississippi.

Greenville, South Carolina, in 1955 was the most beautiful place in the world. Black walnut trees dropped their green-black fuzzy bulbs on Aunt Ruth's matted lawn, past where their knotty roots rose up out of the ground like the elbows and knees of dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars. Weeping willows marched across the yard, following every wandering stream and ditch, their long whiplike fronds making tents that sheltered sweet smelling beds of clover. Over at the house Aunt Raylene rented near the river, all the trees had been cut back and the scuppernong vines torn out. The clover grew in

long sweeps of tiny white and yellow flowers that hid slender red-and-black striped caterpillars and fat gray-black slugs – the ones Uncle Earle swore would draw fish to a hook even in a thunderstorm. But at Aunt Alma’s, over near the Eustis Highway, the landlord had locked down the spigots so that kids wouldn’t cost him a fortune in water bills. Without relief of a sprinkler or hose the heat had burned up the grass, and the combined efforts of dogs and boys had reduced the narrow yard to a smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks (Allison, *Bastard* 17-18).

Allison reiterates the above description of Greenville, South Carolina in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*:

Where I was born – Greenville, South Carolina – smelled like nowhere else I’ve ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles, cheap make-up and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the country of my nightmares: a pure pink blue sky, red dirt, white clay, and all that endless green – willows and dogwood and firs going on for miles (6-7).

Allison continues to explore her southern heritage, not only through the characters she projects but also through southern cuisine, and this is found predominantly in her poems. *The Women Who Hate Me* (1991) consists of twenty-seven poems written between 1980-1990. The collection denotes the poetic persona’s growth of identity and acceptance of self. According to Dennis Kulp, “The poems leave one shaken, fully aware of Allison’s forthright use of language, and impressed by her voice which commands attention” (21). Allison is one of the



founders of the “Lesbian Sex Mafia”, a New-York based group whose members include women involved in various kinds of non-mainstream sexuality. In *The Women Who Hate Me* she explores her past – her childhood in South Carolina, her relationship with her mother and sisters, the earlier days of her lesbianism and her everyday life in Brooklyn, New York, and relationships with lovers – “with both the women who hate her and the women who love her” (ibid).

The opening poem to the series “dumpling girl” immediately draws the reader into the Southern culture:

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 (Allison, *The Women Who Hate Me* 9).

Allison echoes her southern heritage through food imagery in the poem, suggesting a “nostalgic orientation towards southern food” (Cantrell np). Pork-laced greens are pertinent to an understanding of Allison’s “white trash, no-account” southern roots and “are inexpensive and widely available to the lower classes” (ibid).

The first stanza claims ownership of traditionally southern practices such as eating biscuits, sipping tea, and preparing quintessentially southern meals, such as, stewed okra, potatoes with gravy and turnip greens. Having established the poetic persona's southern roots, her sexual preferences and practices follow. The last two lines of the poem "and lick slow // like mama's favourite dumpling child" not only contains the sexual theme, but also goes back to the nostalgic southern childhood memories with which the poem started.

Her second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998), set in rural Georgia, reverts to previously established themes of familial relationships, poverty, violence, liberation and redemption. The setting is very much emphasized as she does with most of her work, paying much attention to minute details in terms of description.

Cayro, Georgia, was just another wide patch off the side of Highway 75. Most people on their way north from Atlanta never saw it. Downtown consisted of a triangular intersection no bigger than a good-sized basketball court. There was a sign that read WELCOME on one side and COME BACK SOON on the other. The cutoffs at each corner of that intersection were marked with little directional arrows on which someone had drawn smiley faces. The road north led back to Highway 75 and the route to Nashville, but another smiley-face sign indicated that it was also the way to the county hospital. The route south was marked MARIETTA, but the road west was a mystery, with only the silhouette of a chicken beside the smiley face (43).

Delia gives an illustration of character traits that are typical to people in this region of America. She tells her daughter Cissy:

“Don’t worry, baby. It will be different in Cayro,” Delia said. “It an’t like here. People are different there. They care about each other, take time to talk to each other. They don’t lie or cheat or mess with each other all the time. They’re not scared, not having to be so careful all the time. They know who they are, what is important. And you’ll be with your sisters. You won’t be alone. Not being alone in the world, that’s something you’ve never had. That’s something I can give you (10-11).

Delia’s description of those labelled as white trash by affluent whites bears witness of the many redeeming qualities that they possess. She highlights such qualities as loyalty, honesty, and authenticity which she finds lacking amongst so called affluent whites.

Dirt has a symbolic association with white trash existence since time immemorial and the mention of dirt in Allison’s texts reiterates extreme representation of poor whites by Southern writers and humorists as clay eaters. In *Cavedweller* for instance Delia tells her daughter Cissy that Granddaddy Byrd grows dirt in his farm:

“What does Granddaddy Byrd grow on his farm?”

“Dirt.” Delia gave a wry grimace. “He an’t farmed in thirty years...”(43)

An interesting aspect of Allison’s work is her portrayal and emphasis on southern gospel music popular especially amongst the poorer sections of society in this region. In *Bastard*, Allison “interrogates the notion of musical salvation offered to Ruth Anne ‘Bone’ Boatwright in the gospel and country music communities of the American South in the 1950s and 1960s” (George 126-127). Critical discussions have addressed “Bone’s ‘white trash’ status and its history in the South, the shame it brings to Bone in particular, and the different ways Bone challenges her assigned place in the community through her masturbatory fantasies,

story-telling, and visual re-makings”( 127). However, these discussions fail to address the element of gospel music intrinsic to the South and remarkably significant within the context of Allison’s texts. Other critics like James R. Giles argue that these aspects are commendable for in depth analysis:

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is its exploration of the gospel music subculture and especially of the close connections between gospel and ‘popular’ music in the South (91).

George’s article discusses how, “Allison uses southern music history to critique the coercive raced, classed, and gendered values of patriarchy; through Bone’s developing recognition of this coercive community” (129), and also “reimagines a cohesive South based on resistance to these oppressive values – a resistance found in the gospel community’s origins and in country music’s honky-tonk angels” (ibid). Allison exposes “the imagined coercive southern community that excludes Bone because she is labelled ‘white trash’ and ‘bastard’” (ibid.) Bone observes the productive nature of Southern gospel music where it provides financial stability and a sense of complacency for the musicians:

Gospel singers always had money in their pockets, another bottle under their seats. Gospel singers had love and safety and the whole wide world to fall back on – women and church and red clay soil under their feet (Allison, *Bastard* 168).

For Bone, gospel music offers a potential escape from the unstable home life provided by Glen. She dreams of becoming part of a real family other than the Boatwright family – a gospel family:

All I needed was a chance to turn my soulful black eyes on a tent full of believers, sing out the little break in my heart. I knew I could make them love me. There was a secret to it, but I would find it out. If they could do it to me, I would find a way to do it to the world (143).

Donald G. Mathews makes the following statement with respect to religion and racial distinctions in the American South:

in the years surrounding the Civil War, “social rank, learning, intelligence – most of the bases for making invidious distinctions among people – were cast” in hopes of creating a community through personal relationships with Christ (12).

George discusses how “revivals, camp meetings, and gospel music” were introduced as “conversion tactics for the individual Christian and the group” (130) – “In the camp meetings, after sermon, followers gathered to sing hymns set to popular folk tunes” (Goff 18). Several critics demonstrate that “gospel music was characterized by interracial interaction in the antebellum south” (George 130). Although segregated “camp meetings” did prevail, Goff gives an account of “camp meetings” where “no wall segregation existed and interracial worship services carried the day” (19). He further states that in the midst of interracial services, black and white southerners continue to influence one another:

Here in the midst of common worship experience, despite the invariable conflict of racial stereotypes and limits imposed by southern culture, worshippers listened, learned, and shared (19).

When Bone listens to gospel music, Allison emphasizes these idealized origins, however when gospel music grew into music produced for the masses, “evangelical intentions for equality collapsed into an industry divided by race and class” (George 130).

Gospel music shifted from a communal form of prayer to a business, where large five-and-seven-note shape book companies used singers to promote their products. The shared singing between songsters and congregations at camp meetings gave way to gospel quartets and families, who gained profit from once-free performances (130-131).

In *Bastard*, Allison explores this shift in gospel history from that of a “communal form of prayer” to a “business” that promoted gospel singers (ibid). This is clearly evident in the case of the Pearl family, who make a comfortable living out of the religious business. The source of livelihood for the Pearl family comes from Mr. Pearl’s promotion of gospel singers, his wife Mrs. Pearl does her share by sewing for these potential artists. Bone also recognizes that Shannon and the Pearl family maintain a sense of pride and superiority especially when interacting with people like the Boatwrights. She comments that Mrs. Pearl:

reminded me of the way James Waddell looked at us, of his daughters’ smug, superior faces, laughing at my mama’s loose teeth and Reese’s curls done up in paper scraps. Daddy Glen was still working for the Sunshine Diary and continued to take us over to his father’s or one of his brothers’ every few weeks, though they never seemed any happier to see us. Their contempt had worn my skin thin, and I had no patience for it. Whenever the Pearls talked about my people, I’d take off and not go back for weeks (162).

Apart from class dynamic in southern gospel community, Alison critiques the racial dynamic as well. Bone is conditioned by her family's notion of race; however, she is considerably darker in complexion in comparison to other Boatwrights, which leaves her feeling conscious of her physical appearance and develops a sense that she is different from the rest of her family. Her dark complexion compels her to identify with African Americans; she even resorts to a potential friendship with a young black girl at her cousin Gray's apartment. Bone questions Southern race relations, and makes the following observation:

I had heard all the hateful jokes and nasty things people said about “niggers,” but on my own, I had never spoken to a colored person in anything more than the brief careful ‘sir’ and “ma’am” that Mama had taught us. I was shy with those kids as they seemed to be with us. As nervous as the idea made me, I wished that girl would come out so that I could try to talk to her, but she never did more than look out the windows at us. Her Mama had probably told her all about what to expect from trash like us (86).

Allison makes a continued exploration of the connections between race and class prejudice through Bone's “travels on the segregated gospel circuit” (George 132). On one occasion, Shannon and Bone stumble on a black choir in the backwoods, which resonates with the protagonist:

Gut-shaking, deep-bellied, powerful voices rolled through the dried leaves and hot air. This was the real stuff. I could feel the whisky edge, the grief and holding on, the dark night terror and determination of real gospel (Allison, *Bastard* 169).

Bone requests Shannon that they approach her father, since he makes a living out of promoting gospel singers. However, Shannon replies, “He don’t handle colored. An’t no money in handling colored” (170). In this instance, Allison criticizes the underlying hypocrisy and racial prejudice that marked Southern gospel. She also links “gospel history with an imagined southern community, where barriers of race and class kept the black choir and white trash from gaining power in an industry reserved for white-middle class southerners like the Pearls” (George 134).

Allison possesses a taste for gospel singing which is another identifiable trait of the working- class. Gospel singing is intrinsic to the south and even more so among the poorest rural classes. The common folk rejected the lyrics of hymns from established churches and, in time composed hymns that reflected values and beliefs exclusive to their background. Till date, a section of poor white population rely on religious music as an attempt to deal with their isolation and powerlessness. The practice of gospel singing among poor whites in the south allows a sense of belonging, and a sense of community. In her short story, “Gospel Song” Allison states:

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. I knew. I knew I was the most disgusting person in the world. I didn’t deserve to live another day. I started hiccupping and crying.

“I’m sorry. Jesus, I’m sorry.”

How could I live with myself? How could God stand me? Was this why Jesus wouldn’t speak to my heart? The music washed over me...*SOFTLY AND*



*TENDERLY*. The music was a river trying to wash me clean. I sobbed and dug my heels into the dirt, drunk on grief and that pure, pure voice. It didn't matter then if it was whiskey backstage or kissing in the dressing room. Whatever it took to make that juice was necessary, was fine. I wiped my eyes and swore out loud. Get those boys another bottle, I said. Find that girl a hard-headed husband. But goddamn, get them to make that music! Lord, make me drunk on that music (*Trash* 56-57).

Because American literary regionalism has a rather broad connotation, Allison's work may further be categorized as Grit Lit. Grit Lit has close associations with American literary regionalism since it focuses on a particular region, that of the American south with explicit characteristic traits. The genre of Grit Lit focuses primarily on the American South – particularly that of the blue-collar Southerner. Grit Lit lacks clarity in terms of definition since it is a fairly new genre. “Grit Lit” is an amalgamation of “grit” – the personality trait, and “literature.” An essay in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* defines “grit” as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals ...his or her advantage is stamina” (Duckworth 1087). In 1988, three remarkable figures published their premier fictions: Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, and Tim Mc. Laurin. A pioneer writer of the genre – “Grit Lit”, “Larry Brown has been lauded for his graphic, raw fiction about the rural South – stories featuring characters who are ordinary and poor, and struggling with such real-life issues as marital strife, alcoholism, suicide and the traumas of war” (Bledsoe 68). The genre primarily associates itself with a Southern rural background comprising of poor white characters belonging to the working-class; the predominant setting is “white, poor, and dirty with characters who drink, fight, fornicate, and drive trucks” (Jensen 8). The principal characters of this genre are invariably male. Allison may be classified as a classic Grit Lit author, but in certain areas she is not, the most glaring area is that she is a woman when most Grit authors are male, and she is

homosexual. In a literary tradition that generally refrains from representing women and rejects the notion of homosexuality, Allison has a woman partake in the activity of creating the landscape usually perceived as inherently masculine.

In his essay on “Rough South” writers, Eric Bledsoe primarily focuses on Larry Brown, Tim McLaurin, and Dorothy Allison, which is suggestive of the fact that the three represent the genre – Lit Grit. He further establishes that all three writers published their first work of fiction in 1988 with which they joined “Crews in writing about southern poor whites from within the class” (1). With *Bastard*, Allison’s publishing house writes that “critics have likened her to William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Harper Lee, naming her the first writer of her generation to dramatize the lives and language of poor whites in the South” (Jensen 11). The above quotation positions Allison within the confines of a grit lit writer. *Bastard* in particular, and Allison’s literary pieces in general, usually takes place in a blue-collar setting; it emphasizes the centrality of land, it employs the grotesque and Southern Gothic elements, and the narrative takes place in an inherently patriarchal set up. All of these elements are traits that define Grit Lit.

Allison in her collection of stories titled *Trash*, which serves as the socioeconomic backdrop of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, examines the label “trash” applied to white lower class like herself.

Now for a word on “trash.” I originally claimed the label “trash” in self-defense. The phrase had been applied to me and to my family in crude and hateful ways. I took it on deliberately, as I had “dyke” – though I have to acknowledge that what I heard as a child was more often the phrase “white trash”. As an adult I saw all too clearly the look that would cross the face of any black woman in the room when that particular term was spoken. It was like a splash of cold water,

and I saw the other side of the hatefulness in the words... I gave that one up and took a simpler honorific...

In 1988, I titled this short story collection *Trash* to confront them and to claim it honorific (xv-xvi).

In *Skin*, a collection of essays, Allison discusses the typical representation of the poor—“invariably male, righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble” (17), and then juxtaposes that with poor white trash: “The poverty I knew was dreary, deadening, shameful, the women powerful in ways not generally seen as heroic by the world outside the family” (ibid). In an interview, Allison dilates on the above statement: “You know we weren’t always clean and you could get seriously depressed about yourself if you did not even meet the romanticized notion” (Claxton 44). This clearly appropriates the “Grit Lit” label, the setting is rough and dirty and there is nothing alluring or dignified about it. Since Grit Lit essentially focuses on working-class environment, it is blue-collar in the sense that it pertains to their nature of work and their supposed lifestyle. In *Bastard*, the men folk resort to menial jobs, they “fish, fight, and fornicate to varying degrees” (Jensen 12). Uncle Earle, for instance, enjoys fishing, he tends to be violent, and is sexually promiscuous. Uncle Wade indulges in extramarital affairs, so he is thrown out by Aunt Alma, hence he indulges in fornication. Although Bone and her sisters are too young to fornicate, they masturbate instead. Daddy Glen on the other hand gets violent when he beats Bone and molests her.

Another activity that is associated with this genre is drinking. The characters in Allison’s work often indulge in this activity. Bone’s uncles are known to drink excessively especially when out in the yard fixing their trucks. The uncles’ drunken fighting lands them in jail and even on the front pages of the newspaper. Bone herself sips beer and whisky at one point in the novel at her aunt’s funeral:

“What,” Butch muttered in my direction. “A little Carter Family caterwauling? Maybe that one about building your house for the Lord?” He snorted and began to sing a brief offkey chorus of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” His breath came out in pale little clouds.

“You can’t sing,” I told him.

“Hell, none of us can.” He passed me the whisky. “You want a sip? Might warm you up.” I said nothing, just drank deeply. I liked the taste. It was strong, a little bitter, but warming. Butch laughed gently, tipped the bottle back, and refilled his cup with Pabst. “Don’t you tell your Mama, now. She’d take my head off.”

“Give me some.” I took the cup before he could object and poured as much as I could of the beer down my throat. It tasted mild after the whisky, but it hurt to swallow, whether because it was so cold or that I drank such a big gulp, I couldn’t have said. For all I knew, beer was supposed to hurt going down...

“Whoa, Bone! Girl, you been growing up while I been gone? Drinking beer and stealing whiskey?” (Allison *Bastard* 241-242)

*Bastard* contains a host of grotesque elements, befitting the tradition of Grit Lit writers like Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor. Shannon Pearl is another case in point in the sense that she is described as monstrous.

Six inches shorter than me, Shannon had the white skin, white hair, and pale pink eyes of an albino, though her mama insisted Shannon was no such thing.

“My own precious angel is just a miracle child,” Mrs. Pearl declared, “Born too

soon, you know. Why, she was so frail at birth we never thought the Lord would let her stay with us. But now look at her. In my Shannon, you can just see how God touches us all.”

Shannon’s fine blue vessels shone against the ivory of her scalp. Blue thread under the linen, her mama was always saying. Sometimes, Shannon seemed strangely beautiful to me, as she surely was to her mother. Sometimes, but not often. Not often at all...

Looking back at me from between her mother’s legs, Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction (155)

The grotesque is inherent in Allison’s presentation of Bone’s family. “The sweating, spitting grandmother, the insecure, underachieving stepfather, the eternally hell-raising Uncle Earle and the drunken gospel singers” (Jensen 13), signal the element of grotesque.

Peggy Dun Bailey states that, “With her definition of the ‘Southern tradition’ as ‘the grotesque’ and her identification to literary forebearers ...Allison associates herself and her writing with complex category of Southern Gothic” (1), and labels Allison as “Southern Gothic”. In *Bastard*, for instance, Anney is gifted a love knot by “the Eustis aunts,” Mary and Marvella when she marries Glen. The knot is made from “Marvella’s hair” and rabbit blood “drained under a full moon” (41-42). When the knot “disintegrates the consequences are apparently dramatic for the marriage” (Jensen 14).

The sisters sent Mama a wedding present, a love knot Marvella had made using some of her own hair, after Marvella had cut little notches in their rabbits’ ears under a new moon, adding the blood to the knot. She set the rabbits lose, and

then the two of them tore up half a dozen rows of their beans and buried honeycomb in a piece of lace tablecloth where the beans had flourished. The note with the love knot told Mama that she should keep it under the mattress of the new bed Glen had bought, but Mama sniffed the blood and dried hair, and shook her head over the thing. She couldn't quite bring herself to throw it away, but she put it in one of her flower pots out in the utility room where Glen wouldn't find it stinking up their house (41-42).

Other instances of Southern Gothic include the case of Reese's father, who dies in "devil's rain", witnesses to the incident doubted that he actually died. Shannon's death completely embodies Southern Gothic elements:

Shannon didn't even scream. Her mouth was wide open, and she just breathed the flames in. Her glasses went opaque, her eyes vanished, and all around her skull her fine hair stood up in a crown of burning glory. Her dress whooshed and billowed into orange-yellow smoky flames. I saw the fork fall the wooden handle on fire. I saw Mrs. Pearl come to her feet and start to run toward her daughter. I saw Shannon stagger and stumble from side to side, then fall in a heap. Her dress was gone. I saw the smoke turn black and oily. I saw Shannon disappear from this world (201).

Other examples of Southern Gothic include "Bone's birth to an unconscious mother who has just flown through a windshield" (Jensen 14), and the burning down of the court house, and "with that Bone's birth certificate leaving her with an option of rewriting her past" (ibid). Following is a detailed description of Bone's birth:

My aunt Alma insists to this day that what happened was in no way Uncle Travis's fault...There's no question in my mind but that they had all been drinking, except Mama, who never could drink, and certainly not when she was pregnant.

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 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 out my name (2)

Another important trait of Grit Lit is the strong patriarchal hierarchy within the family unit as well as in society. Patriarchy is the framework within which Allison operates especially in terms of her fiction. In *Bastard* Daddy Glen is without a doubt the head of the family, he himself comes from a patriarchal set up where his father dominates him. The very fact that Bone's "legitimacy is decided by whether or not she has a father listed on her birth certificate" (Jensen 14-15), validates the patriarchal framework of the novel. However, Allison deviates from typical grit lit writers when she deals with gender roles. Although she sets her novel in a "male-dominated patriarchal environment", Allison "manages to expose the flaws of the system" (ibid). The men are portrayed as "rambunctious" little boys.

My aunts treated my uncles like overgrown boys – rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked than worried over – and they seemed to

think of themselves that way too. They looked young, even Nevil, who'd had his teeth knocked out, while aunts – Ruth, Raylene, Alma, and even Mama – seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men (23).

“Men,” says Aunt Ruth, “are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can. Your Mama knows it as well as I do. And Glen...” (123). She continues: “There’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband. And that an’t so rare. I’ll tell you” (ibid). Uncle Earle for instance is described as a little boy by Aunt Ruth, “A sad wounded man who genuinely likes women – that’s what Earle is, a hurt little boy with just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested” (24-25). Bone’s biological father is described as “A sorry excuse for a man” (25), and is also portrayed as a boy like other male figures in the novel: “That boy was scared shitless, holding you in hands stained dark green where he’d been painting his daddy’s flatbed truck” (ibid).

In *Bastard*, it is the women who make sacrifices and hold the family unit together. Kathlene McDonald observes the reversal of gender roles within the context of the novel: “Anney falls in love with Glen’s need for attention and mothering yet she maintains that she needs him to take care of her” (20). She further dilates on the subject and maintains that:

Anney provides financial support for Glen and her children. Glen’s inability to hold down a job and frequent periods of unemployment make him more of a liability than a source of support. But even though Anney does not depend on Glen financially, she believes she needs a man to survive. She cannot leave him, despite his intensifying violence toward Bone and his failure to put food on the table more often than not. Her final decision to remain with Glen thus has less to do with her love for him than her fear of being without a man (ibid).



She also writes that “the Boatwright women seem unable to recognize the support they derive from the strong community of women in the novel” (ibid). In an interview, Allison pointed out, “They knew it was important but didn’t think it was nearly as important as what a man and a woman made together” (Megan 77). The aunts’ “nasty and strong” support system offers a substitution to the world of “spitting, growling, overbearing males” (91). The Boatwright sisters fail to see the network of support that they have with each other and choose to depend on men whom they have to mother. Quoting McDonald:

Together, the Boatwright sisters can draw support from one another rather than devoting all their energy to caring for their men. The aunts nurture and sustain one another, give one another power and strength, and help one another survive, but ultimately they believe they need to rely on their men (20).

Bone’s attempt to appropriate male gender roles becomes clear when she plays “mean sisters” with her cousins. When Reese asks her what “mean sisters” do, she responds: “They do everything their brothers do. Only they do it first and fastest and meanest” (Allison *Bastard* 212). Aunt Raylene is another character that transcends gender roles. At the very end of the novel, we are told that Aunt Raylene is a lesbian. Like the uncles in the novel, “she wears overalls, cuts her hair short, and even drives a truck” (Jensen 32). She paints a fairly masculine image and picks trash out of the river. It is primarily through Aunt Raylene and Bone that male and female gender roles are blurred. Allison takes male characters and exposes their “general uselessness” (McDonald 19). This is evident in the case of Glen Waddell as previously mentioned, and also with the Boatwright brothers. McDonald establishes that: “They maintain a fierce loyalty to the Boatwright clan, often assuming the role of the protector. At the same time, they allow themselves to be taken care of by their sisters, who treat them like ‘overgrown

boys” (ibid). Allison emasculates the male characters, and the space traditionally occupied by men is filled by female characters, like Raylene.

Allison herself grew up in a patriarchal set up, she establishes the same environment in her pieces, but she deviates from the norm in her portrayal of gender dynamics. In all of her writings, “men are still the ones who beat their wives, drive trucks, and get into fights. But these actions are portrayed more as expressions of powerlessness than of power” (Jensen 16). Men are physically stronger, they fornicate, drink, and fight which fits well within the grit lit genre, but the pathetic nature of these traits are exposed which is a rare practice in this tradition.

As it has been previously noted, American literary regionalism defines itself as necessarily distinct from the whole, it is essentially a literature of margins. The same may be said for Grit Lit as well, for it focuses particularly on southern whites who are poor. Likewise, Allison’s writing draws heavily on the space that her kind – white trash, occupy within the American south. She examines the Other space occupied by white trash and further describes the marginalized experience; her lived experiences as a member of this group lends an element of authenticity to her tales.

In her essay, Melanie Grue discusses how middle-class definition of white trash “combines objective data and myths, leading to the creation of a threatening social ‘Other’ who should be confined to a real and imagined space of abjection” (32). She also states that, white trash as a group “is the victim of fixed representations and seems to be condemned to wander in social and human limbo because they fail to match the cultural ideals” (ibid). When describing the ambiguous white trash position, Allison questions the conception of normative whiteness. Whiteness is invariably associated with invisibility and is considered normative, this, in turn guarantees social superiority. However, white trash questions the homogeneity of

the white group simply because they are white and poor at the same time. Therefore, white trash poses an internal threat to the existence of the dominant white group. This threat requires the creation of a specific space, designed to welcome white trash, with the sole purpose of protecting clean, pure middle-class from contamination

In the words of Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, white trash is “the most clearly marked form of whiteness” (4). White trash represents the white Other, born into a condition of lack. This condition arises from the fact that they lack the essence of whiteness, which Peggy McIntosh rightly defines as an invisible knapsack of special provisions. The othering of white trash is therefore complete with the creation of specific spaces designed to welcome them, quarantined spaces that will ensure preservation of the pure dominant white group. Michel Foucault’s discourse on crisis heterotopia and heterotopias of deviation becomes extremely relevant on the subject of creating the Other space for white trash.

Foucault describes the crisis heterotopias designed by primitive societies as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (24). These heterotopias were created for a specific purpose:

These heterotopias were created to welcome people whose physical condition prevented them from living with the community, (aging, menstruation, childbirth) but later on individuals have been assigned to this social space because of moral or behavioral characteristics. Therefore the creation of heterotopias is linked to the notion of norm and deviance, whether they refer to the body or morals (Grue 44).

Goffman studies the social codes of categorization and the influence of stigma on social identity, explaining that “society establishes the means of categorizing persons” and decides

what attributes are ordinary and natural for each category (11). In Ancient Greece, “stigmas” were signs inscribed on the bodies of slaves, criminals, or traitors, whose moral anomaly was made visible during a ritual (ibid). Goffman juxtaposes “stigma symbols” with “prestige symbols,” both of which classified individuals according to their worth. These symbols decided whether individuals should be socially acknowledged. Foucault also discusses how the heterotopias of crisis were substituted with heterotopias of deviation which welcome individuals who deviate from a certain norm. In Foucault’s discourse, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible, “the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (26). Goffman, on the other hand considers isolation as a punishment that does not require any ritual or purification; rather, the marginalization of the spoilt individual allows the purification of the social space. According to Wray and Newitz, the term white trash suggests “something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance,” the ambiguity of the term therefore implies that: “White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness” (Hill 169-170). Wray and Newitz uncover the fact that purification of the white group is unrealizable. Since white trash has its origins in the white group, complete rejection from the parent group becomes impossible hence posing a persistent internal threat.

Allison examines the space between normality and otherness, and exposes how people are segregated according to their social status. She deplores the fact that white trash lives are not as worthy as everybody else’s. In the essay “A Question of Class”, Allison discusses how one of her cousins was sent to jail when he was eight. Allison’s cousin and another boy – the son of a deacon, had been caught breaking into payphones; after being caught, he was arrested and sent to the county farm, while the other boy was sent back to his parents. This incident clearly reveals the unfair treatment meted out to the white trash child. Being a member of the other social group, Allison’s cousin is not given a chance at all: “He never went back to school,

and after jail he couldn't join the army" (*Skin* 29). Allison continues to explain: "We were trash. We were the ones they built the county farm to house and break" (*ibid*). The county farm much like Foucault's heterotopias of deviation represents the space where socially deviant individuals are locked up and isolated, and made docile and harmless.

Allison describes how white trash, deviate from the pure white norm in her poem "Upcountry":

When the uncles came to visit  
 pickups parked aslant the yard  
 bottles that rocked from board to rim  
 shotguns point-down beside the gears  
 a leather holster or canvas sling  
 I watched the neighbors squint their eyes  
 no-count, low down, disgusting,  
 I put my nails to the bones of my neck  
 squeezed, trying to understand.  
 You don't know where she's been.

I know where I've been (*The Women Who Hate Me* 10-11).

The trucks parked aslant and the rolling bottles symbolize the uncles' deviation from social norm while the neighbours' attitude and insult point to social inferiority.

In an episode in *Bastard* where Bone and her family attend a gathering at the Waddell's, Bone and her sisters, referred to as "Anney's girls" are served tea out in the backyard. They are not allowed to enter the house while their cousins run in and out of the house:

They served us tea in the backyard, just us – Anney's girls, they called us. Their kids went in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, tracking mud in on the braided rugs (101).

Anney's girls constitute the Other, who are deprived access to the space of social privilege in the fear that they might pollute it, ironically, the privileged cousins are the ones who bring dirt and contaminate the preserved space.

Through her writing Allison illustrates the process of othering as well as the creation of a space of abjection, dedicated to welcome deviant individuals. The stigmatization and the marginalization of white trash, exposes the anxiety of middle-class, who fear pollution thereby making attempts at isolating the internal threat. White trash heterotopias indicate the fear of losing control and worth, as well as the need to define some individuals as less-than-human in order to assert one's superiority. White trash therefore constitutes an undesirable Other within the social and cultural space, they are visually distinguishable and physically put at a distance from the realm of normality. When Allison writes about the cultural, imaginary, and spatial distinctions established between individuals, she opposes the conception that allows certain individuals to be constrained, and condemns the social processes that alienate certain individuals such as the subject in question.

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## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This research examines the representation of white trash from selected texts of renowned author Dorothy Allison. The question of representation and the idea of representational control is therefore a focal point in this study. Allison's representation of white trash subculture in the selected texts expose the control of representation, since she has exercised the power to represent white trash for the sole reason that she identifies and belongs to the subculture. Theoretical positions on representation and subculture by Stuart Hall has been drawn to categorize white trash as a subculture, and further examine how they have been presented in literature over the years. 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, for Hall, representation does not merely translate reflection, it is rather an act of reconstruction. From a critical standpoint, Hall and Cultural Studies interpret representation as an act of ideological recreation which exclusively caters the interest of those who control the discourse. 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 is to protect the dominant white group from contamination by way of isolating white trash. The isolation references physical distance in certain instances but also

points towards psychological othering as well. In posing an internal threat to the white group, upper and middle-class whites, psychologically distance white trash from the parent group in order to protect their status and privilege. 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 discourse on crisis heterotopia and heterotopias of deviation becomes extremely relevant on the subject of creating the Other space for white trash. Crisis heterotopia refers to “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly etc” (Foucault 24). Heterotopias of deviation, refers to those spaces: “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). These heterotopias were created for a specific purpose:

These heterotopias were created to welcome people whose physical condition prevented them from living with the community, (aging, menstruation, childbirth) but later on individuals have been assigned to this social space because of moral or behavioral characteristics. Therefore the creation of heterotopias is linked to the notion of norm and deviance, whether they refer to the body or morals (Grue 44).

The question of representational control becomes very relevant with respect to Allison's representation of white trash in her texts. Allison paints an accurate picture of white trash in all of her writing, which translates as an honest attempt to humanize the notion of the white trash identity. For Allison, the hope is that her writing will break down social misrepresentations of white trash,

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).

Allison presents the white trash perspective in all of her texts, offering a glimpse of their reality. Traditionally, white trash has been represented in literature by those belonging to the upper-class. Individuals who are ignorant of their reality subscribe to an exaggerated display of dominant stereotypes, distorting the already tarnished image of white trash. In her collection of essays titled *Skin*, Allison claims that, "The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction" (*Skin* 14).

Allison integrates an array of stereotypes referencing lewdness, drinking, poverty, and violence 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 amusing, and pathetic aspect of white trash culture, but fails to recognize the material conditions that make them true. When Allison shows the liminal experience of white trash with respect to their identification with the white group, the choices that they have or the lack thereof, the poverty and hunger, and the contempt and hatred from other classes of society, she relates to the reader, the material reality and subjugation that lies behind fixed caricatures and popular stereotypes. She focuses on "internalized classism" and

discusses how many men and women categorized as white trash internalize the shame and hatred from upper and middle-classes and consider themselves trash.

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.

Allison's work brings to the forefront poor white culture – 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 whites' culture as any other social group, flaws and virtues intact.

According to 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).

In its entirety, Allison's work speaks of those hybrid and multiple identities, and simultaneously invites readers to reflect on the social conditions to which stigmatized poor whites are subjected. She embraces certain socially stigmatized traits affixed to white trash but strays from others. Her literary pieces are saturated with images of self-destructive characters, telling their stories as they tackle life's problems with dignity and resilience. She voices her disapproval, on the other hand, of overt racism and illiteracy amongst white trash, allowing her characters to have a different view on the subject, thereby offering the notion of real people and not just mere caricatures.

Although Allison has only one memoir under her belt, most of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it. Allison's personal experience of incest, her lesbianism and the trauma thereof, along with her lived experience of being categorized as white trash constitute the subject matter in a majority of her work. The autobiographical strain evident in Allison's writing makes Michel Foucault's description of human beings as "confessing animals" very relevant within the context of this analysis (Pennebaker 13).

The genre of autobiography has developed into an increasingly popular mode of communication for marginalized groups. By way of responding to question "Why Memoir Now?", the title of her article, Vivian Gornick surmises that the recent surge of memoir's popularity, particularly those authored by marginalized groups is the result of "...thirty years of politics in the streets [which] have produced an outpouring of testament from women, blacks, and gays that is truly astonishing" (1).

The recent surge in memoir popularity reflects a changing political atmosphere, where entire groups of people who once experienced mass silencing now feel it is their right to express their experiences in writing, to verbalize their lives in a way that validates them personally and before society. It is especially important for groups outside the societal mainstream (i.e., white, male, straight, middle-

class) to feel authorized to write their stories. Often this authority comes slowly and painfully, and the writing may come first; beginning to write may help writers feel authorized to continue telling their life stories (Massey 3).

Dorothy Allison became a memoirist with *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). In 1994, she published a collection of autobiographical essays, many composed earlier and published elsewhere. In her memoir, “Allison constructs a personal account of the poverty, incest, and physical abuse she endures as a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina” (ibid), drawing readers into “Allison’s world of intense self-disclosure” (ibid). Although *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is Allison’s first and only memoir, all of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it.

In both her fiction and non-fiction, Allison constantly returns to the highly personal topics of incest, poverty, and lesbianism. Writing about past trauma does not force the traumatic experience out of her psyche but allows her to sustain an emotional composure. Based on numerous studies on the healing benefits of writing, psychologists establish that “writing about trauma is proven to have therapeutic effects on the writer” (Massey 7). For Allison as well, “writing becomes the only way to express the unspeakable, and speaking through writing becomes the only way to express pain and make sense of traumatic events” (Massey 8).

Laura S. Brown makes an argument regarding male trauma and female trauma. She argues that male trauma is public and acceptable whereas female trauma, which often remains hidden, has dimensions of aberrance surrounding it, and therefore differentiates between acceptable male trauma and unspeakable female trauma.

War and genocide, which are the work of men and male – dominated culture, are agreed upon traumas: so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean (101).



Brown further argues that these male traumas are “rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims” (102). Women, however, have been “victims of rape, incest, and domestic violence who are subjected to disbelief, criticism, blame, and hostility” (Massey 9). Allison recounts that she struggled for many years to become “a woman who can talk about rape plainly, without being hesitant or self-conscious” (*Two or Three Things* 42). Women are thus doubly traumatized in that they experience a sense of shame about the violence have endured and continue to endure.

In *Bastard*, Allison has two primary objectives: “to put in print everything I understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place” (*Skin* 54) and relate “the complicated, painful story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl” (34). Her work is seminal in examining the mother’s pivotal role in cases of incest between father and daughter, “as she tries to come to terms with how the mother’s action or inaction further traumatized the daughter” (Grogan 147). Allison refrains from portraying Anney as a “collusive mother”, she, instead, “reflects on why the mother doesn’t leave her abusive husband and finally chooses him over her daughter” (ibid).

Through writing *Bastard*, Allison eventually forgives her mother for ignoring her daughter’s abuse. She understood her mother’s evasiveness with respect to the abuse, and eventually forgives her through writing *Bastard*. She attributes her mother’s actions and decisions to prevailing laws regarding unwed mothers:

Aware of the harshness of South Carolina’s laws in the 1950s regarding unwed mothers (the state went so far as to enact “a substitute parent law” that denied “aid to children whose mothers had even a casual, short term relationship with a man”), she notes that many women in her culture wished to marry in order to escape the ingrained shame of class prejudice (Grogan 153-154).

Allison comments on the matter, “I think the shame [my mother] felt was one of the reasons she stayed with my stepfather. She wanted to be respectable” (Strong 95). She acknowledges the psychological nature of her mother’s attachment to her stepfather: “My stepfather broke her, broke her in a way that she couldn’t imagine life without him” (Jetter 56). Allison’s mother never left her abusive stepfather and died at fifty-six of cancer. Tokarczyk remarks that, “In her final days, Allison’s mother apologized to her for the abuse she had endured; trying to explain that she never wanted their lives to be so horrifying, that she always hoped things would get better” (168). Allison acknowledges her mother sentiments, commenting that she “fought desperately to get us through our childhood intact, but she failed utterly” (Strong 64).

By way of unveiling Bone’s resilience and focusing on the complexity of Anney’s character, Allison explains: “I had to forgive my mother, really forgive her in order to show a child who couldn’t forgive her” (Hollibaugh 16). In *Bastard*, Allison dramatizes the incest in such a way that it problematizes easy categorization of the characters as victim and instigator. It becomes rather glaring that “forgiving rather than hating marks Allison’s aesthetic” (Tokarczyk 192).

Allison has her own reasons as to why she leaves lesbianism “tantalizingly vague” in *Bastard* (Cvetkovich 350). An outright lesbian who has been vocal and articulate in terms of sex and sexuality in most of her writing, Allison affirms “being a lesbian is part of why I survived,” but she did not intend to chart Bone’s coming-of-age as a lesbian (Strong 97). She states, “The book is not about growing up queer successfully, and I got the real strong impression from talking to people was, what they hoped I would write would be the lesbian biography” (Hollibaugh 16). It seems likely that Allison purposely added the element of uncertainty with regards to Bone’s sexuality, to avoid developing linkages between incest and queer identity, implicating such liminal identities as a remedy or a solution out of father-

daughter incest. As she herself alleges, “if that were the case, we’d have a lot more lesbians” (*Two or Three Things* 45).

For Allison, writing of past traumatic experiences is therapeutic, it allows her the necessary distance from traumatic memories while confronting them at the same time: “Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them” (*Trash* 3).

Allison’s writing explores a regional space; that of the American south, which situates her in the tradition of American literary regionalism. American literary regionalism refers to creative writing in fiction or verse that focuses on specific characteristics encompassing dialect, custom, landscape, history, characters, and history of a particular area or region.

With Mark Twain as its predecessor, regional writers include, Ellen Glasgow, Thomas Stribling, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Elizabeth Roberts, and Paul Green in the south; Robert Frost, Mary Ellen Chase, Paul Green, and Marjorie K. Rawlings in the east; Carl Sandburg, Louis Bromfield, Phil Stong, and James Farrel in the midwest: and in the far west, John Steinbeck, Oliver La Farge, and Robert Cantwell. Even though there is evidence of regional awareness in southern writing it was only the 19<sup>th</sup> century that regional considerations began to overshadow national ones.

The setting is intrinsic to American literary regionalism; for regionalist writers the setting is central and not merely incidental – for instance Faulkner’s Mississippi, Twain’s Hannibal, Steinbeck’s Salinas and so on. Authors in this tradition “focused on representing the unique locales of what they saw as a vanishing American past whose customs, dialect, and characters they sought to preserve” (Campbell 971).

Furthermore, as writers of a continuing national narrative implicitly focused on what it meant to be American, they often presented characters as types,

sometimes as representatives of the collective traits of a community or region, and sometimes as outsiders or eccentrics whose attempts to fit into a community exposed both the community's values and their own (ibid).

Alongside the emphasis that is placed on setting, regionalist fiction also features dialect, which lends an element of authenticity to the tale. Regionalism also has an element of "local color", in the sense that it has the quality and background exclusive of and specific to a particular region or place, and requires the voice and representation of a native. This type of fiction cannot be done from above or from the outside. The characteristics specific to American literary regionalism is evident in the writings of Dorothy Allison. In both her fiction and non-fiction Allison centers her stories in the locales of South Carolina and Georgia. As many critics have noted, regionalist literature defines itself as necessarily distinct from the whole, a literature of margins. Allison chooses as her subject the infamous marginalized social group referred to as white trash. The authenticity of her art lies in the fact that it contains the native element, a trait specific to regionalism, since she herself belongs to this group. Representing a particular region, and a specific group of people with respect to landscape, customs, values, and dialect, rightly situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism.

In the words of Dickinson:

Dorothy Allison's first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) provides a graphic depiction of the domestic and sexual violence inflicted upon a twelve-year old girl by her stepfather in Greenville County, South Carolina, during the 1950s. Possibly the most demonised and scrutinised regional space within the national boundaries of the USA, "the South has long been that 'other country' which is both part of, and differentiated from, the rest of the nation" (74).

The institution of slavery and its history has led to manifestations of the South as “a regional space in which a sense of place is paramount and whose ‘refusal to engage with the wider world and its concerns has locked it into a morbid past’” (ibid). The South has often been depicted as “insular and obsessed with its indigenous history and character”, and is “repeatedly derided for the incestuous nature of relations, be they family members or religious and political alliances” (ibid). Allison’s text perturbs and disconcerts the reader as it ventures into this region, and delves into intricate details regarding violence, loyalty, and love in a community of marginalized poor whites. With setting being a central element among regionalists, Allison does with Greenville, South Carolina what Faulkner does with Mississippi.

Greenville, South Carolina, in 1955 was the most beautiful place in the world. Black walnut trees dropped their green-black fuzzy bulbs on Aunt Ruth’s matted lawn, past where their knotty roots rose up out of the ground like the elbows and knees of dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars. Weeping willows marched across the yard, following every wandering stream and ditch, their long whiplike fronds making tents that sheltered sweet smelling beds of clover. Over at the house Aunt Raylene rented near the river, all the trees had been cut back and the scuppernong vines torn out. The clover grew in long sweeps of tiny white and yellow flowers that hid slender red-and-black striped caterpillars and fat gray-black slugs – the ones Uncle Earle swore would draw fish to a hook even in a thunderstorm. But at Aunt Alma’s, over near the Eustis Highway, the landlord had locked down the spigots so that kids wouldn’t cost him a fortune in water bills. Without relief of a sprinkler or hose the heat had burned up the grass, and the combined efforts of dogs and boys had reduced the narrow yard to a smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks (Allison *Bastard* 17-18).

Allison reiterates the above description of Greenville, South Carolina in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*:

Where I was born – Greenville, South Carolina – smelled like nowhere else I’ve ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles, cheap make-up and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the country of my nightmares: a pure pink blue sky, red dirt, white clay, and all that endless green – willows and dogwood and firs going on for miles (6-7).

Because American literary regionalism has a rather broad connotation which implies a recognition from the colonial to the present of differences among specific areas in the country, Allison’s work may further be categorized as Grit Lit. Grit Lit has close associations with American literary regionalism since it focuses on a particular region, that of the American south with explicit characteristic traits. The genre of Grit Lit focuses primarily on the American South – particularly that of the blue-collar Southerner. Grit Lit lacks clarity in terms of definition since it is a fairly new genre. “Grit Lit” is an amalgamation of “grit” – the personality trait, and “literature.” An essay in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* defines “grit” as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals ...his or her advantage is stamina” (Duckworth1087). In 1988 three remarkable figures published their premier fictions: Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, and Tim Mc. Laurin. A pioneer writer of the genre – “Grit Lit”, “Larry Brown has been lauded for his graphic, raw fiction about the rural South – stories featuring characters who are ordinary and poor, and struggling with such real-life issues as marital strife, alcoholism, suicide and the traumas of war” (Bledsoe 68). The genre primarily

associates itself with a Southern rural background comprising of poor white characters belonging to the working-class, the predominant setting is “white, poor, and dirty with characters who drink, fight, fornicate, and drive trucks” (Jensen 8). The principal characters of this genre are invariably male. Allison may be classified as a classic Grit Lit author, but in certain areas she is not; the most glaring area is that she is a woman when most Grit authors are male, and she is homosexual. In a literary tradition that generally refrains from representing women and rejects the notion of homosexuality, Allison has a woman partake in the activity of creating the landscape usually perceived as inherently masculine.

Allison’s writing draws heavily on the space that her kind – white trash, occupy within the American south. She examines the Other space occupied by white trash and further describes the marginalized experience; her lived experiences as a member of this group lends an element of authenticity to her tales.

In the words of Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, white trash is “the most clearly marked form of whiteness” (4). White trash represents the white Other, born into a condition of lack. This condition arises from the fact that they lack the essence of whiteness, which Peggy McIntosh rightly defines as an invisible knapsack of special provisions. The othering of white trash is therefore complete with the creation of specific spaces designed to welcome them, quarantined spaces that will ensure preservation of the pure dominant white group. Michel Foucault’s discourse on crisis heterotopia and heterotopias of deviation has therefore been linked with the subject of creating the Other space for white trash within the context of this analysis.

Allison examines the space between normality and otherness, and exposes how people are segregated according to their social status. She deplores the fact that white trash lives are not as worthy as everybody else’s. In the essay “A Question of Class”, Allison discusses how

one of her cousins was sent to jail when he was eight. Allison's cousin and another boy- the son of a deacon, had been caught breaking into payphones; after being caught, he was arrested and sent to the county farm, while the other boy was sent back to his parents. This incident clearly reveals the unfair treatment meted out to the white trash child. Being a member of the Other social group, Allison's cousin is not given a chance at all: "He never went back to school, and after jail he couldn't join the army" (*Skin* 29). Allison continues to explain: "We were trash. We were the ones they built the county farm to house and break" (*ibid*). The county farm much like Foucault's heterotopias of deviation represent the space where socially deviant individuals are locked up and isolated, and made docile and harmless.

Allison describes how white trash, deviate from the pure white norm in her poem "Upcountry."

When the uncles came to visit  
 pickups parked aslant the yard  
 bottles that rocked from board to rim  
 shotguns point-down beside the gears  
 a leather holster or canvas sling  
 I watched the neighbors squint their eyes  
 no-count, low down, disgusting,  
 I put my nails to the bones of my neck  
 squeezed, trying to understand.  
 You don't know where she's been.



I know where I've been (*The Women Who Hate Me* 10-11).

The trucks parked aslant and the rolling bottles symbolize the uncles' deviation from social norm, while the neighbours' attitude and insult point to social inferiority.

In an episode in *Bastard* where Bone and her family attend a gathering at the Waddell's, Bone and her sisters, referred to as "Anney's girls" are served tea out in the backyard. They are not allowed to enter the house while their cousins run in and out of the house:

They served us tea in the backyard, just us – Anney's girls, they called us. Their kids went in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, tracking mud in on the braided rugs (101).

Anney's girls constitute the Other, who are deprived access to the space of social privilege in the fear that they might pollute it, ironically, the privileged cousins are the ones who bring dirt and contaminate the preserved space.

Allison's work illustrates the process of othering, as well as the creation of a space of abjection, dedicated to welcome deviant individuals. The stigmatization and the marginalization of white trash thus exposes the anxiety of middle-class, who fear pollution thereby making attempts at isolating the internal threat. White trash therefore constitutes an undesirable Other within the social and cultural space, they are visually distinguishable and physically put at a distance from the realm of normality. When Allison writes about the cultural, imaginary, and spatial distinctions established between individuals, she opposes the conception that allows certain individuals to be constrained, and condemns the social processes that alienate certain individuals such as the subject in question.

The underlying component of this analysis is Allison's rendition of the liminal experience of white trash. Allison transcends popular myths and stereotypes that defines the very existence of white trash. Her representation both defies and accepts the popular myths and stereotypes that have been associated with white trash since time immemorial. Allison's ultimate goal is to present white trash as real people. In the colonial era, poor white trash were described as lazy and shiftless because they refused to work. They lived outside of society because of their rejection of society's work ethic. For years, they have been objects of ridicule which can be traced to popular images of white trash such as August Baldwin Longstreet's comical portrayal of Ransy Sniffle, a poor white Southerner who fed copiously on red clay and blackberries. Popularized by Longstreet as "dirt eater", Sniffle was a grotesque comic character notable for his poor diet, physical deformities, laziness, apathy and low intelligence, and his oddly coloured skin. The dirt eater was used by Longstreet and later by other humourists to amuse and disgust a growing audience of middle-class readers.

The economic signifier "poor" is very significant in studying individuals identified as white trash in American literature. The phrase "poor whites" which has been part of the American vernacular since the 1700s, has a revelatory history- having shifted over the years from "poor whites" to "poor white trash" to merely "white trash." Poverty – whether material, cultural, or intellectual, came to be the hallmark of poor white trash, and the failure to move from one class to another is a hallmark of the white trash experience. Poverty is simply an outward marker of one's categorization as white trash. Consequently, difference of identity is no longer established by skin colour, and that differences exist among whites themselves – differences marked by categories like white trash, which may serve to undo whiteness as racial supremacy. Because the term "white trash" foregrounds whiteness and working class or underclass poverty, two social attributes that usually stand far apart, they are part of but not

recognized within dominant whiteness. Similar to other ethnic minorities, white trash has been othered by dominant whites themselves.

Allison's texts underline the fact that white trash in itself is a stigmatized identity. From Ransy Sniffle to Twain's Pap Finn, the element of grotesque is ever present in the portrayal of white trash. The very projection of this section of the white population as physically unappealing reinforces its nature as a stigmatized identity. The fictional characters in Allison's literary pieces as well as her memoir signal the innate trashiness of white trash. This is evident in the grotesque descriptions of the Boatwrights and the Gibsons.

Social critics like Wray and Newitz have failed to explain the reason behind the trashiness of white trash. Having said that, not all poor white people can be categorized as white trash. To cite an example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, makes clear demarcations between the clean and honourable poor, and white trash. Allison herself discusses the issue of the good poor and the bad poor. Literary texts like Mitchell's tend to project white trash poverty as an outcome of laziness.

The Slattery family in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* are considered "white trash", by Scarlett's class conscious, genteel society. Even the house "negroes" of the County considered themselves superior to white trash.

Tom Slattery owned no slaves, and he and his two oldest boys spasmodically worked their few acres of cotton, while the wife and younger children tended what was supposed to be a vegetable garden. But, somehow the cotton always failed, and the garden, due to Mrs. Slattery's constant childbearing, seldom furnished enough to feed her flock. (Mitchell, 51)

Able Wynder, on the other hand, is elected lieutenant by the Troop inspite of him being poor.

Don't you call Able Wynder "po' white". Sure he's poor, but he ain't trash; and i'm damned if I'll have any man, darky or white, throwing off on him. There ain't a better man in this County, or why else did the troop elect him lieutenant... 'He ain't trash! Do you mean to compare him with real white trash like the Slatterys? Able just ain't rich. He's a small farmer, not a big planter, and if the boys thought enough of him to elect him, then it's not for any darky to talk impudent about him. The Troop knows what it's doing (19).

The descriptions given about the Slatterys, places them a class apart from Able Wynder, and members of the class-conscious genteel society differentiate the honourable poor from real white trash like the Slattery family. With the myth of the poor, lurks the colonial attitude of discriminating a man by his physical features. These attributes are always constructed to mean a hierarchy of values again swayed to favour the elite white skin. In an introductory piece to a collection of short stories, Allison makes the following observation with reference to white trash and poverty:

There was a myth of the poor in this country, but it did not include us, no matter how I tried to squeeze us in. There was this concept of the "good" poor... hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. We were the bad poor. We were men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became 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. My cousins quit school, stole car, used drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables. I worked after school in a job provided by Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, stole books I could not afford. We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight for

or struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and those who did try to escape failed (Allison *Trash* viii).

Through her representation of white trash, Allison provides an insider's view of what it feels like to be white and underclass. She deconstructs previous misconceived images of white trash created by mainstream whites and focuses instead on the social conditions to which stigmatized poor whites are subjected. Allison allows her characters to transcend generally accepted stereotypes and attempts what is rarely done within the realms of American literature by presenting white trash as real people- flaws and virtues intact, instead of mere caricatures. She further makes the following comments with respect to the characters in her literary pieces:

A lot of working-class fiction or pseudo-working-class fiction gives you dismissive caricatures, people who drink and whore and kill each other and are funny about it. I wanted my characters to be charming, so charming they wake you up in the night. That, for me, is political fiction. It takes you out of yourself, it makes you brood on it, it makes you worry about what happens after the book is over. It makes you want to argue with these women and talk to the men (Claxton 44).

According to Dietzel, an important aspect of Allison's work is that she writes against misrepresentation, and refuses romanticizing and idealizing her characters, and therefore states:

One of the themes that shapes your work is that you are writing against misrepresentations, particularly of working-class women, queers, and poor people in general. That, I think, is something you have learned from feminism. Breaking down misrepresentations and infusing the genre with, for example, brutal honesty has added a lot to working-class literature. Unlike Victorian

working-class fiction, you refuse to romanticize the working-class heroine – make her into the angel of the home. Similarly, unlike proletariat writing of the 1930s, you refuse to idealize your characters – make them larger and more noble than life, elevating them to the vanguard of the coming revolution (ibid).

She also claims, “I have been writing all my life against the romaniticization of the lesbian, and the romanticization of the survivor...Some of the romantic stuff helps. But only if it is placed in a very real context” (Claxton 46). She refuses romanticizing and idealizing her characters, and dilates on how white trash has failed to meet the romanticized notion of the poor:

No, I think that it is one of the things that hurt me a great deal as a child, where you encountered this romantic notion, “Oh, they’re ragged, but they’re clean!” Because you know, we weren’t always clean and you could get seriously depressed about yourself if you did not even meet the romanticized notion (ibid).

Allison writes against misrepresentations, “particularly of working-class women, queers, and poor people in general” (Claxton 44). Ultimately, she writes to save herself, and also writes with the hope that her fiction will “replace prevailing stereotypical and distorted images of white trash with sincere identities that speak the harsh truth about economic inequality” (Docka np).

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<b>XII</b>	<b>ISCE</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>71.8%</b>
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<b>NET</b>	<b>UGC</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>Lectureship</b>	
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2. Attended and presented a paper entitled “Mizo Society vis-a-vis Literature: A Study on Select Narratives of Mizo Literature” at the State Level Seminar on “The Mizo Society – Continuity and Change”, on 17-18 July 2019 at Lunglei, Mizoram, organised by Department of History, Govt. J. Buana College.
3. Attended and presented a paper entitled “An Ecopsychological Reading of Vanneihluanga’s ‘Thunderbird’” at the Seminar on “Interpretations of Mizo Culture in Literature”, on 4 September 2019 at Pachhunga University Auditorium, Aizawl, organised by Mizoram English Literature Society.
4. Published Work:
  - i) “A Study on Trauma and Healing in C.Thuamluaia’s ‘Sialton Official’” published in *Mizoram University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (A National Refereed Bi-Annual Journal)* Vol VI. Issue I. June 2019. Pages 110-119. ISSN 2348 –1188.
  - ii) “Dorothy Allison and the Position of White Trash Subculture” published in *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (A Peer Reviewed International Journal)* Vol. 7. Issue 4. Oct.-Dec. 2019. Pages 197-209. ISSN 2395 – 2636.
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6. Attended and participated in a national seminar entitled, “Narrativizing Trauma in North Eastern India and Beyond,” organized by the Department of English, Mizoram University on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> November, 2012.
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**NAME OF CANDIDATE** : **Vanlaltanpuii**  
**DEGREE** : **Ph.D**  
**DEPARTMENT** : **English**  
**TITLE OF THESIS** : **Representation of White Trash  
Subculture in the Works of  
Dorothy Allison**

**DATE OF ADMISSION: 30.07.2015**

## **APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**1. BOS** : **11.04.2016**  
**2. SCHOOL BOARD** : **19.04.2016**  
**3. REGISTRATION NO. & DATE** : **MZU/Ph.D/893of 19.04.2016**  
**4. EXTENSION IF ANY** : **N.A**

**Head**

**Department of English**

**ABSTRACT**

**REPRESENTATION OF WHITE TRASH SUBCULTURE IN THE  
WORKS OF DOROTHY ALLISON**

**VANLALTANPUII**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMANITIES**

This research focuses on the representation of white trash subculture in selected texts of Dorothy Allison. The question of representation is very relevant in the present time and the idea of representational control has been integral to the critique of culture since W.E.B. Dubois. Dubois was specifically concerned with representations of race: “The whites obviously seldom picture brown and yellow folk, but for five hundred centuries they have exhausted every ingenuity of trick, of ridicule and caricature on black folk” (59-60). The disenfranchised on seeing these representations, become ashamed of their own image. Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies give due importance to the control of representation, and exposing that control is their chief concern. Allison’s representation of white trash in both her fiction and non-fiction exposes the control of representation, which simply means that the image of white trash has been constructed over time through literary texts and media representations. However, Allison herself has exercised the power to represent white trash for the sole reason that she herself identifies and belongs to this subculture. For this research, six of Dorothy Allison’s works have been selected. These are: *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983), *Trash* (1988), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994), *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995) and *Cavedweller* (1998). Based on theoretical treatises laid down by Cultural Studies, Michel Foucault, and trauma theorists, this research presents an analysis of Allison’s works. It further examines how Allison’s representation of white trash subculture solidifies notions of regional, class-based, and gender-based prejudices.

In his article, Eric Bledsoe discusses changes in the treatment of white lower-class characters, which began with Harry Crews and continued through the fiction of Dorothy Allison, Tim Mc Laurin, and Larry Brown. He further asserts that white lower-class characters had long appeared in Southern fiction without receiving realistic treatment for their creators belonged to the middle or upper classes and were only able to look at them from the outside. Crews, Allison, McLaurin, and Brown write about life from the perspective of the poor white. Crews and his

disciples write from within the class and force readers to re-examine long held stereotypes and beliefs and challenge the literary role traditionally assigned white trash. These so called “Rough South” writers, a term originated by documentary filmmaker Gary Hawkings, invariably present white trash with realistic detail and forthright empathy.

With the present uncertainty that marks minority groups in the political arena of the United States, Dorothy Allison’s work and performance during the last forty years is worth noting. Determined as she is in taking down the barriers that outcast poor whites from the mainstream, Allison is adamant on telling things as they are. Her 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”. “White trash” is a derogatory term which refers to poor white people in America, especially in the rural South, suggestive of lower social class and low living standards. The term, references a marginalized group of subordinate whites perceived by the elite whites as victims of laziness and immorality and, as Matthew Wray puts it, “stigmatized, dishonored and despised identity” (Hill 170).

This analysis draws on cultural theorists and examines Allison’s white trash as a subculture. Stuart Hall notes that since subcultures are sub-sets “there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the ‘parent’ culture” (Hall and Jefferson 7). Having said that, Hall also claims that subcultures must be identifiably different from their ‘parent culture’. As Phil Cohen suggests, subculture is “a compromise solution, between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents...and the need to maintain ... the parental identifications which support them” (26). 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). Matthew Wray discusses the paradoxical situation of white trash:

if whiteness bespoke purity and godliness, then poor white trash implied an ungodly, desacralized, polluted whiteness. As a social category, it was laden with contradictory meanings (Wray 47).

With the history of whiteness as a mark of one’s social status, poor white trash has emerged as a subset of whiteness, separate from the primary racial classification. Like other subcultures, significant things bind and differentiate white trash from affluent/mainstream whites. White trash is part of but not recognised within white culture, marking it racially, but, as Newitz and Wray have argued, “it is simultaneously marked as trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance” (Hill 169). Therefore, the term “white trash” is not simply a reflection of economic or racial status; it also references certain cultural markers, a “complex set of social representations, an amalgam of well known stereotypes” (Hill 171).

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. 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 explores her class roots, and delineates the shame that stems from being poor and white. She contends that the kind of poverty associated with white trash is



overshadowed by stereotypes of shiftlessness and indolence, and conjectures, “That 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” (*Skin* 15). The insidious nature of shame that is closely tied to internalized classism, and the sense of feeling different and despised is highlighted both in Allison’s fiction and non-fiction.

Although Allison has authored only one memoir, all of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it. The autobiographical tendency in Allison can be paralleled with Foucault’s treatise on disclosure. Allison’s personal experience of incest, her lesbianism, and the trauma thereof when examined under the lens of trauma theorists such as Laura S. Brown, and Judith Lewis Herman brings to the surface unspeakable female trauma.

Allison’s exploration of a regional space that of the American South in the primary texts situates her in the tradition of American literary regionalism. American literary regionalism refers to creative writing in fiction or verse that focuses on specific characteristics encompassing dialect, custom, landscape, history, characters, and history of a particular area or region.

In the words of Dickinson:

Dorothy Allison’s first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) provides a graphic depiction of the domestic and sexual violence inflicted upon a twelve-year old girl by her stepfather in Greenville County, South Carolina, during the 1950s. Possibly the most demonised and scrutinised regional space within the national boundaries of the USA, “the South has long been that ‘other country’ which is both part of, and differentiated from, the rest of the nation” (74).

The institution of slavery and its history has led to the following depiction of the American South as, “a regional space in which a sense of place is paramount and whose ‘refusal to engage with the wider world and its concerns has locked it into a morbid past’” (ibid). The South has invariably been depicted as “insular and obsessed with its indigenous history and character” and is “repeatedly derided for the incestuous nature of relations, be they family members or religious and political alliances” (ibid). Allison’s text perturbs and disconcerts the reader as it ventures into this region, and delves into intricate details regarding violence, loyalty, and love in a community of marginalized poor whites.

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Dorothy Allison is an American writer who claims to be a feminist and working-class storyteller. She has also made her mark as a speaker who openly discusses issues of class, gender, sexual orientation, and violence. Allison was born on April 11, 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to Ruth Gibson Allison, a poor, unmarried fifteen-year-old. At the age of five, Allison’s mother married a route salesman who sexually abused her.

Allison and her family re-located to Florida where she found acceptance from her schoolmates and teachers, in the sense that, she was recognized for her intellect which somehow overshadowed her “white trash” background. She therefore observes, “because they did not see poverty and hopelessness as a foregone conclusion for my life, I could begin to imagine other futures for myself” (Allison, *Skin* 13). She procured a scholarship to “Florida Presbyterian College” which promised her an alternative future

Dorothy Allison as an American poet, novelist, and essayist, securely locates her work on the precincts of Southern and working-class literature, entrenched in feminist and lesbian-feminist activism and politics. Most of her writing focuses on the life of poor Southern “white trash” and the violence, poverty, and abuse that accompanies the conditions under which such

working-class and under-class people live. In her collection of poems, titled *The Women Who Hate Me*, published in 1983, Allison honoured and dissected her sexuality as well as her working-class background. She extolled sadism, masochism, macho-femme role, and sexual perversity in her text, offending and infuriating mainstream feminists. In the preface, to *Trash* (1988), an anthology of short stories, she declares the collection to be “the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope, who has made the decision to live” (7). Around the same time that Allison explored her Southern working-class background through literature, she reconnected with her mother and sisters. Allison as a young adult had distanced herself from her family, but eventually came back to her roots and re-established ties with her family that she had cut off years before.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Allison presents an affectionate yet unsentimental and amusing depiction of a girl belonging to the infamous white trash subculture. Apart from her reality as a member of a marginalized group of poor whites, she is a victim of incest and sexual abuse, which began at the tender age of five. The stepfather and perpetrator, however, denies the abuse till date. Allison does not subscribe to fixed caricatures in depicting her characters; in *Bastard*, for instance, Bone is projected as a victim, and also an individual that possesses strength of character. Allison does not resort to stereotypical representations when portraying her characters, despite her traumatic ordeal, Bone does not fit the victim mould which requires her to be weak, helpless, and without voice.

In 1994 Allison released a collection of essays titled, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*. The collection won the “American Library Association’s Gay & Lesbian Book Award”. The following year, the *New York Times Book Review* dubbed her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), a notable book of the year. Her second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998), reverts to themes of poverty, violence, familial ties, liberation, and redemption. Allison

has made her mark as a renowned member of the *Fellowship of Southern Writers* and former board member of *Feminists for Academic Freedom*. She is deeply influenced by fellow “Rough South” writers such as James Baldwin, and Flannery O’Conner, and feminist activist writers such as Audre Lorde, and Jewel Gomez.

## **Chapter 2: Dorothy Allison and the Position of White Trash Subculture**

This chapter examines Allison’s representation of white trash subculture in the selected texts 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” (Hall and Jefferson 100). On the other hand, “there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the parent culture” (ibid). Likewise, white trash in meeting the colour component identifies with the other whites – those belonging to the upper and middle class, they are often described as being 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 subset 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 is 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. Crisis heterotopia refers to “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly etc” (Foucault 24). Heterotopias of crisis, however, were later substituted by heterotopias of deviation: “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). Foucault’s treatise on heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation can therefore be linked to the creation of quarantined 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). However, for Hall, representation does not merely translate reflection, it is rather an act of reconstruction. From a critical standpoint, Hall and Cultural Studies interpret representation as an act of ideological recreation which exclusively caters the 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). Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies give due importance to the control of representation and exposing that control is their

chief concern, 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. The chapter therefore primarily focuses on Allison's representation of white trash which 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.

As a member of a highly stigmatized social group, Allison draws an accurate picture of her people in her collection of essays titled *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*. 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 being labelled as poor white trash. It took many long years for Allison to overcome the damage of being labelled white trash. She therefore 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 (225).

Allison's writing represents an honest attempt to humanize the notion of poor white trash identity. Through her writing, Allison's 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).

Allison presents the white trash perspective in all of her texts, offering a glimpse of their reality. Traditionally, white trash has been represented in literature by those belonging to the upper-class. Individuals who are ignorant of their reality subscribe to an exaggerated display of dominant stereotypes, distorting the already tarnished image of white trash. In her collection of essays titled *Skin*, Allison claims that, “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).

Allison integrates an array of stereotypes referencing lewdness, drinking, poverty, and violence 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 amusing, and pathetic aspect of white trash culture but fail to recognize the material conditions that make them true. When Allison shows the liminal experience of white trash with respect to their identification with the white group, the choices that they have or the lack thereof, the poverty and hunger, and the contempt and hatred from other classes of society, she relates to the reader, the material reality and subjugation that lies behind fixed caricatures and popular stereotypes. She highlights aspects related to the

excruciatingly painful existence of white trash, making it visible for those on the outside, thus negotiating different perspectives in her representation of white trash.

### **Chapter 3: Autobiographical Impulse in the Works of Dorothy Allison**

This chapter focuses on the autobiographical strain evident in much of Dorothy Allison's writing. Dorothy Allison became a memoirist with *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). In 1994, she published a collection of autobiographical essays, many composed earlier and published elsewhere. In her memoir, "Allison constructs a personal account of the poverty, incest, and physical abuse she endures as a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina" (Massey 3), drawing readers into "Allison's world of intense self-disclosure" (ibid). Although *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is Allison's first and only memoir, all of her writing has an autobiographical tinge to it.

Trauma victims often experience the urge to write their trauma, something Allison herself experiences, and her urge in particular comes with the need to write the same tale in different ways. This compulsion to write of trauma is seen in Allison's work, both in her fiction and her non-fiction. From her acclaimed novels to her collection of short stories, and essays, "Allison has grappled with the topics of poverty and incest, something with which she is painfully familiar" (Massey 4). Timothy Dow Adams conjectures that the reason for Allison's decision to represent her trauma initially in fiction has to do with the "difficulty of telling such a humiliating story through autobiography" (1). Although this may undeniably be the case, "a more significant and telling factor of Allison's return to the topics of incest, abuse, and poverty proves trauma has a repetitive and insistent nature" (Massey 4). What is evident from Allison's work is that, writing does not necessarily cure emotional trauma, however it brings upon the individual a calmer state, continually maintained through writing.

In her memoir, Allison describes her need to write autobiographically. She says,



“When I began [writing fiction] there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive ... But where am I in the stories I tell? Not the storyteller but the woman in the story” (*Two or Three* 4).

In writing her life story, Allison “becomes the woman in the story” (ibid), one that she creates and brings to life. Massey conjectures that:

After writing fiction, after creating and bringing characters to life, it seems she needs to do the same with herself: create herself and her life through a story from which she derives satisfaction. Writing her life stories allow her to construct, or more accurately, reconstruct herself through her writing, creating a necessary narrative (4-5).

Allison herself acknowledged that “Bone is a thinly-veiled Dorothy Allison” (Grogan 151), and modelled Bone’s family after her own. Behind the realistic portrayal of her flawed characters lies the compassion and desire to understand why her kind- white trash, subscribe to a particular behaviour and lifestyle, including Glen, the stepfather. She acknowledges the stereotypes that have been associated with her family, and therefore states,

I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that’s exactly who we are said to be. That’s what white trash is all about. We’re all supposed to be drunks standing in our yards with our broken-down cars and our dirty babies. Some of that stuff is true. But to write about it I had to find a way to pull the reader in and show you those people as larger than that contemptible myth. And show you why those men drink, why those women hate themselves and get old and can’t protect themselves or their children. Show you human beings instead of fold-up, mean, cardboard figures (Hollibaugh 16).

Allison avoids documenting her people as “case studies”. “One temptation,” Allison remarks, “is to make the Boatwrights something off *Tobacco Road*. Just dirt poor slutty horrible, you know, stealing and wenching and all that bullshit” (Graff 46).

The lesbian theme is understated in the novel, however Allison makes subtle hints regarding Bone’s lesbianism. Allison has her own reasons as to why she leaves lesbianism “tantalizingly vague” in her first novel (Cvetkovich 350). An outright lesbian who has been vocal and articulate in terms of sex and sexuality in most of her writing, Allison affirms “being a lesbian is part of why I survived,” but she did not intend to chart Bone’s coming-of-age as a lesbian (Strong 97). She states, “The book is not about growing up queer successfully, and I got the real strong impression from talking to people was, what they hoped I would write would be the lesbian biography” (Hollibaugh 16). It seems likely that Allison purposely added the element of uncertainty with regards to Bone’s sexuality since she refused to develop linkages between incest and queer identity, implicating such liminal identities as a remedy or a solution out of father-daughter incest. As she herself alleges, “if that were the case, we’d have a lot more lesbians” (*Two or Three Things* 45).

#### **Chapter 4: Situating Allison in the Tradition of American literary regionalism**

This chapter situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism. American literary regionalism refers to fiction or verse that focuses on specific characteristics encompassing landscape, customs, characters, and history of a particular area or region. The setting is intrinsic to American literary regionalism; for regionalist writers the setting is central and not merely incidental – for instance Faulkner’s Mississippi, Twain’s Hannibal, Steinbeck’s Salinas and so on. Authors in this tradition “focused on representing the unique locales of what they saw as a vanishing American past whose customs, dialect, and characters they sought to preserve” (Campbell 971).

Furthermore, as writers of a continuing national narrative implicitly focused on what it meant to be American, they often presented characters as types, sometimes as representatives of the collective traits of a community or region, and sometimes as outsiders or eccentrics whose attempts to fit into a community exposed both the community's values and their own (ibid).

Alongside the emphasis that is placed on setting, regionalist fiction features dialect which lends an element of authenticity to the tale. Regionalism also has an element of "local color" in the sense that it has the quality and background exclusive of, and specific to a particular region or place, and requires the voice and representation of a native. This type of fiction cannot be done from above or from the outside. The characteristics specific to American literary regionalism is evident in the writings of Dorothy Allison. In both her fiction and non-fiction Allison centers her stories in the locales of South Carolina and Georgia. As many critics have noted, regionalist literature defines itself as necessarily distinct from the whole, a literature of margins. Allison chooses as her subject the infamous marginalized social group referred to as white trash. The authenticity of her art lies in the fact that it contains the native element, a trait specific to regionalism, since she herself belongs to this group. Representing a particular region, and a specific group of people with respect to landscape, customs, values, and dialect, rightly situates Allison in the tradition of American literary regionalism.

With setting being a central element among regionalists, Allison does with Greenville, South Carolina what Faulkner does with Mississippi. Allison explores her southern heritage not only through setting, or the characters she projects but also through southern cuisine, and this is found predominantly in her poems. An interesting aspect of Allison's work is her portrayal and emphasis on southern gospel music popular especially amongst the poorer sections of society in this region. In *Bastard*, Allison "interrogates the notion of musical salvation offered to Ruth

Anne ‘Bone’ Boatwright in the gospel and country music communities of the American South in the 1950s and 1960s” (George 126-127). Scholars have discussed “Bone’s ‘white trash’ status and its history in the South, the shame it brings to Bone in particular, and the different ways Bone challenges her assigned place in the community through her masturbatory fantasies, storytelling, and visual re-makings”( 127). However, most of these scholars fail to consider the element of gospel music intrinsic to the South, and remarkably significant within the context of Allison’s text. Other critics like James R. Giles argue that these aspects are commendable for in depth analysis:

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is its exploration of the gospel music subculture and especially of the close connections between gospel and ‘popular’ music in the South (91).

Because American literary regionalism has a rather broad connotation, Allison’s work may further be categorized as Grit Lit. Grit Lit has close associations with American literary regionalism since it focuses on a particular region, that of the American south with explicit characteristic traits. The genre of Grit Lit focuses primarily on the American South – particularly that of the blue-collar Southerner. Grit Lit lacks clarity in terms of definition since it is a fairly new genre. “Grit Lit” is an amalgamation of “grit” – the personality trait, and “literature.” An essay in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* defines “grit” as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals ...his or her advantage is stamina” (Duckworth1087). In 1988 three remarkable figures published their premier fictions: Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, and Tim Mc. Laurin. A pioneer writer of the genre – “Grit Lit”, “Larry Brown has been lauded for his graphic, raw fiction about the rural South – stories featuring characters who are ordinary and poor, and struggling with such real-life issues as marital strife, alcoholism, suicide and the traumas of war” (Bledsoe 68). The genre primarily associates itself with a Southern rural background, comprising

of poor white characters belonging to the working-class, the predominant setting is “white, poor, and dirty with characters who drink, fight, fornicate, and drive trucks” (Jensen 8). The principal characters of this genre are invariably male. Allison may be classified as a classic Grit Lit author but in certain areas she is not, the most glaring area is that she is a woman when most Grit authors are male, and she is homosexual. In a literary tradition that generally refrains from representing women and rejects the notion of homosexuality, Allison has a woman partake in the activity of creating the landscape usually perceived as inherently masculine.

With *Bastard*, Allison’s publishing house writes that “critics have likened her to William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Harper Lee, naming her the first writer of her generation to dramatize the lives and language of poor whites in the South” (Jensen 11). The above quotation places Allison within the realms of a grit lit writer. *Bastard*, in particular, and Allison’s literary pieces in general usually take place in a blue-collar setting; it emphasizes the centrality of land, it employs the grotesque and Southern Gothic elements, and the narrative takes place in an inherently patriarchal set up. All of the elements mentioned earlier are traits that define Grit Lit.

Allison’s writing draws heavily on the space that her kind – white trash, occupy within the American south. She examines the Other space occupied by white trash and further describes the marginalized experience, her lived experiences as a member of this group lends an element of authenticity to her tales.

Through her writing Allison illustrates the process of othering as well as the creation of a space of abjection, dedicated to welcome deviant individuals. The stigmatization and the marginalization of white trash exposes the anxiety of middle-class, who fear pollution thereby making attempts at isolating the internal threat. White trash heterotopias indicate the fear of losing control and worth, as well as the need to define some individuals as less-than-human in order to assert one’s superiority. White trash therefore constitutes an undesirable Other within

the social and cultural space, they are visually distinguishable and physically put at a distance from the realm of normality. When Allison writes about the cultural, imaginary, and spatial distinctions established between individuals, she opposes the conception that allows certain individuals to be constrained, and condemns the social processes that alienate certain individuals such as the subject in question.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

Allison's work brings to the forefront poor white culture – 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 whites' culture as any other social group, flaws and virtues intact.

The entirety of Allison's work speaks of the hybrid and multiple facets of the white trash identity, 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 transcend stereotypes, thereby offering the notion of real people and not just mere caricatures. Through her representation of white trash, Allison provides an insider's view of what it feels like to be white and underclass. She writes against misrepresentations, "particularly of working-class

women, queers, and poor people in general” (Claxton 44). Ultimately, Allison writes to save herself, and also writes with the hope that her work will “replace prevailing stereotypical and distorted images of white trash with sincere identities that speak the harsh truth about economic inequality” (Docka np).

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