UNIVERZITA KARLOVA – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLISTIKY A AMERIKANISTIKY

(Re)Shaping the "White Trash" Myth:
Dorothy Allison's Defiant Attempt To Deconstruct the "White Trash" Myth From Within

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (Supervisor):   Zpracovala (Author):
PhDr. Hana Ulmanová, PhD, M.A.   Zuzana Josková
                                    Obor (Subjects): angličtina - čeština

Praha, August 2007

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Praze dne 27. 8. 2007

I declare that the following diploma thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

Prague, August 28, 2007

Acknowledgements

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the diploma thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In contemporary cultural, social, and literary studies in the USA "whiteness" has recently become the central issue of scholarly interest (Wray 146). The goal of "whiteness studies" is to challenge white invisibility and its normative character which continues to permeate most aspects of American life. Rendering the quality of "whiteness" as yet another object of identity debate destroys the racial hierarchy and opens this concept to an honest and unbiased analysis. However, as Matt Wray points out: "Scholars of whiteness have become extraordinarily sure-footed and nimble when the word that follows *white* is *supremacy*, *power*, *privilege*, or *pride*, but they tend to stumble badly when it is followed by *trash*" (Wray 3). This insinuates that whiteness studies are following a common pattern in the American social and cultural discourse and disregard the complexity of the given question, focusing solely on the problematic of "race", and ignoring the numerous related issues such as that of class, gender, sexuality, etc[1]. This articulates the need for new approaches to the studies of identity; not those which focus on its single aspect, but those which take into account its complex, fluid and constantly evolving nature. "White trash" as a cultural concept unites numerous identity categories, and it is therefore imperative to subject it to a multilayered analysis; one which questions and attacks especially those aspects ascribed to "white trash" which have quietly been considered "natural"[2].

What exactly is "white trash"? In America's cultural milieu shaped by the widespread belief in classlessness (Beaver 17), and the possibility of the acquisition of the American dream "white trash" sounds like a pure literary oxymoron. It is a very pregnant label referring

---

[1] I am well aware of the incompleteness of this "list" and of the "embarrassed etc." at its end as Butler called it in *Gender Trouble*. No list can ever enumerate all aspects which comprise one's identity. Thus, my "etc." aspires to embrace all other possible aspects, and to leave this category open for any reader to add his/her own to it.

[2] The academic work in the field of "white trash" studies has been marked by the publication of *White Trash – Race and Class in America*, edited by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz in 1996. Since then, a great debate has taken place among the scholars about the nature of the approach to "white trash" studies. Some have argued that "white trash" studies further bolster the objectification of the "white trash" subjects, strengthening the myth and its negative affect on specific "white trash" people (cf. Smith 2004).

predominantly to the never-ending cycle of poverty[3] among white people living in the rural

South[4]. However, it also carries inherent moral, biological, behavioral, and intellectual

connotations. "White trash" people (read predominantly men) are and have been stereotyped

as lazy, shiftless, slothful, indolent, immoral, racist, overly sexually active and violent

alcoholics[5]. These connotations have remained virtually intact for almost 300 years, allowing

"white trash" to become a myth.

The most important aspect of a myth is that its content (in this case "white trash"

people/bodies) always lies within a great distance from the recipient/creator of the myth. This

distance is both literal and metaphorical. The myth is "naturalized", grounded so deeply in

people's minds that even upon coming face to face with its real content and history the

recipient rather turns to the mythical explanation. This is only possible, because the content of

the myth is constantly being deferred (in Derrida's terms). "White trash" evades definition as

strongly as it is imposed on it from the outside. When deconstructing the myth, it becomes

evident that every aspect of it is simultaneously implying its own counterpart. Thus, "white

trash" people and the "white trash" myth are in a constant state of evasion and equivocation.

There is a false dichotomy between the real and the myth[6]. The myth is a cultural narrative, a

fluctuating text drawing on the language of fact and fiction and affecting real people.

1.1. The "White Trash" Myth Analyzed According to Barthesian Concept of the Myth

The analysis of the "white trash" myth in accordance with Roland Barthes' concept of

the myth as he states it in *Myth Today* proves that "white trash" people/bodies are the empty

---

[3] It is not the static condition of poverty that is so despicable, it is primarily the inability to break its cycle.

[4] In this thesis the labels "South", "Southern", and "Southerner" are used not only regionally but also in the complex "mythical" sense (cf. Wray 159).

[5] These are the characteristic traits of the settlers in antebellum North Carolina as originally depicted by William Byrd in *Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*. Confront the on-line *Urban Dictionary* which features the very same "qualities".

[6] I would like to thank Jeremy Hill from GWU for this comment.

signifiers of the myth, devoid of their history in order to preserve the myth and retain its function. This thesis attempts to show, how the "white trash" myth has become naturalized, and what are, or whether there are, any possibilities of its deconstruction or denaturalization through literature, specifically through the works of Dorothy Allison.

Allison writes from within the myth and intentionally seeks to shatter it. Does she completely denaturalize it? No, she draws on the myth as much as she attacks it, which shows that the extent to which the myth has permeated her writing is noticeably great. Which aspects of the myth is she directly attacking, and which ones has she carried on into her works? Has her attempt to denaturalize the "white trash" myth been successful?

In *Myth Today*, Barthes defines myth as "a mode of signification, a form," (109) a second-level sign made from material which "has already been worked on" (110), in other words simplified, subjected to stereotypical representations. What kind of material formed the "white trash" myth and how had it been filtered in order to provide the desired simplification? It was primarily literature with its stereotypical depictions of southern rural whites; social sciences, especially during the boom of eugenic studies, which labeled poor whites as a distinct ethnic; and popular press spreading the iconic photos of impoverished whites across the nation. All these representations have been emptied of their first level meaning before entering the myth as signifiers. Their signified is the concept of the myth which, according to Barthes "is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations" (119) and holds together only due to its function. What is the most important function of the "white trash" myth? According to Will D. Campbell (Carr 9) it provides a perfect scapegoat for America's gravest sins. Being the ultimate American "other" (Harkins 5) it takes the blame for white racism, the very existence of poverty, and the inability to materialize the powerful myth of the American dream. The myth draws on the assumption that the white color of one's skin is a sufficient condition of success. Those who fail to make use of it must be "deficient in some fundamental

3

manner" (Beaver 19). Furthermore the myth provides a safe boundary for the middle class whose fear of the fluidity of class (Beaver 16) provides a strong reason for keeping the myth alive and powerful allowing it to take on new facades without actually changing its function and impact.

"Myth transforms history into nature" (129), claims Barthes. It substitutes the linear relationship between a signifier and a signified into a causal one, and "robs" the signifier of its history. In order to denaturalize or deconstruct the myth it is imperative to reveal the history of the signifier. Who or what has the potential to do so? In the "white trash" discourse the signifier, or the infinite number of signifiers, are people, bodies. Is it possible to be a part of the myth, an embodiment of the empty signifier, and shatter the myth from within? Up to what extent feel "white trash" signifiers/people that they are being deformed by the myth, and up to what extent did they already naturalize the myth, believing it to be at once "true and unreal" (Barthes 128)? Taking into account the widespread effect of "white trash myth" how strong does the denaturalization have to be? Can one only shatter the myth for him/herself leaving the other recipients of the myth intact, or is it possible that by uncovering the myth for other readers, one "naturally" breaks lose from it? The naturalization of the "white trash myth" is so strong that although its content is constantly shifting, although it perpetually deconstructs itself, the myth pervades in a fixed form, because its "unstable" concept encompasses contrasting qualities which can be modified according to any given situation.

The naturalization of "white trash" signifiers meant not only that poor white Southerners were robbed of their history but also of their voice. "White trash" people have always been objectified and silenced precisely because of the danger they might want to narrate their side of the "story", and thus undermine other "Southern" master narratives (Gray 5). In this respect "trashy" whites share the fate of all other groups (not only) in the United States who were/are disenfranchised and oppressed on the basis of any aspect of their identity

– their race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, opinion, religious beliefs, or anything else; and who are still striving to be heard. The "white trash" myth thus mirrors the function of the master narrative of the colonizer rendering the disenfranchised subjects as "other" and sustaining in them the notion of "natural" inferiority.

1. 2. The "White Trash" Myth in the Works of Dorothy Allison

Dorothy Allison is a contemporary American writer coming from a self-proclaimed "white trash" background; she is the embodiment of the myth's empty signifier. Being a woman her history had not even turned into nature, since as a "white trash" woman she has had no history to begin with[7]. She is one of the very few "white trash" signifiers who has managed to acquire a voice and be heard, and one of even fewer who has dared to make her-"white-trash"-story the main focus of her narration. Apart from many other contemporary Southern women writers she embraces and is proud of the label "white trash"[8]. In many aspects she could be seen as continuing in the Southern literary tradition – she makes use of a vast number of Southern issues ranging from the focus on the South as a unique region, through the nature and importance of female storytelling, to that of the Southern grotesque, and Puritan work ethics. Her writing also coincides with currently debated literary issues, such as that of autobiography, survival dynamics, violence, and shame which all play a major role in her stories.

Allison primarily disrupts the myth by placing women's stories and issues into the center of her writing, since in the "white trash" discourse women have always been defined

---

[7] The vast majority of books about the history of rural poor whites in the South focuses on the living and working conditions of men, women are usually put under the "and family" label. Even publications which acknowledge the lack of academic writing on this subject fail to include equally detailed accounts of women's history (Foley 141-162, Graham 337).
[8] Carolyn Chute, a notable contemporary Southern writer who publishes her writings in mainstream presses, rejects this label fiercely, when it is applied to her work by cultural and literary critics, because she feels its negative and derogatory charge (Hartigan 2005: 127)

(and defined themselves) in terms of their relationships to men (Tracy 185). Furthermore, the sole act of narrating "white trash" stories has "been the exclusive domain of male writers" (Watkins 451). Women's "white trash" history from a point of view of a "white trash" female author opens up a wholly new and neglected world for most readers as well as literary and non-literary scholars[9].

Allison's authorial identity is comprised of innumerable aspects ranging from that of a "white trash" girl, to that of a writer, a lesbian, a fighter for the freedom of one's sexual appetite, a rape victim, a mother, a political activist, and many more. This allows for the fact that Allison is often seen as much of a writer as a publicly politic/politically public persona, or a trauma patient, and her work is thus judged accordingly – as a literary text, a manifesto, or a rape victim's confession. This thesis sets out to pose a literary interpretation and analysis of Allison's work while not excluding the possibility of her texts to function otherwise acknowledging Foucault's demand to see literature as an integral part of social power structures (Vickroy 57).

Concerning the issues present in her writings, it is imperative to view her work from a multilayered perspective and not focus solely on the questions of class, gender, and sexuality as such has been the main trend so far[10]. Bearing in mind the impossibility (and even danger) of the compartmentalization of (a textual) identity, a close reading of a number of Allison's texts will attempt to show how the innumerable issues in her work intermingle and conflate thereby producing a distinct identity, a distinct body, a unique text carrying numerous functions[11].

---

[9] There is a number of sociology, anthropology, and psychology articles which cite Allison's works in order to back up their arguments (cf Haaken).

[10] There is not a great body of academic writing about the works of Dorothy Alison. It comprises predominantly of magazine articles scattered in renowned literary journals such as *Contemporary Literature*, *Southern Folklore*, *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, and others. It is not surprising that each article usually focuses on one aspect of her work, be it sexuality, storytelling or the question of class.

[11] However, focusing on the "white trash" myth it is the "white trash" aspect of Allison's writings which will be given the greatest attention.

This thesis will analyze the relationship between the myth and "white trash" bodies when they stand in clear opposition. This is best seen in Allison's depiction of working conditions in *Bastard Out Of Carolina* (1992) which will be confronted with the mythical assumption of "white trash" laziness and sloth. It will further examine the complex emotional processes of a "white trash" body internalizing the myth which are openly depicted in her essay "A Question of Class" (*Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* 1994); and transformed into a powerful short story "River of Names" (*Trash* 1988). Last but not least, the thesis sets out to examine the possibilities of resisting the "white trash" myth through the act of narrating personal stories from a "white trash" subject position. It is the medium of writing and narration itself through which Allison attempts to denaturalize the "white trash" myth setting her text in opposition to the mythical text. The blunder of fiction and reality in the myth, and the confusion of the "real" palpable body with the mythical representation of it is best mirrored in Allison's memoir/autobiography *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995). The decision to focus on these three subjects is grounded in the importance they play in Allison's work and, simultaneously, how they are deployed within the "white trash" myth. Despite the strategic separation into these three issues, they are closely interrelated and conditioned by each other.

Given the elusive nature of the "white trash" myth, it is not surprising that it has recently assumed yet another façade which seemingly opposes the perception of "white trash" people as being abhorrent and despicable characters; "white trash" is currently becoming a "hip" commodity, a marketable product of the "South" (Gray 2004: 7, Sandell, Smith 2004). In this new phase the old myth has not lost any of its negative aspects and stereotypes, but since pride and shame have always been present and intertwined in the myth, pride is now assuming the leading position: "I now can be both cool and authentic," claims Bérubé

demonstrating his "white trash" origins through the purchase of a "Cheap Trailer Trash" T-shirt (37). Many "middle-class people use 'white trash' 'costuming' to distance themselves from the identity, ironically, as if to say, if I have to wear this T-shirt to become 'white trash' then I wasn't 'trash' in the first place"[12].

Barthes draws attention to the difficulty of deconstructing a myth from the inside when he says: "[I]t is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its strangle hold becomes in its turn the prey of myth" (135). Allison's characters might have added to the "popularity" and commodification of the "white trash" concept/myth, not bodies, exactly by those qualities which she uses to denaturalize the myth. This reflects the immense power, flexibility, and fluidity of the myth – it can "devour" its own counterpart and make it its own showcase. Thus, Allison's attempt to shatter the myth might have, paradoxically (but within the logic of the myth), only reinforced it[13].

---

[12] I would like to thank Jeremy Hill from GWU for this comment.

[13] In her article "Telling Stories of Queer White Trash" Jillian Sandell sets to: "investigate the extent to which [Allison's] storytelling operates both hegemonically [as remystifying those social and economic relations they aim to expose] and as a liberating practice" (215). She ends by praising Allison for her "contribution to the urgent political project of critiquing and dismantling the oppressive system of class relations in the United States" (227). In other words she claims Allison has been successful in denaturalizing the myth.

2. Chapter One

From the Stereotype Towards the Myth

2. 1. Deconstructing the Term "White Trash"[14]

"[W]hite trash represent the frightening porosity of borders,
all the ugliness and imperfection that must be rejected in
order for stable perfection to be gained." (Beaver 28)

"White trash" is an ambiguous term of a conflicting nature. It evades fixation, its meaning and content being constantly deferred. It oscillates between being a (most obviously) classist/racist slur to being a proud denomination of one's attitude and origins (Hartigan 1996: 44). On the one hand, "white trash" is the subject of a growing body of academic work; on the other, a great number of people use it as a derogatory term; it is charged with the same level of political incorrectness as words which have long been excluded from a standard dictionary. As Kirby points out in *The Countercultural South*: "It is widely (and I think truly) said that in our age of official respect for ethnic diversity, enforced more or less by 'politically correct' speech, the only remaining fair game for put-down humor is white southerners. (They are not certified as 'ethnic.')" (89).

In order to deconstruct the "white trash" myth it is first imperative to scrutinize the term "white trash" itself. The first problem which occurs when dealing with this denomination is that, when not followed by any other noun, "white trash" displays an enormous amount of space for any kind of reference, for any signifier, thus making it detached and objectified. According to John Hartigan Jr., a renown scholar of whiteness studies, "white trash" is a "rhetorical identity" which does not provide "an unique, locatable, ethnographic object" but

---

[14] The term "white trash" has been used in popular literature of the North by 1860's (Hartigan 2005: 61) I use it here as an umbrella term which includes all other similar denominations such as: poor whites, landless whites, rednecks, hillbillies, crackers, etc. I am aware of the fact that each of these labels has a slightly different referent with a specific history.

serves as a "naming practice within a discourse of difference by which racial and class identities in the United States are maintained" (1992: 8)[15].

"White trash" is a popular concept familiar to most US citizens. At first glance it combines the depiction of race with that of class, but to narrow the term down to these two concepts would be dangerously misleading as the "white" only depicts skin color[16] and "trash" is laden with inherent negative moral, social and behavioral connotations[17], presently not necessarily economic ones. Although the term has often been explained as referring to poor whites, lately its dominant connotation is one of behavior and attitude[18]. The current prevailing concept does not substitute one issue by another (poverty by behavior) but broadens itself to sustain both. Furthermore, the economical aspect of the myth is being overshadowed by the behavioral one which is a dangerous process renewing and prolonging the legitimacy of the "white trash" myth.

The label is used to other and objectify signifiers who are scapegoated for the flaws and sins of the rest of the society. It serves as a boundary term which safely distinguishes "whites" from "blacks" and further "good" whites from the "bad" ones (primarily upper and middle-classes from lower classes). The stubborn endurance of the label and hence the myth bears witness to the sustaining need of the American society for such delineations. Beaver argues it is a concept used predominantly by the middle class in order to assure themselves of their superior status (13). Since whiteness has been, and still is, seen as a "natural" predisposition to a flawless and successful life (which is equated with the upper- and middle class status), people who are unable to fulfill it are inherently viewed as deviant, and "less

---

[15] In this thesis I refrain from the mythical discourse and always use the term "white trash" as a modifier to denominate a certain noun (body, people, concept, women, men), to make the signifier as palpable to the reader as possible.

[16] Contemporary sociologists even argue for the abolishment of the term "race" substituting it rather with "culture" or "ethnicity" (Ratcliffe; Solomos and Back).

[17] A contemporary list of these connotations can be found in the on-line *Urban dictionary*. Some of the most frequently reoccurring ones are for example: "white trash men beat their women", "white trash men are alcoholics", "white trash women are sluts", "white trash fathers rape their daughters", "white trash are racist", etc. (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=white+trash)

[18] See *Urban Dictionary* – You don't have to be poor to be white trash.

white". "White trash" is a proof, a deterrent example of "failed whiteness" (Beaver 15). This leads to their objectification[19] by the rest of the society, and places them in what Beaver calls a "racial limbo" (15). On the one hand, they are placed side by side to other disenfranchised groups such as African Americans and Latin@s on the other, nobody can deny them the "privilege" of being white[20]. The term "white trash" implies that all non-white people are naturally "trash", skin color is used as a differentiating mark between similar class groups[21].

The "ethnification" of whiteness is nevertheless of enormous importance as it pulls whiteness out of the realm of invisibility, thus answering the demand of writers and theoreticians such as bell hooks and Toni Morrison (Wray and Newitz 5) to perceive whiteness as yet another aspect of one's identity, not a dominant norm; a skin color identity which is just as socially constructed as other identities. However, the only visible representatives of whiteness so far are the "not quite white" (Wray 2006) "white trash" bodies which are furthermore laden with the worst behavioral aspects. Within this logic it has been for example fairly easy for white Americans to accept the responsibility for racism since "the culprits were barely white to begin with" (Graham 341) – racism being one of the strongest and most enduring "white trash" stereotypes. Since all faulty behavior is rendered as inherently "white trash", whiteness itself is redeemed as a normative and respectable standard.

"The other" is always feared by those who perceive it such, and it is precisely the fear which buttresses the borders between "white trash" and the rest of the American society (both white and non-white). The fear, that the signifier might "escape" the denomination and diffuse the delineation between "us" and "them" which would conceptually lead to the destruction of the hierarchical distinctions in society (not only in the terms of race and class), and individually to the demand to acknowledge personal responsibility for one's own flaws. It is

---

[19] "The objectification leading to the term." I would like to thank Jeremy Hill from GWU for this comment.
[20] Sometimes they're even seen as the purest form of whites I would like to thank Jeremy Hill from GWU for this comment.
[21] I would like to thank Jeremy Hill from GWU for this comment.

not only the middle class who utilize this myth, but everyone who denies the true nature of their negative behavior ascribing the possibility to act in such a way solely to some "other", often "white trash" bodies[22]. Thus, "white trash" people pose a threat to a non-"white trash" society – a threat that the "white trash" concept might disintegrate and the sense of responsibility finally might have to be acquired by those who keep denying it. That is why the "white trash" myth is given so much space allowing for its mutations and transformations. It has to be kept alive no matter in what form.

The theoretical analysis of the "white trash" myth which stresses the potential of "white trash" bodies to transgress social boundaries, unite binary divisions, and disintegrate cultural constructs follows the same pattern as the works of contemporary "queer" and postcolonial theoreticians who question the essence of any "natural" categories or fixed divisions, and stress the importance of performativity in the formation of one's identity[23].

2. 2. The Simplification of "White Trash" History

At first, the concept of "white trash" related to whites in rural areas of the Southern states, whose living conditions were deemed strange, "un-civilized" or "un-natural" by people who depicted them. It gradually came to encompass even Northern inhabitants. Nevertheless, the focus on Southern "white trash" bodies allows for a more focused analysis of the "white trash" myth, especially when related to literature and the works of Dorothy Allison.

According to Barthes, when entering the myth the signifier has to be simplified, emptied of its true meaning, robbed of its history. Only under these circumstances is the signifier sufficiently pliant, and capable of expressing the meanings demanded by the myth.

---

[22] For example violence against children can be described as "beating" when speaking of "white trash" families with focus placed on the act of violence itself, but as "spanking" in other families with focus placed on the aftermath of the violent act and its "positive" impact on the child's upbringing.
[23] See for example Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* which address the issue of crossing the borders in a literal as well as metaphorical sense.

Within the "white trash" myth, this simplification had been achieved through the formation of "white trash" stereotypes predominantly in literature, journalism, and eugenic studies.

One of the most important moments in the creation of a stereotype is the unification of diversity. When considering the "white trash" stereotypes it is precisely this feature which played a major role in their formation but which is rarely addressed in a sufficiently significant and exhausting manner. The contemporary denomination "white trash" serves as an umbrella term for other pejorative labels[24], and refers to people of various regional origins, various histories, various working and living situations. Sylvia Jenkins Cook in *From Tobacco Road to Route 66* lists "at least" three distinct groups of white people who were lumped together under the same "white trash" stereotype – the mountaineers, the sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and the mill workers – noting that the differences in their representations soon became "blurred" (x), forgotten, and ignored. Moreover, from a historical point of view these three groups didn't "evolve" simultaneously, rather were conditioned by each other. The gradual fusion of these numerous histories into one simple story accounts for the malleable and fluctuating nature of the "white trash" myth.

It is important to note, that the very need for the explanation of the origins of white poverty is a unique feature of the New World, where the sole possibility of such a condition is deemed as refuting the essence of the American dream, and as denying the Puritan concept of the Promised Land. The repetitive cycle of poverty is perceived as un-American, alien, un-natural, and therefore had to be elaborately explained through two dominant creation myths – "environmental" which "blames" the fertile climate and the diet of its inhabitants[25], and "genetic" which deems them biologically inferior, and therefore "naturally predisposed to being poor" (McDonald 16).

---

[24] These labels are frequently aligned with the regional distinctions – Florida Crackers, Arkansas mountaineers, Louisiana Cajuns, etc.

[25] The myth claims that thanks to the unique fertility of the climate "white trash" people did not have to work in order to survive.

Both of these myths are deeply grounded in the writings of William Byrd, who is an ambivalent "founder" of the "white trash" studies[26]. His *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (written 1728, first published 1841) is acknowledged as the primary source for all subsequent works concerning poor Southern whites. Byrd's text establishes all future stereotypes not only in literature, but also in journalism, and social sciences.

William Byrd of Westover was a commissioner who surveyed the disputed boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina in 1728. He and his fellow travelers were supposed to explore this region, and provide sufficient arguments for the political division between these two colonies. His text is in reality a diary of this expedition which he later tailored for a publication in London. This short depiction of the circumstances under which his *History* was conceived already presents great difficulties for the book's interpretation (Carr 15-16). In *History*, literary ambitions which demand stylization intermingle with Byrd's "true" depictions of events while he tries to retain the function of the text as a serious scientific survey.

Most frequent quotes from *History* refer to Byrd's depictions of whites as lazy, indolent, irreligious, simple-minded, filthy, promiscuous, vulgar, and diseased. A closer reading of the text however discloses that there are numerous incongruences in these generalizations; that Byrd frequently contradicts himself; that every stereotype he "coins" refers to a certain un-articulated history; and that the negative picture he creates serves a blatant functional purpose[27]. Furthermore, in his depictions Byrd drew on the long-lasting antagonism between the two colonies due to the disputed border region (being hired by

---

[26] A vast majority of scholarly work on the history of "white trash" people start with quotes from Byrd's *History* (McIlwaine, Cook, Carr, Wray, Harkins, etc.)

[27] For example when Byrd notes that: "tis a thorough Aversion to Labor that makes People file off to N Carolina, where Plenty and a warm sun confirm them in their Disposition to Laziness for their whole Lives" (Byrd 90), he shortly contradicts himself when he points out that even "the best Estate affords little more than coarse subsistence" (92) (Carr 16-17). For further critical analysis of Byrd's text see McIlwaine (3-15).

Virginia his preferences were strictly on his superordinates' side), as much as from his personal position of an aristocrat who perceived lower classes inferior, and last but not least from stereotypical literary depictions of the poor by such authors as Petronius or Daniel Defoe whom he greatly admired (McIlwaine 4-5)[28].

Nevertheless, Byrd had one strong reason which prompted him to employ the stereotypes in a truly harmful manner. The disputed area he had been sent to survey had functioned as a no-man's-land, a free territory, and therefore a refuge to many outlaws, and runaway slaves, where they co-habited with American Indians (McIlwaine xxi)[29]: "Nor were these worthy Borderers content to shelter Runaway Slaves, but Debtors and Criminals have often met with the like Indulgence" (Byrd 58). At the beginning of the 18th century, it was still an untamed and uncivilized space, not subjected to any authority. Frequently referred to as the "backwoods" it blatantly references the fear of the suppressed "other", the dark unknown, the Dionysic (Cook 141), the chaotic. The people Byrd had seen in this no-man's-land often rejected his beliefs in what he perceived to be the "natural order" of the human society: "the need for hard work and purposefulness, the economic and physical dependence of women upon men, and the proper distinction between white men and Indians" (Harkins 15). In other words, Byrd despised, feared, and was unable to conceive the disruption of social hierarchy, the disintegration of the established boundaries, the penetration of "nature" into "civilization". It is at this point that the truly "natural" habitat is deemed "queer" and "unnatural" by the civilized society.

The further history of the inhabitants of these "backwoods" is marked by the loss of this open and fluid territory, and consequently by their reluctant and uneasy subsumation into the surrounding hierarchical structures, be it in terms of social, economic or political relations. McIlwaine depicts this change in terms of a "typical American rape of the land" when the

---

[28] Needless to say Byrd's literary models were white males of upper- middle-class status.
[29] Hence the term „white Indians" (McIlwaine xxi).

"backwoods suddenly became private" (164), and those, who were "too poor to own land or slaves[30] [...] squat[ed] [...] either on no-man's land or government districts – [...] and claim[ed] masterdom over the place they invade[d] till ejected by rightful proprietors" (Lockley 60). The separation of land forced its inhabitants to either remain in the same place and become sharecroppers or flee further West. However, plantation owners caught up with them sooner or later wherever they went.

From this point on, the landless whites acquire a number of other enduring stereotypes. Their disregard for authorities marks them as a "violent lot" (Wray 34); their search for another free territory or for a better land to work on as sharecroppers stigmatizes them as vagrant (Foley 71); and since the postbellum period when they competed for work predominantly with African Americans and Mexicans they have been perceived as unconditionally racist.

There is a number of contemporary theoretical works addressing race relations among the "white trash" people, blacks, and Mexicans[31] in the postbellum South. Many argue it has been the plantation owners and the mill owners (the representatives of the oppressive power) who stirred racial animosity among the poor whites, blacks, and Mexicans with the intention to prevent them from realizing their common class status and uniting to fight for better working conditions. Thus, the question of race had been foregrounded to that of class[32], and reinforced in the poor whites the notion of their superiority (Foley 101, 181-186). This however often resulted in their unemployment, as they demanded higher pay, and better working conditions than blacks or Mexicans who, on top of working more for less money, were more experienced (Foley 176). Another double-edged feature of the white skin

---

[30] The fact they didn't own land or slaves however does not necessarily have to be ascribed to poverty. The withdrawal of "backwoods" people from the social structures of the American colonies might have meant they felt oppressed by them and sought space which would have been free from any authoritarian assertions power represented by people such as William Byrd and future plantation owners.

[31] For race relations in the South see Foley, Tracy, Lockley.

[32] In "Women Without Class" by Julie Bettie the author gives a contemporary example of how class related identity is overshadowed by that of skin color often to a major disadvantages of lower classes regardless of skin color who being class-blind do not realize them.

superiority was that many rich whites would not employ their poor counterparts for the sole

fact that they "disliked to see white people living that way", i.e. doing "black man's work"

(Foley 131), working for money. The perpetrators of the racial and social hierarchy in the

South literally forced poor whites into the realm of invisibility[33], imposed upon them the

concept of abjection, and created a perfect "dark white" American "other".

2. 3. Eugenic Stereotypes – Scientific Legitimization of Disdain[34]

One of the earliest and strongest arguments for the patronization of the "white trash"

bodies has been their deployment as a unique "race" not on the basis of their skin color but on

a much vaguer set of characteristics and values established predominantly through the

conflating work of writers[35], journalists, and pseudo-scientists[36]. McIlwaine notes, that the

"Florida Cracker" in 19th century literature had almost become "a new racial type" and the

same went for poor whites across the South. They became the "objects of study" for eugenic

"scientists" who had enjoyed more than two decades (roughly 1890's till 1920's) during

which they could freely patronize and oppress "white trash" people legitimizing their conduct

by pointing to the "scientific facts"[37]. The poor white was perceived as biologically inferior,

---

[33] The notion of involuntary invisibility is a frequent issue in "minority" literatures – for example Ellison's
Invisible Man.

[34] For an extensive analysis of the eugenics movement see Wray 65-98.

[35] A great example of this conflation is the work of Southern Agrarians, advocates of the Old Southern hierarchy.
In *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), John Gould Fletcher used "scientific" facts to argue that poor whites were inferior
and should only exist for the sake of the superior, are thus un-educable and should only be occupied with
plowing and washing the dishes (Carr 6). *I'll Take My Stand* is mostly viewed as a literary proclamation, a genre
existing on the verge of literature and journalism.

[36] In its age, eugenics have been conceived as a legitimate scientific field of study. With the Second World War
and the deployment of this "science" by the Nazis who used it to advocate the elimination of Jewish people,
eugenics lost its "legitimate" scientific status are presently considered a pseudo-science.

[37] The popularity of the eugenics movement has its roots in the infatuation by sciences which can be dated by
Darwin's publication *On The Origin Of Species* in 1859.

genetically defective, "a breed apart" (Wray and Newitz 2), "naturally" determined to the condition of poverty by his/her "blood"[38].

Matt Wray argues that the "scientific" delineation and objectification of poor whites was buttressed by the emerging class of middle class professionals for whom it served as an argument for the "natural basis of the social order" (69) eliminating the possibility of crossing or even questioning the boundaries between different social, ethnic, racial, and economic groups, and positioning the white middle-class safely within the impenetrable distance of the "other".

The scientific investigation undertaken by eugenics movement's proponents resulted in involuntary sterilization of poor white men and women. In the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court ruled it legal to involuntary sterilize those "it deemed unworthy for sexual reproduction" (Wray 69). The decision of the court was based on eugenic scientists' studies which proposed such "scientific facts" as: "The impudicity[39] of 'the Jukes'[40] women is twenty-nine times greater than that of average woman" (cited from Wray 66). The US power structures denied poor white women the possibility to give birth to and raise their children, and marked their sexual and bodily desires as animalistic, less-human, illegitimate.

The "scientists" argued that overt sexual activity of "white trash" women inevitably leads to incestuous relations (Hartigan 2005: 81). Before the rise of the eugenic studies the preconception of "white trash" people as incestuous has been predominantly seen as owing to their geographical isolation. However, eugenics proponents underlined and emphasized this stereotype by "explaining" it as a biological predisposition pertinent only to "white trash" people, and conditioned by a whole reproductive cycle, by a "natural" lattice of

---

[38] The notion of different blood is strongly present even in Allison's works, where she uses it as a means of positive identification with her family (C 162).
[39] Impudicity – immorality, immodesty, shamelessness (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/impudicity)
[40] In 1877 Richard Dugdale published a book entitled *The "Jukes": A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* which is seen as marking the beginning of eugenic studies in the USA. It focused on behavioral patterns of a poor white family which was seen by the author as representing a distinct "kind" of people (Hartigan 2005: 79).

circumstances. Incest was grounded as the starting point of degenerate "breeding" and "white trash" women as inherent "reproducers" of idiocy and criminality[41]. Allocating incestuous relations solely within the "white trash" borders excluded the possibility of them being present among any other social groups, namely upper- and middle class white families.

The dividing line between "white trash" people and upper- and middle-classes was naturalized as biological, not economic, thus creating and perpetuating the dichotomy between the legitimate and normative wealthy and the illegitimate and degenerate poor. The main stereotypical characteristics of illegitimacy were not only mental deficiencies seen as results of incestuous relations, but also birth out of wedlock, haggard physical appearance, poor social intelligence and the inability to transmit property and acquire wealth.

2. 4. Literary Stereotypes – Creating the "Either – Or" Characters

The stereotypes of poor whites in the former British colonies were spread and reinforced through traditional literary depictions of poverty. As Matt Wray argues: "[White trash's] deep origins lie within the fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century English bourgeois conceptions of the poor as immoral, lazy, and criminal" (135). In American literature, the poor Southern white soon became a type, a stock character, a "popular folk figure" (Cook ix). It was primarily the disempowering condition of poverty that kept poor whites in the background of the stories, only rarely granting them a voice and the possibility to stand in the center of the story[42].

---

[41] Seeing "white trash" bodies as scapegoats, who are inscribed with a set of characteristics otherwise invisibly present in every human being, discloses the argument behind eugenics' restriction, fear and condemnation of "white trash" women's sexuality. This approach to bodily desire and reproductive possibilities did not only apply to "white trash" women, but to white and black women in the South as well as to black men. They were marked as the "other", dangerous bodies.

[42] For an exhaustive analysis of the history of poor white characters see McIlwaine, Cook, and Carr.

Fictitious poor whites embodied a set of fixed characteristics which provoked either laughter or disdain. Such simplicity in the fictitious representation of poor whites mirrors Barthes' claim that "a caricature [lends itself to signification] more than a portrait" (110). They were either despicable or pitiable, either threatening or comic, either dull or cunning. This rigid dichotomy in the literary portrayal of "white trash" inhabitants reflected their "boundary" existence and advocated the impenetrable social division putting forth the less-human character of poor whites, since no "real" human beings behave in accordance with the schematic and stereotypic portrayal. The flat fictitious depictions furthermore enabled the readers to thoroughly enjoy their position as an audience, as spectators who felt compelling distance between themselves and the fictitious objects of ridicule.

The most frequent "white trash" literary stereotypes have been the following: immorality, drunkenness, laziness, beggary, vagrancy, poverty, aggression, dullness, animosity, emotional simplicity bordering on idiocy, mental and physical retardation, drunkenness, unconditional hatred, filthiness, malnutrition, etc. Most of these stereotypes relate equally to men and women, although it is the men who are associated with them in the first place since masculinity is always seen as a master narrative. However, within the terms of gender differences, it is male ferocity and female immorality which form the characters' dominant profiles.

"By the latter half of the 1930's the possibility of any writer's approaching poor whites with a mind and sensibility erased by preconceptions about them was a very remote one" (Carr 143). The employment of poor white stereotypes culminated in the works of Erskine Caldwell during the Great Depression[43] and left indelible marks on all their future representations. The author utterly exploited the existing stereotypes creating such horrifically grotesque figures they only vaguely resembled humans. His characters were mere caricatures

---

[43] The sudden interest in the issues of poverty during the 1930's was unquestionably provoked by the massive rise in the numbers of the poor due to the economic situation. At this point poverty became visible, especially in the South which was seen as particularly backward and not fully American.

of human beings which marked them as perfect material for the formation of the myth. They exist on the verge of idiocy, degraded to the animal level, and "empowered" solely with the basic bodily instincts – the demand for food and sex. The author's "white trash" bodies were utterly despicable, their emotional potential unquestionably refuted.

Through such an extreme portrayal of his characters, Caldwell aimed to provoke pity in the audience which has in relation to "white trash" representatives been accustomed to unconditionally stereotypic reactions, mostly those of laughter or scorn. However, he fell short of this attempt as his readers followed the stereotypical scheme disregarding any potentially different response. As McDonald points out in relation to *Tobacco Road* (1932) as a popular Broadway musical:

> "Although Caldwell intended to use *Tobacco Road* to express his outrage against an economic system that kept its victims impoverished, the sexual titillation and the absurd caricatures merely reinforced the prevailing stereotypes." (17)

In *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* (1933), Caldwell uses "white trash" protagonists solely as objects on which he projects his argument that poverty is despicable and dehumanizing. The author deprecates the condition of poverty but fails to redeem the "white trash" bodies who are its most palpable bearers.

Caldwell's characters are passively one-dimensional. Firmly positioned in the dead end road[44] their existence is restricted by social, economic, and "racial"[45] boundaries. Deprived of agency, Caldwell's "white trash" protagonists (along with their non-fictitious referents) served as mere recipients of other people's opinions, they were continually re-inscribed with "either – or" meanings from the outside. In Barthes' terms, they play the role of the empty and simplified signifiers devoid of their history, yet containing contrasting

---

[44] Such as Jeeter Lester's family in Tobacco Road.
[45] Caldwell's writings coincide with the rise of eugenic studies which marked poor whites as a dysgenic race. See 2.V.

qualities which mark the possibility to ascribe them with whatever necessary functional concept/signified.

2. 5. Journalistic Stereotypes – When the Text Meets the Image the Myth Is Born

> "[T]hroughout the [20th] century [a]s mass media increasingly permeated American culture, the distinction between image and reality became increasingly blurred. Inundated by stereotypical portrayals of shiftless, drunken, promiscuous, and bare footed people, [...] many Americans [...] came to see little or no difference between the "real" Southern [poor] and their cultural image." (Harkins 4)

Barthes perceives the complete sign, the complete "myth" to be the "associative total of a concept and an image" (114) since "[p]ictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it" (110). The importance of photography in the construction of the "white trash" myth is thus obvious. The image of "white trash" people was subjected to the previous textual stereotypes and: "contributed to a powerful set of representational boundaries" (Henninger 86) of poor Southern whites. The birth of this iconic representation filled the signifier with a concept which Barthes would probably have called "white trashiness".

The interest in Southern rural poverty culminated during the Great Depression and was accompanied, if not motivated, by the wide-spread use of photography in journals and magazines. In order to collect material for their social policies between 1935 and 1943, the government sent 24 predominantly Northern photographers to document Southern poverty (Kidd 110) and supply, in the editors' words, "archetypal representations" of the American poor (Kidd 116). The textual stereotypes suddenly met with the photographs of their protagonists – the word was united with the image. It is precisely at this point that the myth was born.

The journalistic depictions of poor white inhabitants of the South drew upon both fictional and scientific representations of them. Foreshadowed by the writings of William Byrd, the portrayal of poor white Southerners in journals and magazines has always been stigmatized by the outsider's point of view. Moreover, these outsiders were frequently travelers, journalists or scientists from the North (McIlwaine 135), who viewed South and its inhabitants "mostly from train or boat [...]. The poor whites thus became the inevitable still-life figures" (McIlwaine 137) of the Southern landscape.

The relationship between the literary stereotypes and those perpetrated by most journalists was mutually determined. For example, drawing on the dull passivity of Caldwell's characters Marion Post Wolcott, a Northerner visiting the South in the 1930's, was struck by the discrepancy of her assumptions and the "white trash" families she saw with her own eyes: "Many of them seemed to have some hope left, which surprised me" (Kidd 111). Such a remark brings evidence of the stereotypical image of poor whites which the journalists naturalized long before coming into contact with their "objects of interest". However, the journalistic depictions were less bound to provoke laughter than the literary ones. Newspapers often brought stories "about Southern illiteracy, violence, lynching, and idiocy" (McIlwaine 171) which strengthened the multilayered boundaries (political, regional, racial, economic, etc.) restricting the "white trash" bodies, and generated and reinforced the sensation of fear of the "other".

The most famous publication of this era is Walker Evans' and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise the Famous Men* (1939)[46]. Agee's and Evans' project naturalized a great many stereotypical approaches towards the poor whites: the authors were both Northerners, they came to "study" the families thus objectifying them, the book was directed towards a non-"white trash" audience, the majority of the "white trash" stereotypes such as their simplicity,

---

[46] Their project was originally meant to be published in a newspaper, but ended up being a book.

dullness, and aggression remained intact[47]. They naturalized the myth predominantly through their approach, through maintaining the same structures as were present in Caldwell.

Same as Caldwell, they attempted to re-shape the "white trash" myth. Unlike Caldwell, they focused on stressing the concept of "human divinity" (Agee and Evans xiv) and spiritual richness of poverty. The authors believed a detailed portrayal of poor material conditions would change the perspective of their audience towards economically handicapped white bodies. This attempt resulted in a significant change in the perception of poor whites – the split between Agee's and Evans's romanticized version of the "worthy poor" and Caldwell's perpetually despicable "white trash" caricatures. Needless to say this division only reinforced the boundaries around "white trash" bodies, stressing the moral aspect of the stereotype, and allowing space for their "rightful" condemnation.

The discrepancy between the intention behind the portrayal of "white trash" bodies and the preconditioned manner of its reception (as has been seen in the works of Caldwell, and Agee and Evans) raises the question whether it is possible to use the "mythical" means of expression against the myth itself; whether a certain unique and palpable text can acquire enough power to attack the vague and elusive text of the myth. Although Caldwell was not writing against the myth, his main motivation was to re-shape it, to shift the myth's projection on its readers from abhorrence to pity. He did not succeed as his fiction was channeled through the mythical structures which interpreted his depictions of the less-human bodies in accordance with the familiar concept of disdain. The myth naturalized Caldwell's caricatures as signifiers, but rejected the signified with which the author endowed them.

Agee's and Evans' aim was to celebrate poverty. This romantic approach dictated the outcome of their work – the creation of the "worthy poor". However, their project also resulted in buttressing the existing stereotypes, and advocating the binary "either – or"

---

[47] "There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves" (Agee and Evans 33).

character of poor whites provoking positive reactions for the "worthy poor" while invoking further contempt for the despicable "white trash". The myth naturalized its superficial disregard for the economic situation of the poor[48] and strengthened its concept of immorality.

Thus, these authors' attempts to re-shape the myth only resulted in broadening the mythical concept, in further confusion of its associations, in enriching the concept with contrasting qualities which generate the myth's potential to "devour" a variety of different signifiers and fill them with one simple meaning. The reason for Caldwell's, and Agee and Evans' failure was the fact they themselves naturalized and enacted the myth in their work as well as in their bodies[49]. Nevertheless, they could be seen as Allison's distant predecessors at least in terms of realizing the myth's power and trying to address it. Unlike Allison, however, they were unable to descend from the mythical level to the first level of the sign; they failed to see distinct "white trash" bodies under the guise of the myth.

---

[48] The denial of the importance of money and the fore grounding of behavioral aspects is one of the strongest manifestations of the myth today.

[49] Meaning in the physical approach to poor white people, (un?)intentionally stressing their difference: "What you saw right away [...] was a faint rubbing of Harvard and Exeter, a hint of family gentility, and a trace of romantic idealism. [...] The families understood what [Agee] was down there to do. He'd explain it in such a way that they were interested in *his* [my emphasis] work" (Agee and Evans ix, xi).

3. Chapter Two

Dorothy Allison – Writing Against the "White Trash" Myth

3. 1. Dorothy Allison And Her "White Trash" Questions

Dorothy Allison is a self proclaimed "cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language and hope" (T 12). Within the literary field of work she is the author of a collection of poems, *The Women Who Hate... Me.* (1983)[50]; short stories, *Trash* (1988)[51]; personal essays, speeches and articles collected in a volume *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994); two novels, *Bastard Out Of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998); a performance memoir *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995); and a few science fiction stories[52]. Nevertheless, Allison does not restrict her performance solely to writing as she fears the postmodern reduction of her work to pure textuality (Griffin 145). Contrariwise, her whole life and all the activities she has taken part in could be seen as a complex anti-discriminatory, myth defying, and eye-opening project[53]. This thesis will, focus on her literary production, and analyze its impact on the "white trash" myth as well as the effect of the myth on her writing.

---

[50] Expanded edition in 1990.

[51] In 2002 Trash was published again including an award winning short story *Compassion* (http://www.dorothyallison.net/).

[52] I will use the following abbreviations for Allison's texts: W - *The Women Who Hate Me*; T – *Trash*; S - *Skin, Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*; B - *Bastard Out Of Carolina*, C – *Cavedweller*, TTT - *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*.

[53] Dorothy Allison was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina to a fifteen year old unwed mother who worked as a waitress. From the age of five until the age of fifteen she had been continually raped and physically abused by her stepfather. In her teenage years she became aware of being a lesbian. Allison went to Eckerd College in Florida and later earned a MA in anthropology from the New School for Social Research. She became politically active in the 1970's lesbian feminist movement living in a collective in Tallahassee, Florida, working as a volunteer in social centers, editing lesbian newspapers, and fighting for "women's revolution". At that time, encouraged by her friends, she also started writing short stories and poems. In the 1980's Allison played a major role in the movement's "Sex Wars" fighting for the freedom of sexual expression which earned her many enemies within and outside the feminist movement, an experience reflected in her collection of poems. The 1990's mark her career as a successful writer with her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* being a National Book Award finalist and winning two Lambda Awards. Allison also dedicates her time to teaching, public readings, and being a mother (Megan 584-585, Miller).

There are innumerous influences which have shaped Allison's life and work, but as she claims in an essay entitled "A Question of Class":

> "[W]hat may be 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 had me." (S 15)

Such a statement entails a great number of implications – the inescapable cycle of poverty, the internalization of shame, the contempt inflicted upon her by better-to-do others, the strong family ties, the stubborn pride, the indelible feeling of inferiority under her skin; Allison recapitulates herself as being born into the "white trash" myth, being an iconic representation of it.

Allison leads a continuous dialogue with the myth, inside and outside textual grounds: "I am trying to understand how we internalize the myths of our society even as we resist them" (S 24). Within her myth-defying project she embodies both the "real" poor white Southern girl and the archetypal image of what Barthes would have called "white trashiness". Allison primarily addresses these two identities, which do not necessarily contrast with each other and do not always produce an easily interpretable set of binary oppositions. Instead, they intermingle, one often conditioned by the other, being an un/intentional product of the other. Such a complex situation echoes Barthes' claim about the relationship of the myth's concept ("white trash" signifier) towards its former meaning ("white trash" body):

> "[T]he form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. [...] [T]he meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment." (118)

The myth is constantly nourished and re-formed by reality, constantly evolving but never really changing.

In her writing, Allison's characters represent the simplified concept of the myth as well as the meaning which has been erased by it. They are the products of the myth as well as the instruments of its deconstruction. How does Allison employ these two seemingly opposing forces in her texts? Is it viable to argue that her writing has strengthened the myth instead of deconstructing it? In what ways does her writing nourish the myth, and in what ways is her work poisonous for it? Is it possible to be a self-proclaimed "white trash" author, thus agreeing with the existence of the "white trash" myth, yet fight against its negative impact on "white trash" bodies? Is it possible to fight the myth on fictional grounds using "truth" as the author's major weapon?

Through her de-mystifying project Allison embodies the post-deconstructive demand for "living theory"[54]. By carving out a space for and within herself she grants herself and her characters the freedom of self-construction, which is unthinkable without a previous de-construction[55]. In her dialogue with the "white trash" myth she simultaneously de- and re-constructs it, allowing the disassembled parts to transgress the boundaries of the myth and take on a life of their own. She does not unconditionally attack the founding stereotypes of the myth, but deconstructs it by breaking the mythical barrier which holds them related only to "white trash" people[56]. Simultaneously, she grants her characters the possibility of self-construction by ascribing to them qualities which have been previously denied to them on the basis of not being in accordance with their "white trash" "nature"[57].

As the author explicitly states in regard to the "white trash" myth and its stereotypical simplifications of the signified:

---

[54] Cf. Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/LA Frontera.*

[55] Allison illustrates the de- and re-constructing process in her novel *Cavedweller*, specifically in the portrayal of its main heroine Delia Byrd. Delia decides to reconstruct her life by returning to a small town Cayro in rural Georgia which she fled threatened by an abusive husband who almost killed her, leaving behind their two daughters. She returns in order to reconstruct her life as a mother and citizen of Cayro. Before she succeeds in winning her daughters' love and gaining back the respect of the town's inhabitants, she goes through what Allison calls "the crying season" – a period of deconstruction.

[56] For example the assumption that incest is committed only by "white trash" men.

[57] For example, the heroine in *Bastard out of Carolina* is an avid reader, a characteristic which has never been seen as an attribute of "white trash" girls.

> "Some of that stuff is true. But [...] I had to find a way to [...] show you those people as larger than the contemptible myth. And show you *why* those men drink, *why* those women hate themselves [...] Show you human beings instead of fold-up, mean, cardboard figures." (Hollinbaugh 16)

In accordance with Barthes' theory of the myth, Allison intends to show the linear development in the history of her characters which the myth has naturalized as simple knowledgeable "facts". Her fighting strategy is to shake the foundations of these "facts" and show the audience *her* truth – "real" people with all their flaws and beauties. She resists Caldwell's caricatures as well as Agee's romanticism. Within the structure of the narrative, she is the author, the subject, and the audience, writing for and about herself. Allison stands in the center, unifying all participants of the text, thus defying one of the major prerequisites of the myth which is unconditional objectification. This is the most important difference between her and other writers who have chosen "white trash" people only as the protagonists and dumb signifiers of their ideas.

Her work being largely autobiographical, the main character Allison writes about is herself. This gives her texts the strongest argument through which the author is able to shatter the myth. Through her use of individual speech Allison refuses to serve as an icon, as a body which lets itself be written over, filled by outside interpretations. By performing her unique subjectivity, she drags the empty signifier down to the first level of Barthes' myth-diagram (115) – to the level of language and meaning. Allison embodies a "white trash" woman's voice coming simultaneously from an authentic disenfranchised subject position and an objectified "other". The key weapon in Allison's struggle against the denigrating effects of the myth is that she fulfills Helene Cixous's demand for women writers' independence by putting herself into the text and creating her own history as it is presented in her famous article "The Laugh of the Medusa" (875).

In all her work, Allison maps the porous borders between myth and reality, fact and fiction, truth and lie, and investigates the complicated nature of such emotions as love and hate, or pride and shame. Her texts prove that these categories do not form binary oppositions and that such strict divisions only encourage the simplification which leads to the formation of any myth. All of the seemingly opposing qualities are rooted in one situation; they share the same starting point. In her stories the contrasting emotions are tied so closely together that the existence of any dividing line between them is rendered as an artificial construct. Allison's plots of pride and shame or love and hate refute preconditioned understanding which is not based on individual experience. She shows her characters' confusion when having to relate to the concepts of these "conflicting" emotions and discovering that what they feel is impossible to squeeze under a fixed denomination.

Allison's texts attack the simplified nature of the mythical language, which prescribes definite meanings to signs regardless of their context, by separating the fixed relations between the signifier and the signified and making them flexible and susceptible to individual interpretation. The author's texts undermine the simplicity of mythical language by questioning its unquestioned (and according to the myth unquestionable) meaning, making language her own unique and complex instrument.

As the author admits, intentionally or not, she did internalize a certain level of the myth's signification. Focusing on three specific elements which form the concept of the "white trash" myth, and the manner in which they are deployed in the author's texts, this thesis will scrutinize up to what level Allison internalized the myth in her literary works. These elements are: the question of Puritan work ethic as opposed to "white trash" laziness; the complex emotional processes which lead to the internalization of the myth, and lastly the act of finding her own narrative voice, and placing herself into the center of her-story through

which the author defies the "white trash" myth's objectification. In the above mentioned aspects, there is a certain degree of both, the mythical concept as well as Allison's "truth".

The attempt of this thesis should be viewed as de/constructing the "history of the dividing line betwixt myth and reality", and exploring the Southern landscape and its "white trash" women's bodies and minds for an answer to the question: "How [and why do] we internalize the myths of our society even as we resist them" (S 24). There is no anticipation of a detailed and accurate map. On the contrary, the "expedition" might come to an end when the border dissipates so much it will cease existing. However, there is also the possibility that the elusive and yielding myth might yet again naturalize the dividing line between itself and reality and incorporate Allison's truth into its deceitful nature.

3. 2. Hard Work or hard work?

The "white trash" myth is only one of many myths that permeate and co-create the southeast region of the United States simply called the "South"[58]. One of the myths/narratives which the South shares with the rest of the USA is the all-penetrating myth/the master narrative of the American dream. The acquisition of the Dream is inextricably linked with the Puritan notion of Hard Work, and the presupposition that every white person "naturally" has the opportunity to prosper[59]. The myth of the American dream and the possibility of its acquisition has been generated and retained predominantly by upper and middle class whites in order to advocate their privilege, which they do not ascribe to their "inherited social position but to [H]ard [W]ork" (Beaver 20).

However, as Roxanne A. Dunbar exclaims in Wray and Newitz's pioneering publication about "white trash": "We ['white trash'] are the proof of the lie of the American

---

[58] Some scholars even claim that the "South" itself is a myth, a fiction, a space of competing narratives (Gray 5).
[59] The color of one's skin has been seen as a "natural" predisposition to the acquiescence of wealth and to the successful "pursuit of happiness".

dream" (77). The exhausting work poor "white trash" people are subject to is not considered

Hard Work. They are denied appraisal and labeled/naturalized as lazy and shiftless for the

sole reason that their hard work does not lead to the acquisition of the Dream.

The concept of praised and valued Puritan Hard Work as it is defined in George

Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) and Allison's "white trash" hard work, which is ignored

and even denied, reveals one of the opposing elements in the "white trash" myth. The analysis

of the contradiction between Hard Work which leads to wealth and is deemed by Gilder and

the myth as effective[60], and hard work which doesn't lead to wealth, and is consequently

regarded by Gilder and the myth as ineffective[61], discloses the process of mythical

signification of "white trash" people's hard work into the assumption of their "natural"

laziness.

George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty*[62] was written at the start of the Reagan

administration just as Allison began to write. It was a very influential book which voiced the

opinion of economic liberalism on wealth and poverty. The book advocates capitalism with its

golden rule that the wealth of others multiplies one's own (8). He perceives wealth to be the

solution to all social problems and stresses the notion that the welfare system is a threat to the

rich as well as the poor "who have always been with us in great numbers" (10). "The only

dependable route from poverty," Gilder claims "is always work, family, and faith" (68).

Furthermore, "the poor [...] must work harder than the classes above them [...]. But the

current poor, white even more than black, are refusing to work hard" (68). These statements

largely sum up Gilder's attitude toward poor whites: objectification, contempt, assumption of

laziness; and thus can be taken as a contemporary text representing the image perpetrated by

the myth.

---

[60] Paradoxically Hard Work does not necessarily have to be, and often is not, hard.
[61] Although it is usually very hard.
[62] I would like to thank Professor Phylis Palmer for pointing this book out to me, and suggesting I contrast Allison's texts to it.

Gilder does not relate the effectivity of Work to its production, importance or necessity, but directly to its capability to gain money. Work which is not financially successful is in his eyes not considered Work; for Gilder as well as for the myth hard work is not Hard Work. There is only a small step between denying "white trash" people's hard work the denomination Hard Work and proclaiming them lazy. The inability to gain money no matter how hard one works is in the mythical terms interpreted as laziness. Presently, working hard for money is stigmatized in a way, it is a signal of failure which mirrors the reluctance of former plantation owners to hire white people to do "black man's work" (Foley 131), i.e. to work for money.

According to Barthes' mythical diagram, the first level features a sign which is a "white trash" body performing hard work. This sign is filled with a precise and complicated meaning; it carries its own history. On the second, mythical level the sign becomes an empty signifier of the myth waiting to be filled by its simple yet malleable concept. This concept is supplied by the Puritan sentiment to Hard Work, which deems hard work as laziness for the sole reason it doesn't lead to wealth. The mythical signification is thus a lazy "white trash" body.

It is clear that the central paradigm directing the construction of the myth is the deployment of binary oppositions. It is not enough for the myth to claim that "white trash" people don't perform Hard Work[63]. Such a statement would entail questions, a relationship of cause and effect which would weaken the myth; on the contrary, the "fact" must be unshakable and fixated in one position; and laziness fulfills this prerequisite.

---

[63] Thus, they don't work.

3. 2. 1. "White Trash" hard work in Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*

By portraying "real" "white trash" working conditions in her first novel *Bastard out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison undermines the "mythical" notion of "her people" as being lazy and shiftless[64]. Through opening up "real" "white trash" stories, she deconstructs the myth. Matter-of-factly Allison draws the vicious circle of hard work which does not lead to the acquisition of wealth; on the contrary, it only confirms the never-ending condition of poverty.

At the very beginning of the novel, the author sets the stage by directly addressing the issue of work and showing how tightly it is intertwined with other elements of the myth[65]:

> "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[66] burned her
> like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy,
> shiftless.* She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel
> shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile." (B 3)

Allison's writing states very clearly here, that she is engaging in a Baktinian dialogue with the mythical text which she promptly quotes: *"No-good, lazy, shiftless".* In one breath, the author introduces her character – Mama – as a "white trash" woman inextricably linking her to the mythical image. Simultaneously, through narrating Mama's story she shows her character's conscious resistance to it first and foremost through hard work. On the one hand, the author presents the "white trash" myth as a despicable denomination ("Mama hated to be called trash"), on the other, both Mama and the narrator internalize it – Mama accepts the myth precisely by feeling compelled to oppose it, and the narrator uses "they" ("the stamp she knew

---

[64] *Bastard out of Carolina* is narrated by Bone, the daughter of a "white trash" mother whose second husband Glen beats, molests, and eventually rapes Bone. The novel is set in Greenville, South Carolina in the 1950's and is strongly autobiographic.

[65] The author refuses to separate the various elements of the myth and structures her text in a way which makes a separate interpretation of them impossible.

[66] The birth certificate the narrator is referring to is her own. It is stamped "ILLEGITIMATE", as she says elsewhere in the novel, she was "certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (B 3). Her mother doesn't feel the "illegitimate" label is referring only to her daughter, she knows it is also a denigrating stamp the others project upon on her "white trash" body.

they'd tried to put on her"), thus acknowledging the objectifying "us" and "them" divide exerted by the myth.

Furthermore, the author links hard work with the image of a defected body: "She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape…" which is also one of the dominant signifiers of the "white trash" myth. However, Allison shows where this image is coming from, shows its history which has been overshadowed by the concept of "white trash" laziness. Mama distorts her body by hard work which she performs in order to counter the assumption of her laziness. Paradoxically, her effort to defy one mythical image (laziness) leads to the fortification of another (defected body). The author exposes the causal relationship between hard work and a defected body which the myth had kept separated, arguing that "white trash" bodies are defected "naturally" or as a result of their "degenerate" reproduction.

By pointing to the deformation of Mama's body, Allison's text also insinuates that her work is rendered invisible. Mama "works her hands to claws", but people still look at her "like she was a rock on the ground". The work she performs is visible only on her body, but that is already proclaimed as defected by nature. It is also fairly easy for the myth to render Mama's work invisible as there is no visible financial reward for it. Later on in the novel Mama speaks about picking strawberries when she was a kid. The answer to her daughter Bone's question: "What'd he pay you?" is the following:

> "Mama waved her hand as if that didn't matter: 'Not enough, you know, not enough. Strawberry picking is terrible work, hurts your back, your eyes. You get that juice all over you, get those little prickers in your hands. An't enough money in it even for children…'" (B 95)

Although Mama works hard and is productive, she acquires no wealth. The question of her financial reward is considered as unimportant even by herself. The mythical process of signification broke up the causal relationship between work and financial reward, so that

Mama as a "white trash" character internalized the notion that her hard work "naturally" doesn't lead to the acquisition of wealth.

As the opening paragraph shows, the product of "white trash" degrading and unrewarding work always goes to the plantation owners who are the ones to acquire the wealth. The product of hard work is invisible as long as it is in the hands of "white trash" workers, because up to that moment it does not generate wealth. Once the plantation owner receives the strawberries which the workers picked for him and starts selling them the product becomes visible as it has the potential to produce income.

As opposed to Mama's strenuous work the plantation owners do not have to move, they embody a static and unshakeable position: "[She] hated the memory of every day she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall." The plantation owners are not physically affected by hard work, they "stand tall" contemptuously looking down at Mama's distorted body. In this graphic metonymy, the text draws an impenetrable dividing line between upper and lower classes and strongly alludes to slavery – not only in the imagery but in the language itself. It also directly shatters Gilder's assumption that "current poor, white even more than black, are refusing to work hard". Although in some ways refusing does make sense, given the low pay.

Allison also draws a causal relationship between hard work and the feelings of hate, rage and shame which are provoked by the mythical signification: "Mama hated to be called trash [...]. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. [...] [She'd work] her mouth to a bent and awkward smile". It is not the hard work itself which generates these feelings; for Mama, it is the impossibility to change the image, the inability to break the process of mythical signification which is simultaneously reinforced and attacked by her hard work. She realizes that because of working hard, she will always be called "white trash". Mama hates to be called "trash" because she is ashamed that

she fully represents what she is trying to deny – the mythical "white trash" image of a poor underage, unwed working mother.

Furthermore, hard work is a means of repentance for Mama. By "working her hands to claws" she consciously inflicts pain upon herself as if she wanted to atone for her social condition which "they" deem despicable. Mama internalizes the negative image others project upon her and further reinforces it by ruining her body. Her "bent smile" signifies the shame she feels, the compulsion of constantly having something to hide, among other sensations the feeling of hate. The "awkward smile" reflects the "illegitimacy" of her existence, her "inappropriate" position in society and her urge to excuse it. It is important to note that Mama "*works* her mouth" to such a smile. Apart from meaning physical work in a literal sense, the use of this word also insinuates that she is making a conscious *effort* to develop the "awkward smile". Furthermore, the text suggests Mama puts on the smile only when she is confronted by "them"; never among "her people". It can thus function as a mask, a servile attitude she uses to protect herself against the outside hateful world.

In *Wealth and Poverty* Gilder advocates the traditional gender roles of men as providers for their families and women as mothers and housewives. He deems women unable to work as hard as men which, according to him, "naturally" results in their lower pay (Gilder 14-16). From Gilder's point of view a working woman is useless, a working mother even harmful to her family and to the society (16). The nature of work thus marks a clear dividing line in the stratification of classes[67], especially when related to women. The "white trash" myth plays on the divide between being a mother and being a working woman, and condemns "white trash" mothers for working, pushing the economic necessity to do so into the realm of

---

[67] The denomination "working class" already insinuates that upper classes don't work.

the invisible and putting forward the possible "harm" which their work causes to their families.

Bone, the child narrator of the novel, immediately notes the major class distinction between her "white trash" Boatwright family and the Waddells, the family of her stepfather, Daddy Glen:

> "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.'" (B 98)

Bone regards the occupations of the Boatwrights' and the Waddells' men as equivalent. In both cases they are restricted within the borders of masculinity which entails the feature of leaving their house to work elsewhere. On the other hand, the women who '"work outside the home" are subjected to Glen's brothers' contempt and disregard. The upper class represented here by the Waddells demands the woman to stay at home and the man to provide for the family. However, when her economic situation doesn't allow it[68] and she works, the Waddels show primary contempt towards her and not the man or the economic system. Once the woman transgresses the boundaries of the house she is perceived as "trash", as occupying an inadequate social position. The Waddells advocate their behavior by the "rightful anger" at a mother "leaving [her] children" which in their eyes implies the violation of not only the social, but also the "natural" order[69]. Furthermore, it is notable that the opinions colliding with the mythical image of "white trash" are voiced by the two brothers and the women in the house remain silent on this topic. From a textual discourse point of view, the novel suggests

---

[68] The text of the novel does not imply a woman might want to work even if she weren't pressured to by her economic situation.
[69] The novel insinuates that the Waddells, being the representatives of the Old South hierarchy, believe that the social order is derived from the "natural" one.

the myth is an instrument of Southern patriarchy who use it to maintain the hierarchical power structures of Southern society.

In Allison's novel, Mama goes back to work only eight days after the birth of her first daughter: "[A]ll she could do [was] to pull herself up eight days after I was born and go back to work waiting tables with a tight mouth and swollen eyes" (B 4). The birth of a child does not grant her the possibility to stop working as she needs the money to support herself and her family. She can not stay with her child, and follow the "natural" order, because her disenfranchised position within the social order does not allow her to do so[70]. The text clearly states Mama lacks the power and the possibility of decision-making ([A]ll she could do [was] to pull herself up...). She does not have the possibility to not work and stay at home with her newborn child, neither the possibility to refuse or successfully resist the "white trash" signification. Mama has internalized the myth's objectification and determination to a "white trash" existence up to a point when she believes she cannot desire what she feels she cannot get. The internalization is however reluctant and the text suggests it primarily affects the surface of Mama's existence ("tight mouth and swollen eyes"), not her personality or deeper emotions. Mama is aware that it is her image of the unwed working mother which welcomes the myth, and that the reason she can never refute it is that neither the myth nor its readers (who are the readers of Mama's image) want to look under the surface of the image, want to see the history behind the myth. "They" will always see Mama only as a "white trash" signifier, never as a Mama.

Considering the issue of "white trash" women "leaving their children" behind to work outside of home, *Bastard out of Carolina* partly agrees with the mythical allegation that it causes harm to their families. As the plot of the novel develops, it subtly suggests that Mama's work, which keeps her away from home for most of the time, could be partly blamed

---

[70] The "natural" order here acts as the history of the myth from which it draws its nourishment in order to structure its concept represented by the social order.

for the tragic events that happen in the household. Mama is not there to protect her daughter from her husband, because she is at work. Her absence allows space for the accumulation and outburst of Glen's violent behavior. On the other hand, it is Glen's being at home "at odd hours" resulting from his incompetence to keep a job which opens up time and place for his confrontations with Bone. From a wider point of view, it is largely, but not exclusively, the working environment of Bone's household which could be seen as a cause leading to her abuse.

Mama's hard work is a constant undercurrent of the novel, not even its major issue, due to the simple fact that it takes up a great amount of time in her life and consequently influences the behavior and mutual relationships of other characters: "Every time Mama was too tired [from work] to flatter or tease [Glen] out of his moods, Daddy Glen's eyes would turn to me, and my blood would turn to ice" (B 233). Mama's work is continually present, but rarely addressed directly. The novel subtly states that Mama has virtually been working all her life. In her childhood she picked strawberries and peanuts, and after dropping out of school at a very young age she started waiting tables in a local diner: Mama works as a waitress throughout the novel. She leaves home early in the morning and returns late at night. Most of the times when the narrator mentions her clothing, Mama is dressed in her waitress uniform and smells of salt and butter. Although working consumes such a large part of her life, Mama feels she needs a husband who will secure her and her two daughters economically[71], as she does not get adequate financial reward for the time she spends working in the diner.

The following citation inconspicuously observes the difference between Mama's and her husband Glen's work:

> "I was ten [...] when we moved to West Greenville, so Daddy Glen
> could be closer to the new uniform plant where he'd gotten a job as
> an account salesman. [...] Granny was still keeping Reese for

---

[71] It is not solely for economic reasons that Mama marries the upper-class born Glen. She feels the marriage will erase the status of her and her daughters' illegitimate existence and guarantee them at least some degree of protection within the patriarchic society.

Mama when she could, but it was out of the way to take her to Alma's and pick her up, and Mama decided maybe it was time to start trusting me to keep us both alive while she was at work. [...] [I]t was a nice house, [...], but it also cost more, which meant Mama had to take on a few extra hours to bring in a little more money. It didn't seem as if Daddy Glen's route was working out as well as they had hoped. 'Your Daddy's having to work awfully hard these days,' Mama told us. 'You girls be quiet when he gets home. Stay out of his way and let him get his rest.'" (B 104)

Glen's work is the focal point of the whole family life – it is because of his work that they move, and it is his exhaustion from work that influences the atmosphere in the house. His privileged position derives from the sole fact that he is a man expected to provide for his wife and kids, and although he is unable to do so Mama does not question his status as the master of the house. His work is thus unconditionally valued above Mama's work despite the fact it is Mama who by "taking on a few extra hours" brings in a little more money to pay for the new house. Glen fails to fulfill the prerequisite of the financial provider, which means he failed his upper-class status. Contrary to his work, however, Mama's work is pushed (by Glen as well as by herself) to the periphery, into the realm of the invisible.

Mama is the chief provider for the family, not Glen, whose bad temper results in his unpredictable changes in work which are primarily a burden to the household. When further comparing Glen's and Mama's work, the artificial construct of the importance of men's work as opposed to the unimportance of women's becomes evident. Mama has been working throughout the novel, she has kept a steady job and her income is therefore reliable. Glen on the other hand, keeps losing his jobs and getting laid off, rendering his income very unstable often absent: "Daddy Glenn didn't do too well at RC Cola. He kept getting transferred to different routes or having to pay for breakage" (63); "Mama said the new place would be better now that Daddy Glen was going to be working out at the Pepsi plant" (79); "Half a dozen times I came home from school to find Mama and Glen sitting at the kitchen table, with that white-eyed scared look that meant he'd jumped somebody [...] and lost yet another job"

(100); "We moved to West Greenville, so Daddy Glen could be closer to the new uniform plant where he'd gotten a job" (104); "'God, Anney! They laid me off today'" (107); etc. Through such a statement the text directly attacks the myth's concept of "white trash" laziness. Evidently, Mama is not lazy and is at least able to keep her job. Furthermore, it is the middle class Glen who due to his constant dismissals from work is incapable of Hard Work, i.e. generating profit.

Not only does Mama's work in the diner support the family financially, her work at home is equally strenuous and valued even less. The traditional perception of gender roles is buried so deeply in both Mama and Glen that although his role is unfulfilled, Mama is still expected to perform all hers including housework which is granted even less attention and importance than the work in the diner.

Bastard out of Carolina mirrors the invisibility of "white trash" hard work by never describing the actual working process itself. There are only a few scenes which take place in the diner, and all of them focus on some other issue than that of work itself. Similarly with Glen, the reader never follows him on his truck routes, there are never any details given about the precise nature of his jobs. The working environment never directly penetrates the borders of the household, only through Mama's uniform, smell, and absence, and Glen's lack of income and resulting rage.

Allison portrays "white trash" hard work as an inevitable evil clearly marking their "despicable" status. As Bone remarks the future had been determined for her long before she even started thinking about decisions: "There wasn't much choice about what was going to happen to me. [...] What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama at the diner?" (178)

The mythical transformation of hard work into laziness is one of the strongest instruments which enable the "white trash" myth to retain its function. It is evident, that

Allison succeeded in refuting the mythical signification of "white trash" people as being lazy and shiftless. However, the novel could be seen as mirroring many of the myth's other, more subtle significations. It could be argued that the novel agrees with the mythical presumption that when a mother "works outside of home" she causes harm to the family, or that the novel reproduces the invisible "nature" of hard work by addressing this issue only unwittingly. However, a thorough interpretation discloses that the author does not adhere to the myth and that by interweaving the question of work with other elements which shape it, Allison reveals its complex nature and its history. The author dives under the mythical surface of the "white trash" image and refutes the simplicity of its signifier.

Nonetheless, in order to see Allison's refusal of the myth, the reader has to see all the connections she is drawing and agree to set out on the undermining journey with her from the start. Furthermore, when reading the novel it is important to distinguish the "white trash" image the reader has in his/her mind from Allison's characters. The mythical discourse is always strongly present within the author's depictions of "white trash" hard work and a superficial reading of the novel could slip off to the simple mythical interpretation because it is more suggestive, and readily accessible.

3. 3. Internalizing the "White Trash" Myth

No myth can ever function alone; various myths overlap, they are conditioned by each other covering different grounds but providing each other with arguments. As the previous chapter showed, the mythical concept of "white trash" laziness is co-created by the myth of the American Dream. It also illustrated the process of conscious resistance to the "white trash" myth when the mythical narrative stood clearly in opposition to the reality of "white trash" bodies. This chapter suggests that the alleged simplicity of "white trash" people

proclaimed by the myth is grounded in the myth of the poor in general (Wray 135) and their separation into the "good" and the "bad" poor. Furthermore, the relationship between the myth and the "white trash" bodies is not an outward one; rather the struggle takes place within the contested bodies themselves. How does the myth get inside them? What kinds of in/voluntary processes happen within the body as it is internalizing the myth and turning into a signifier of "white trashiness"; and what kinds of processes on the other hand free the body from the myth?

In Dorothy Alison's collection of essays, articles, and speeches *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature*[72] the author reveals in a literary confession style the work of these processes. She delineates the form of the "white trash" myth, its function, and its demands in relation to a "white trash" body, and the reactions of the body towards the myth. In a collection of short stories *Trash*, the author addresses "white trash" people's reactions to the myth primarily through the issues of the mythical pressure for self-denial, and through the complex nature of emotions such as shame and pride, anger and despair, love and hate which do not form binary oppositions, rather represent different shades of reactions to one situation.

The literary analysis of this chapter will compare the opening essay of *Skin* "A Question of Class", where the implied author[73] depicts the affects of the myth on her body from a not-very-fictional point of view, to the text of Allison's short story "River of Names" opening her collection *Trash* in which she deals with the same issues from a slightly-more-fictional perspective. These texts reveal what the myth never considers – the inner responses of the "white trash" bodies. The outcome of this comparison should show whether it is more

---

[72] Dorothy Allison's texts are often very personal and explanatory; nevertheless, it is imperative to always keep in mind that her "I" is textual and stylized, by far not identical with the "I" of the author. The collection of her essays and speeches *Skin* balances on the edge between fiction and non-fiction certain pieces resembling her short stories more than others.

[73] Although the essay is presented as a personal confession and urges the reader to unite its narrative voice with Dorothy Allison's persona, I use the denomination "implied author" to separate these two authors. Despite being very close to "fact" there might be many elements of "fiction" and auto-stylization in the essay.

persuasive to fight the "white trash" myth on fictional grounds, or whether the essential weapon in the struggle is the element of a "true life story".

Resisting the internalization of the "white trash" myth is a complex process. The "white trash" subject first comes to understand that s/he is "different", positioned within the realm of subhuman "they". What might follow is a moment when s/he accepts it and believes her/himself to be the mythical signifier. This moment marks the beginning of self-destruction. The parallel with James Baldwin's straightforward statement "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (Baldwin 4), is more than obvious. One must drain the myth out of his/her body which is only possible through claiming one's self a unique individual and regarding one's self with undisputed self-respect.

"My people were not remarkable. We were ordinary, but even so we were mythical. We were the *they* everyone talks about – the ungrateful poor" (S 13) – Allison's text establishes the point of departure in her analysis of the "white trash" myth. There are two points of view concerning the "white trash" bodies – the inner one represented by the textual "I", the implied author who regards herself as a part of the "white trash" community ("my people"); and the outer view represented by "everyone" for whom "white trash" are "they". "Everyone" is further specified in the essay as "rule makers" (S 33), or "middle and upper classes" (S 24).

The "white trash" voice sees nothing "remarkable" about her "people", she characterizes them as "ordinary". Her view is not affected by the myth, it grows innately out of the community addressing its everydayness and normality: "We all imagine our lives are normal" (S 20). When this voice claims "we were mythical," it is not its own comment but a mediation of the second, outer view. The discrepancy between these two views parallels the

"everyone" vs. "they" division and points to the isolation of "white trash" bodies within the rest of the society. When saying "we were the *they*," the implied author delineates the mythical boundaries encircling her and her community's identity labeled by "everybody" as the "ungrateful poor". She reflects her position as the mythical signifier not yet internalizing the myth but accepting its separation.

The mythical and the personal view of the implied author interweave in the following quote from "A Question of Class" to represent how they merge together in the mind of the "white trash" person, how the mythical view becomes accepted as personal resulting in the internalization of the myth:

> "They're different than us, don't value human life the way we do...; they die so easily, kill each other so casually... *We*, I thought. *Me*. [...] [*They* are] the ones who are destroyed or dismissed to make the real people, the important people feel safer." (S 13)

Such is the description of the form, the function and the demands of the "white trash" myth as perceived by the implied author's "white trash" body and mind. The very humanity of the "white trash" bodies is questioned, and disregarded. They are portrayed as animals lacking feelings and emotions, as an animate wall whose only function is to guard "humanity", as sub-humans who are sacrificed to save the "real people". The quote almost resembles a description of some "wild" natives untouched by civilization who have no concern for "delicate" emotions such as love, tenderness, deep grief, or self-realization. The animosity of "they" is further reinforced by stressing the issues of omnipresent violence and death, and by suggesting that "they" behave as a closed unit (almost a herd) with its own set of values, markedly different than the "human" ones.

Constantly facing sub-humanization leads to its acceptance, especially when the myth stresses elements which are pertinent to one's life:

> "I understood that we were the bad poor: 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 cars, used drugs, and took dead end jobs..." (S 18)

Again, the implied author gradually moves from conveying the simple and obvious mythical signification – "men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage" to expressing her personal knowledge of "white trash" history – "women... who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children". The dividing line between these two views is extremely intangible. The implied author reflects the transition from the personal to the mythical view as almost imperceptible, and suggests that accepting the mythical view is an unconscious and inconspicuous process which results in surrendering to the power of the myth, believing one's self to be the sub-human "they".

One of the strongest reactions of the "white trash" bodies who are charged with sub-humanity is that of inner shame – an issue which the myth absolutely ignores, and which is extensively addressed in Dorothy Allison's works. The fact that shame as a purely human characteristic does not even enter the picture of the myth is a proof that the myth denies "white trash" people the possibility of self-determination, and the capability to reflect their existence. "White trash" bodies are thus marked as ignorant and apathetic by the myth and simultaneously paralyze themselves by the feeling of shame and inadequateness which often results in self-hatred and self-denial.

Shame is a complex and "multilayered" experience affecting individuals as well as whole communities often passed down in a family (Bouson 103). It is provoked by accepting the objectifying myth of "white trash" sub-humanity while knowing it is a lie.

"My family was ashamed of being poor, of feeling hopeless. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight or

struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and that those who did try to escape failed." (S 18)

Although it is shared by the whole community, "white trash" shame is silent, suppressed, and hidden which only results in its reinforcement – the shame of being ashamed; the proof that "white trash" people believe the myth to be "at once true and unreal" (Barthes 128). The "white trash" person consumed by shame becomes self-destructive, and apathetic abandoning any attempts to change his/her condition, accepting the position of an object, and believing him/herself to be a non-person. The quote strongly conveys the overwhelming power of the myth over the "white trash" bodies which is rooted in its semblance of eternity, and which buttresses their passivity. The failures of those who "tried to escape" are passed down in the family along with the shame only to prove that any attempt to resist the "white trash" myth will prove futile. It further isolates the family and reinforces the mythical spell. Also, the escapees are seen as acknowledging the shame of poverty and hopelessness, as voicing something which should remain silent. Furthermore, the failures provide an "alibi" for "white trash" people's apathy and passivity. Such "multilayered" discouragement is a proof of the internalization of the myth.

To metaphorically illustrate the dangers of a direct fight against the "white trash" myth the narrator in "River of Names" mentions a story when one of her boy-cousins tried to teach her and her girl-cousin to wrestle:

> "His hand flashed at my face. I threw myself back into the dirt, lay still. [...] He punched at her, laughing. She wrapped her hands around her head, curled over so her knees were up against her throat. [...] I rocked into a ball, froze. [...] Her teeth were chattering but she held herself still, wrapped up tighter than bacon slices. [...] He walked away. Very slowly we stood up, embarrassed, looked at each other. We knew. If you fight back, they kill you." (T 17)

Passivity is clearly portrayed as a mode of survival as opposed to activity which leads to destruction – "If you fight back, they kill you". However, the struggle is taking place under

the rules and regulations of the mythical battleground. The two girl-protagonists are being constrained by their feelings of fear and shame induced by the myth and that is why they refuse to stand up to it. Being under the influence of their environment strengthens the mythical grip and they prefer the silent shame to a possibility of unsuccessful attack.

The two girls are also petrified by their lack of self-respect. They believe their existence is of no value to the outside world. This feeling is grounded in the unbreakable cycle of poverty and self/destruction they have been witnessing throughout their lives:

> "We were so many we were without number and, like tadpoles, if there was one less from time to time, who counted? My maternal great-grandmother had eleven daughters, seven sons; my grandmother, six sons, five daughters. Each one made at least six. Some made nine. Six times six, eleven times nine. They went on like multiplication tables." (T 14)

Feeling like a mere number in a multiplication table makes it difficult to perceive one's self as an individual who is capable of entering a dialogue with the outside world and struggling to his/her mark on it. The implied author in "A Question of Class" notes that her family regarded as the most rebellious thing "the way [she] thought about work, ambition, and self-respect" (S 25) – the fact that she believed she could do something and be someone, break the mythical boundaries which the family themselves kept tightly wrapped around themselves fearing any unsuccessful attempt to break them[74].

In order to resist the "white trash" myth, one must step out of the mythical battleground – one of the possibilities is to leave the community which the implied author of "A Question of Class" calls the "geographic solution" (S 19). She runs away from her family and the omnipresent shame, "hiding" from herself, trying to become someone else: "I had […] learned to hide from myself. I did not know who I was, only that I did not want to be

---

[74] Again, there is a clear parallel with James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*: "The fear that I heard in my father's voice, for example, when he realized that I really believed I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of proving it. […] It was […] a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction" (26-27).

they…" (S 14) Refusing her "white trash" identity she also cuts herself off from the positive

elements which have shaped her life – her family, her history - and "loses" herself in self-

denial. She struggles to create a new self, but has no stable and positive elements to rely upon.

Similarly, the narrator of "River of Names" hides her "white trash" background from

her middle-class lover whose grandmother "always smelled of dill bread and vanilla".

Entering the dangerous field of childhood memories (for the narrator) the narrator's lover

sincerely inquires:

> "'What did your grandmother smell like?' I lie to her the way I
> always do, a lie stolen from a book. 'Like lavender,' stomach
> churning over the memory of sour sweat and snuff." (T 13)

The narrator lies not only about her grandmother but from a more general point of

view also about her childhood, and thus about herself. The memory of "sour sweat and snuff"

represents her personal history as well as the "white trash" myth. The narrator's grandmother

did obviously not fit the only acceptable signifier of a "grandmother", the standardized

middle-class image of a spick-and-span house with a gentle old laborious lady in it. On the

contrary, "sour sweat and snuff" implies roughness, manliness, boldness, and self-indulgence

– characteristics which are more often associated with grown men. Moreover, "stomach

churning" signals a physical resistance to the memory, a denial which is rooted deep inside

the narrator's body. Defying the image of a "grandmother", the narrator's grandmother

however stands out as a unique person, certainly more "real" and "true" than the fairytale-like

"dill bread and vanilla" image depicted by her lover. At the same time, the portrayal of the

narrator's grandmother corresponds with the "white trash" myth through allusions to

dinginess, laziness, and overall "unacceptability" of her image.

The narrator substitutes her history with a "lie stolen from a book" which signals the

direction in which she is heading to construct her new identity – she attempts to create herself

out of fiction. To smell like "lavender" is a common simile devoid of any type of originality –

the narrator wants to construct an image which will be easily believable and readily accepted

by her lover, an image already existing in her mind. The narrator continues:

> I realize I do not really know what lavender smells like, and I am
> for a moment afraid she will ask something else, some question
> that will betray me." (T 13)

It is impossible for the narrator to adapt a fictional history being always pursued by the

possibility of betrayal by unfamiliar narratives which would result in the revelation of her

background – always marked by the simplified mythical meaning. The text thus brings

forward the notion that one can never completely re-create oneself on the basis of self-

denial[75]. The "white trash" subject is pressured to deny her whole history because its every

aspect is "infected" by the mythical interpretation.

The narrator of "River of Names" is unable to construct her identity freely regardless

of any mythical paradigms. Constrained by her resistance to the "white trash" myth, she

displays a tendency to always perceive the world through a "filter" of some myth, be it the

fairytale myth of the middle-class or the acceptable myth of the "good poor"[76]. As a means of

resisting the "white trash" myth the narrator ventures to construct herself as a signifier of the

"good poor"[77] – the closest acceptable myth she could "fit" – and tells her lover stories to

support this position. The text of "River of Names" suggests she admits certain parts of her

history to penetrate into her stories while silencing and altering others: "'How wonderful to be

a part of such a large family,'" (T 13) exclaims the narrator's lover after she hears the

lavender story; large family being the signifier of poverty made acceptable by the lavender

smell. The narrator and her listener call her adapted stories "funny", in other words mild,

acceptable, and believable "good poor" stories. However, the narrator does not find comfort

---

[75] The narrator's fearful reaction resulting from the act of self-denial is directly depicted by the implied author of "A Question of Class": "I have never been able to make clear the degree of my fear, the extent to which I feel myself denied" (S 14).

[76] The "good poor" are a mythical construct which stands in opposition to the "ungrateful poor"; the literal opposition would thus be "grateful poor" – this denomination would much openly disclose the role which is assigned to such a group of people by the upper- and middle-classes.

[77] Class-wise – she has no other choice.

in this myth; she is unable to re-create herself into a true "good poor" body; she evaluates her "good poor" existence as a "lie" (T 21).

In "A Question of Class" the implied author addresses the myth of the "good poor" directly: "There was a myth of the poor in this country, but it did not include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was an idea of the good poor – hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable" (S 17). It is obvious that the myth of the "good poor" is as much of a construct as the "white trash" myth generated by the middle class in order to legitimize their fear and abhorrence towards the "white trash" bodies. As the implied author of the essay notes, the poverty she knew did not ennoble, it could not produce a "righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble[78]" hero (S 17) because it was "dreary, deadening, shameful" (T 17) it produced people who were affected by it, nevertheless they can not be reduced to simple mythical signifiers – neither "good" nor "bad".

The implied author of "A Question of Class" suggests that trying to accept ANY myth proves to be self-destructive, be it that of "white trash" people, the "good poor", or any other. Consequently, the only possibility to "resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness" is to resist all mythical simplifications and accept every/one's flawed humanity: "I have loved my family so stubbornly that every impulse to hold them in contempt had sparked in me a countersurge of pride" (S 15), claims the implied author of the essay embedding these two seemingly opposing reactions into the heart of one situation. Her statement discloses the pressure of the "white trash" myth on "everyone" to hold "white trash" people in contempt. The implied author's reaction is the very opposite given her affiliation to "them" and the knowledge of "their/her" history. The text thus suggests that seeing a particular body behind the mythical signifiers weakens the effect of the myth. Mirroring the process of self-denial,

---

[78] The word "inhumanly" stresses the mythical nature of such a hero.

when the implied author refused her "white trashiness" along with her family and history, the process of taking pride in these elements which have proved as formative includes accepting the mythical signifiers and re-filling them with their history, thus deconstructing the myth.

The myth does not even consider the possibility of taking pride in "white trash" history and deriving from it any positive self-identification; the essay however establishes pride as one of the most important aspects in resisting the internalization of the "white trash" myth. Pride coaxes the "white trash" person to create a personal set of values unaffected by the myth. It enables the subject to see her female relatives "powerful in ways not generally seen as heroic by the world outside the family" (S 17), to accept their as well as her own faults and to regard them, herself and everybody else as unique and extraordinary people. Furthermore, the implied author's pride in her family is "stubborn" reflecting its deep and personal roots as opposed to other possible "prides" which might be grounded only in superficial notions of unity.

Stubbornness is a characteristic playing a prominent role in Dorothy Allison's texts. It unites a certain degree of irrationality with a decisive determination to enforce one's own will against the claims of the majority. The stubborn subject is fearless and oblivious to the demands which counter his/her decision. Stubbornness is an inherent quality of the "white trash" life – living despite being regarded by the majority as being better off dead. Stubborn love and stubborn pride imply that the subject must overcome some difficulties to express them, such as loving something/one who according to the opinion of the majority is not loveable or being proud of something/one who the majority finds shameful. The implied author of "A Question of Class" is "stubbornly proud" of her "white trash" family although the reaction of the majority would be that of shame, and "stubbornly loves" her mother who did not protect her from the sexual abuse of her stepfather, although according to the majority she should hate her. Through accepting her personal feelings denied to her by the myth the

implied author leaves the mythical battleground and re-enters her own body as a unique individual.

In order to accept one's feelings it is necessary to separate them from those internalized by the myth, to uncover the love concealed by hate, to repair the emotional damage caused to the "white trash" bodies by the myth. The narrator of "River of Names" takes a stubbornly direct look at the effect her family shaped her life. Although love, pride, hate, shame, anger or grief are not thematized, they protrude through the bareness of the story in its every word:

> "Caught at eighteen and sent to prison, Jack came back seven years later blank-faced, understanding nothing. He married a quiet girl from out of town, had three babies in four years. Then Jack came home one night from the textile mill, carrying one of those big handles off the high speed spindle machine. He used it to beat them all to death and went back to work in the morning."
> (T 19)

The story is told in a detached voice, refraining from judgment, giving an account of events which could be read simultaneously as general and detailed. The severity of the narrative form stands in stark opposition to the complexity of its motivations and its emotional charge. The strongest impact of the story rests in its stifling silence bursting with meanings. Silence covers up eight years of Jack's life in jail suggesting events too brutal to be voiced, four years of marriage with a quiet girl revealing sadness and misunderstanding in their common life, the unexplained and deliberate murder implying a train of thoughts the murderer could not bring himself to utter. The lack of articulate sound in the whole of Jack's life is no less than terrifying, suggesting self-denial and hopelessness. It also isolates the protagonist from the readers making him inaccessible, unintelligible which mirrors the impact of the "white trash" myth on its recipients.

It is precisely the breaking of the destructive silence which represents the last step of the "white trash" subject in his/her conscious resistance to internalize the myth. This process

is the main issue in "River of Names" where the narrator recollects the frightful memories of her "white trash" childhood in an inner voice switching into an outer one only when she talks to her lover and tells "funny stories" or "lies". The narrator's inability to voice the truth, and talk to her lover honestly and openly is presented on nearly every page: "I hug her back and close my eyes. I cannot say a word," (13); "I show these pictures to Jesse, not saying who they are," (14); "'How many of you were there anyway?' I don't answer," (15). Simultaneously she fights the literally physical impulse to tell her story:

> "I open my mouth, close it, can't speak. ... I would like to turn around, talk to her, tell her... 'I've got a dust river in my head, a river of names endlessly repeating. That dirty water rises in me, all those children screaming out their lives in my memory, and I become someone else, someone I have tried so hard not to be. But I don't say anything, and I know [...] that by not speaking I am condemning us..." (20)

The strongest motivation in articulating her "white trash" history is the need to make peace with herself, to let the river of names out of her body. The act of revealing the truth about her family is not an act of denunciation or accusation; on the contrary it is an act of purification saving the narrator from becoming someone she has "tried so much to be" – another victim of the suffocating and harmful silence.

The implied author of "A Question of Class" recollects that the immediate impulse for writing the short story "River of Names" was a feeling of hopeless rage, anger, injustice, and deep grief. Writing "explained to [her] something [she] never let [herself] to see close up before – the whole process of running away, of closing up inside [herself], of hiding," (34).

The essay thus suggests that writing, even writing fiction enables the author to understand him/herself better. When writing the author scrutinizes the motivations of his/her characters in a much greater detail than in real life. Even a personal narrative protects the author from the story by a certain level of detachment enabling him/her to transmit it into his/her own life. Furthermore, the endless possibilities in the behavior and the reasoning of

fictional characters enhance the senselessness of simple answers to complex questions. As the implied author of "A Question of Class" points out: "The difficulty is that I can't ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much denied class structure of our society," (S 15-16).

Posing the question whether it is more effective to fight the myth on fictional or factual grounds it is evident the answer will not be simple. The narrator's voice in "The River of Names" is coherent, reinforcing the tendencies to unite her with the persona of the writer[79]. The "true" backdrop behind the stories unquestionably strengthens their impact on the audience. However, as the above quoted excerpts showed, the author makes use of pure literary techniques, augmenting the content of the story by subtle metaphors and allusions, transcending the singular charge of the story and creating a general parable. She seldom addresses the "main" "white trash" issues directly, yet engrosses the reader so much into her story the effect is enormously powerful. The questions and answers persistently grate under the surface of the story and cajole the reader to break in and find them out for him/herself.

On the contrary, Dorothy Allison's essay "A Question of Class" is very straightforward, honest, and explanatory. It directly addresses "white trash" issues and supplies the reader with her answers. The backbone of the essay is again the implied author's life which she mediates to the reader from a very close distance. While learning a lot about a "white trash" body the reader does not have to discover the message of the essay for him/herself and thus it does not resonate in his/her body as much as the short story. While the reader of the essay finds out its implied author had a fearful childhood, the reader of the short story comes close to experiencing the fear and not necessarily being able to name it.

---

[79] In *Trash*, there is only one short story narrated in third person singular: "'The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee'". The title is in quotation marks and the story is introduced and concluded by a text in first person singular suggesting the narrator only mediates the story.

In relation to the myth the short story could be seen as reinforcing it, since in fiction, all protagonists basically function as signifiers separated from the reader by a wall of chasm of make-belief. On the other hand, the essay being a personal confession with an individual "white trash" body almost palpably present behind it is a far more indisputable strategy in deconstructing the myth.

In answer to the question whether it is possible to shatter the myth from within, Allison's texts suggest no more that it is impossible from with-out. Feeling the affect of the myth in one's body also reveals more deeply the mythical strategies and shortcuts and establishes a firm space for resistance. Contrary to a "white trash" body, the outside recipient of the myth can never distinguish between the purely mythical, and the personal. Simultaneously, deconstructing the myth within one's own body does not necessarily lead to deconstructing the myth as such.

3. 4. The Power of Ex-centric[80] Narration

Although the "white trash" myth is a narrative pertinent solely to the United States, it can be viewed in a complementary relation to other exclusionary narratives based on drawing social, cultural, ethnic, economic, national, gender, sexual, and other boundaries around distinct bodies with the intention of creating and perpetrating a strict division between majority and minority, center and margins, superior and inferior. As instruments of power these narratives mark various persons/bodies as "others" – they impose upon them the notion of a shared and uniform identity, they deprive them of subject positions, and silence them with a language which ignores their life (and) experiences. As a result the humanity of these "other" bodies is in Sidonie Smith's words "opaque" (435). If they want to appropriate a free

---

[80] I borrow the term "ex-centricity" from Connie D. Griffin's article "Ex-Centricities: Perspectives on Gender and Multi-Cultural Self-Representation in Contemporary American Women's Autobiographies." (2001).

place/space within themselves and the world, they have to make use of a number of complex self-re-creational strategies.

The "white trash" myth is unquestionably one of these degrading narratives, bearing a striking resemblance namely to the widespread master narrative of the colonizer towards the colonized. The position of "white trash" bodies is in some respects similar to that of colonized bodies[81]. In relation to the North, the South has always been perceived as the "other", the less civilized, the feminine[82]. Furthermore, the North has played an important, even leading role in the creation of the "white trash" myth. Being the subject of predominantly Northern writers, journalists, and scientists the South has been a region which was "written over", colonized by the North. "White trash" people are sometimes even considered to be the earliest "white" inhabitants of the South – "discovered" by William Byrd they play the role of the "natives".

In the "Introduction" to *Women, Autobiography, Theory: a Reader* Smith and Watson place the ultimate question: "Can a colonized subject speak in or through cultural formations other than those of the colonial master?"[83] (28). In other words and in relation to the "white trash" myth the question is – Can a "white trash" body speak in a language other than that of the myth? The relationship between the mythical and the counter-mythical discourse is very tentative. What are some of the strategies which the subjects, who "write back to the center" (Irving 105) from the position of ex-centricity, use to shape their-stories in relation or in opposition to the prevailing master narrative?

It is often through stories with autobiographic elements that the ex-centric bodies attack the "white trash" myth or the master narrative of the colonizer undermining the detached and general story by their personal narrative. As Leigh Gilmore notes in *The Limits*

---

[81] The similarities in question are however strictly structural. As Julia Watson points out, the use of the word "de/colonization" by Western feminists in Western cultural contexts (as the South surely is) can be viewed by non-Western feminists as coming from a "decadent and depoliticized discourse" (398).
[82] McIlwaine even uses "she" when referring to the South and "he" when referring to the North (106).
[83] This merely a rephrases Gayatri Spivak's famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?"

of Autobiography the proliferation of marginal autobiographies[84] in the 1980's paralleled, countered, and reacted to the postmodern announcement of the "death of the author" (2001: 3). The author in question was a very specific one – "the universal human subject"[85] (Smith and Watson 27), the colonizer, the civilized white man; a person who has had the luxury to forget his sex, race, and class, and concentrate on continuing in the tradition of a coherent disembodied subject[86] who voices a stable identity, and narrates an unquestionable his-story[87].

The death of the "universal human subject" paralleled the birth of subjects marginal, ex-centric whose stories have yet never been heard: "No lesbian in the universe, I do believe, will tell you there's nothing left to say. We have our whole lives to say," (53) was Mab Segrest's 1981 reaction to the proclaimed futility of narratives. Contrary to the self-confident narrative strategies of the central subjects, the ex-centrics make use of truly postmodern approaches (or is it the other way around?): questioning of the self as a relevant authorial voice; diffusion of the individual into his/her community and vice versa; dialogism; suspicious mistrust of language resulting in new ways of expression, namely performance; a fluid nature of the subject who is always in the state of becoming, whose identity is always deferred, always related to surrounding people and environment, created as much by "fact" as by "fiction", and filtered through (in Kristeva's terms) the "politics of negativity"[88]. Ex-

---

[84] Marginal here does not only refer to colonial, but to all non white-heterosexual-upper/middle-class-male.

[85] The inclusion of the word "human" in this term further stresses the notion of sub-humanity of all other non-white, male, civilized authors. The literary construction of the "universal human subject" can be traced to Western autobiographical writing with its prevailing feature of the unity of self, individuality, and continuous history of its subject and narrator. The most exemplary masculine Western autobiographers are Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Goethe, and Henry Adams (Smith and Watson 5). Smith and Watson call the Western autobiographical "I" "the 'I' with a historical attitude" (27).

[86] In this light, it becomes evident that the "universal human subject" is himself a cultural construct. As Fredric Jameson points out: "it [he] never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type" (quoted in Griffin). This insightful comment however does not attack the existence of the center, which is as much of a construct as the "universal human subject".

[87] The myth however does not have an author which is why the "death of the author" could not affect it or endanger its impact.

[88] Knowing that the "universal human subject" is a cultural and philosophical construct, it follows that every subject is basically ex-centric. This entails the dissolution of the center – margins opposition and renders all subjects specific, individual, self-constructed. The term "ex-centric" does not only mean "away from the center" but also "following the disappearance of the center".

centric narration relies on the interpretive power of the audience, meaning the writer's as well as the reader's identity becomes a continual process, not a true/false statement.

Many ex-centric subjects use the art of story-telling (and especially story-telling with autobiographical elements) as a survival strategy, as a means of resistance and self-re-creation. In terms of the master narrative of the colonizer, the ex-centric subjects struggle to de-colonize themselves through personal narratives. Accusing the "white trash" myth of lying involves self-esteem and determination to go against the "natural" or "unquestionable". Those who show these qualities, and succeed in making their counter-narratives known despite being long kept in silent shame may to some seem truly *eccentric*[89].

3. 4. 1. Two or Three Things And Nothing for Sure In Dorothy Allison's Memoir[90]

As an ex-centric "white trash" author Dorothy Allison set for her stories a goal no smaller than to "remake the world, to change people's thinking" (S 212). The instrument she uses to make that happen is the thing closest to her – her person, her body, her life, her-story. By being a self-proclaimed "white trash" author Allison partly accepts narrative of the "white trash" myth with its language and strict "us vs. them" division. Nevertheless she complicates her textual identity by insisting on its fluid and relative nature[91].

---

[89] The eccentricity of marginal narratives is based predominantly on the disbelief of the large reading public in the events depicted in the ex-centric autobiographies which may seem "a bit over the top". This may even result in accusations of lying as was the case of Rigoberta Menchú (Smith and Watson 7).

[90] I take the denomination "memoir" from the flap of the book which says that *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is a "lyrical, complex memoir ".

[91] In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: a Reader* the contributors list a number of aspects which render a given text a marginal autobiography: emphasis on writing itself, contradictions in the representations of identity, the name as a site for experimentation, gendered connection of word and body (Gilmore 184), appropriation/contestation of sovereignty, bringing to light/making manifest, announcing and performing publicly, speaking as one of a group/speaking for a group, speaking to the future (Smith 435-438). *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* fulfills every single one of these prerequisites and therefore mirrors the struggles of colonized bodies against the master narrative of the colonizer. It also further unravels the constructed nature of a "white" identity and the need to contest it as much as other "ex-centric" identities.

Through the fictional process of re-constructing her complex identity Allison attacks cultural and mythical imperatives which sustain fictions of coherence (Smith and Watson 27), and de-constructs the coherent concept of an easily defined "white trash" body perpetrated by the myth. On the other hand her text acknowledges the necessity to somehow unite a fragmented identity and locate a stable "point of resistance" (Gilmore 1998: 184) helping her in the process of self-re-creation. The author coaxes her audience to discover the complex meaning of her narrative which is full of contradictions, hints and ambiguities, and realize the deceitful simplicity of the "white trash" myth.

The whole of Allison's text[92] bears strong autobiographic features, she basically tells/writes one story over and over again – starting with a collection of poems *The Women Who Hate... Me.*, which she later transformed into short stories *Trash*, than fully developed in the appraised novel *Bastard out of Carolina*, and re-capitulated in *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* – a piece "written for performance in the months following the completion of [her] novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*" which was later substantially revised and published as a memoir (TTT Author's note). With each text Allison clearly moves out of the realm of make-belief and into the realm of truth trying to persuade her audience about the validity of her-story.

One of the main themes of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, similarly to other ex-centric autobiographies, is the storytelling process itself. The narrator who introduces herself as a storyteller (not a writer) grants the story the leading role in her narrative: "After a while the deepest satisfaction was in the story itself, greater even than the terror in my sisters' faces, the laughter, and, God help us, the hope" (2). The narrator suggests that at first it was

---

[92] A very important role in Allison's text play interviews she has given to various magazines and newspapers in which she strips bare the intentions behind her narratives. In the interviews Allison performs the role of the fiction writer who is asked to leave fiction aside and tell the truth. They offer her the possibility to conform her fictional narratives on clearly non-fictional grounds.

the effect of the story which she most desired, but which later changed to her focus entirely on the telling of a story and rendered its impact on the audience of secondary importance. "The story becomes the thing needed," reveals the narrator her fixation on story-making and telling. The element uniting the narrator's identity, the "point of resistance" thus can be traced to the story itself. This signifies a shift from text to metatext.

The stories in the memoir have a plethora of original authors – the narrator collects stories which somehow shape, affect, and co-create her-story – with one uniting element: they are not easy to tell, they are stories of violence, hate, sexual abuse, humiliation, death, despair. Their authors had to overcome great hardships to voice them. The memoir thus becomes a history of bringing silent stories into the open. The narrator captures the decisive moments that lead to the release of the story, and thus to the liberation of its author. "This was a wall in my life, I say, a wall I had to climb over every day" (43), explains the narrator her need to tell the story of her sexual abuse. "My theory is that talking about it makes a difference. [...] So let me say it" (44).

The text also includes those stories which have not been told: "Behind the story I tell is the one I don't" (39). The narrator suggests that even silence carries meaning, and must be incorporated into the storytelling process. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is not a memoir in the sense of a single coherent subject, straightforward language, and a beginning to end life story claiming an unquestionable truth value; it is a collage of subjects, means of expression, silences and stories deliberately balancing on the verge of truth and lie, fact and fiction, individual and community, all united in a text written by Dorothy Allison.

3. 4. 1. 1. Resistance Towards Language

Dorothy Allison's refusal to comply with predefined modes of representation imposed by the myth is clearly reflected in her resistance towards the medium of language. In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* as a performance piece, the author abandons the written word and literally speaks through her body; constructs her autobiographical identity through performance (Smith and Watson 35). The author substitutes the language used by the myth by the language of her body because language itself, even before becoming a part of the myth, is an instrument of power and hegemony. By attacking language – the very foundation of the myth and the instrument of (in Lacan's terms) the Law of the Father (Smith and Watson 19), Allison creates a new semiological system, which she designs according to her needs, and her reality.

Allison's sign system of performativity does include words (signifiers), but it is her who gives them the desired meaning (signified) by passing them through the lattice of her self. The author succeeds in separating the signifier from the signified by suggesting there is another meaning behind the word, that there is individual history behind the mythical one. The narrator of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* claims: "I am and am not [what] the world sees" (TTT 69), I am and am not what the world reads/says/hears; one must continually question all labels, and look for shaded meanings in all clear narratives. When Allison writes "trash" or "bastard" she places within the word the story of the myth next to her own, and leaves them to compete with each other in the minds of her audience. She does use the same words as the myth but within her story these words simultaneously affirm and counter their mythical meaning. By loosening the undisputed relationship between the word and its meaning Allison's text demands individual interpretation and ignites its audience's distrust in various given and "natural" structures in the society, not only that of language.

For a subject who had to learn to break silence and start speaking, it is important to appropriate all words and use them to express her position. The narrator in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* explains that it is impossible to speak about something that we are reluctant to use the words for. The author has to drag the words with all their meanings on her side: "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 awful, tearing words. [...] I had to learn how to say it, to say "rape," say "child," say "unending," "awful," and "relentless"... [...] "in the same terrible sentence" (TTT 42-43). The narrator of the memoir uses words such as "rape" in the same way that Dorothy Allison uses "trash" and "bastard".

One of the ways Allison makes language speak for her and not against her, one of the ways she avoids its manifestation of power is through the use of an oral narrative. In relation to the written word oral narration has long[93] been considered inferior, uncivilized, feminine, and simply ex-centric which is why it remained unmarked by the internal hierarchy of the written word, and therefore appropriated by ex-centric subjects as a "clean" means of expression. The text is structured by a number of oral elements, namely dialogue with the audience, cyclical repetition, absence of a coherent narrative, and natural flow of speech.

"Let me tell you a story," is the opening sentence of Allison's memoir which sets the scene by invoking a conversation between the narrator and the listener/s, a conversation which has been going on long before it was recorded on paper. The reader suddenly finds him/herself in the midst of an intimate dialogue where the stories told are of such an importance they need to be introduced with a metatextual warning and the listener must agree on hearing them ("Let me tell you a story"). The reader can either assume the position of an outside observer, excluded from the confidential dialogue by the narrator's constant reference

---

[93] Especially throughout colonial times.

to telling and hearing, and not writing and reading; or s/he can actively enter the world of a textual conversation with the author and question, attack, support, and contest her stories while reading them.

The title sentence of the book "two or three things I know for sure" is used throughout the text as a refrain, only the grammatical object of the sentence varies every time. It divides the text into variously long narratives functioning as a sort of envoi, summoning up the main ideas of each "episode". The repetitive sentences alone build a backbone of not only *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* but of Allison's text as such. Placing them next to each other provides the author's "manifesto"[94]: Repeating the sentence may suggest the never-ending importance of these issues for the author, her reluctance to stop talking about them as they do not only concern her but have a wider impact, and the need to constantly debate them and never settle for one fixed interpretation, one stable explanation. The narrator claims the author of this sentence is her aunt Dot who followed: "Of course, it's never the same things and I'm never as sure as I'd like to be" (TTT 5). This uncertainty is present in every one of the refrain sentences and further underlines the narrator's attempt to destabilize any undisputed statements or meanings. Contrary to the myth's demand for simple and easily interpretable signs, Allison's text deliberately presents uncertainty as a positive value.

Another oral element of the memoir is that it presents a number of fragmented narratives, stories which do not gradually lead one into the other but start and end abruptly,

---

[94] "Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make (3); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is the way you can both hate and love something you are not sure you understand (7); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this-if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind (12); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that no one is as hard as my uncles had to pretend to be (32); Two or three things I know for sure, but none of them is why a man would rape a child, why a man would beat a child (43); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that change when it comes cracks everything open (48); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is how long it takes to learn to love yourself, how long it took me, how much love I need now (67); Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I would rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me (71); Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is, that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world (72); Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is, that if we are not beautiful to each other, we cannot know beauty in any form (86); Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love (90).

every single one told with the same passion, endowed with the same importance. Some stories are clearly metaphoric[95], others seem to function as intimate vignettes or obituaries.

The whole text is fluent and colloquial playing on the importance of sound – intonation, dialect, volume, the tone and color of the characters' voices:

> "We have to hurry," Wanda told me and that bark of a laugh that meant noting was funny. [...] "Get out of the way!" I yelled at a guy in a pale blue suit. "No need to be rude, sister," he said in a voice that any other day would have cut me to the quick. [...] Wanda glared across the rows of economy vehicles, cursing, saying: "Damn, this doesn't look right. Damn city growing so fast. Goddammit, this doesn't look right." (TTT 12)

Allison succeeded in what has excluded many Southern writers from getting to the mainstream audience – her texts retain a distinct speech namely by the casual use of swear words and specific compellations while staying easily comprehensible.

Dorothy Allison builds the text of her memoir around photographs of herself, her family, and friends[96], appropriating yet another system of signification used by the myth against the "white trash" bodies. The presence and importance of a non-verbal element further proves that she never entirely "surrenders to language" (Griffin 329). Photographs introduce another system of signifiers which at first sight support and replenish the author's use of words. A closer view however discloses marked discrepancies between the two modes of signification. Introducing herself as "trash" (1) the narrator draws on her audience's biased ideas about people who either assume or are labeled by this term – ragged, unwashed, dull, etc. The first photograph she presents, however, is that of a young woman in a white dress, a

---

[95] Such as the story about Dorothy making a family tree: A new teacher, obviously not a Southerner, gives the children in her class homework – to draw a family tree. For her it is a safe school project which will not cause her students any problems, on the contrary they will be happy to create something their families will be proud of. She does not realize the danger of bringing up the complicated and often silenced history of "white trash" people, within her world family is a safe haven and she does not even imagine it could be otherwise.

[96] Allison has also used family photographs during her performance. Photographs also play a major role in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and her short stories. One of the characters in *Bastard* comments on the Boatwright family's lack of camera-friendliness: "We an't bad looking. We just make bad pictures," (293) and claims the difference is money.

watch bracelet, a necklace, and a stylish haircut – definitely not the mythical concept of "white trash". The author of the memoir continues to weave her narrative by contrasting and paralleling words with photographs: she likens her mother to Kitty Wells through words and a picture (20) and a couple pages later states: "The women of my family? ... Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines" (33) and presents a picture of four women whose looks comply with the text. "I have never been allowed to be [b]eautiful and female. Sexed and sexual" (32) complains the narrator but later on incorporates into the text a romantic portrait of herself with long hair and a sexy top (60) – a typical representation of a beautiful sexy female. Such contradictions between the two modes of signification again alert the reader that s/he can never be sure of what s/he sees or reads; that a meaning is always related to the specific point of view; that one person can be Kitty Wells and a "white trash" icon at the same time, it only depends on the interpreter.

By including photographs into her text Allison in accordance with Barthes' statements shows that the material of mythical speech is diverse:

> "[T]he materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth." (Barthes 114)

Photographs play a leading role in constructing the mythical representation of a "white trash" person (Henninger 85). Allison attacks the myth by its own weapons – she undermines the mythical concept perpetrated by images of "white trash" people the readers/viewers carry in their minds by presenting her private photographs which she claims picture her "white trash" family. The author's photographs have not been "reduced to a pure signifying function", they retain their primary meaning.

One of the strategies Dorothy Allison makes use of in her fight against the "white trash" myth is appropriating elements of mythical speech, be it words or photographs, and expressing them from her own individual position.

III. 1. 2. The Need For an Interpretive Community

The beginning of every marginal narration is involuntary silence. The need of the ex-centric subjects for an audience is thus more than evident. As Smith and Watson point out in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: a Reader* the audience has to "perform the impossible – validat[e] the female [ex-centric] experience narrated by the text" (23). Ex-centric autobiographies become meaningful only when they resonate with the audience, when they are accepted for voicing a common experience previously excluded into the realm of the non-existent (because un-pronounced). The interpretive communities (in Julian Sandell's terms) co-create the text because they understand it.

The dialogical elements in Allison's memoir invite readers to relate to the text – question, attack, or validate it: "I'll tell you a story and maybe you'll believe me. [...] You believe me? [...] Oh, I could tell you stories that would darken the sky and stop the blood" (TTT 3, 51). Any kind of a response is a prerequisite for the narrator to continue in her story. It is only when knows she is breaking the silence that the story becomes meaningful.

Who is Dorothy Allison's implied reader? What kind of an audience understands her stories, believes them, or can relate to them? The narrator of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* answers:

> "If I could convince myself I can convince you. But you were
> not there when I began. You were not the one I was
> convincing. When I began there was just nightmares and need
> and stubborn determination." (TTT 4)

It follows that the first audience, the first reader of the narrator's stories was the narrator herself. In order to break the silence surrounding specific experiences one must first learn how to voice and interpret them for oneself. When the story reaches a larger audience, the narrated

experience becomes less specific and more general enabling a wider range of relational qualities. The narrator of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* "maps" the journey from creating the story for herself to reading it to a strangers who still relate to it: "These days I go to strange places, cities I've never been, stand up in public, in front of strangers, assume the position, open my mouth, and tell stories" (TTT 90).

With regard to the audience, the major difference between the myth and Allison's myth-defying memoir is that the myth relies on creating and perpetrating an insuperable barrier between the object and the recipient of the myth whereas Allison stresses the common experience of the object of her story (who is simultaneously its narrator) and its audience.

3. 4. 1. 3. Creating the Self Through Stories

The narrator of *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure* writes from a number of ex-centric positions. She derives her identity from being a "white trash" woman, lesbian, storyteller, Southerner, feminist, incest survivor, mother, member of her family, etc. Allison constructs her fictional identity on a wholly unchartered territory sweeping away any predetermined and predefined modes of subjectivity[97]. Her fictional identity is fluid, often contradictory, conditioned by her-story and its protagonists as well as by her audience.

Using the same instruments as the "white trash" myth, Dorothy Allison subverts it by creating radically different stories, thus destroying one of the myth's strongest strategies which is unconditional objectification of "white trash" people. The decisive shift in her narratives is that she assumes the position of the subject (author): "I am a storyteller" (TTT 3), the object (content): "[I am] not the storyteller but the woman in the story" (TTT 4), and the recipient of the story: "[I am] the woman who believes in the story (TTT 4). The narrator

---

[97] The number of identity positions she articulates in her narrative only stresses the fact that everyone's identity is fragmented, constructed out of many elements.

unites the narration around her self, destroying the subject-object opposition, and refusing the mythical narratives which have "written her over". At the same time she fragments her identity by speaking through a number of voices, assuming multiple subject positions. Allison disrupts the mythical process of simplification by putting forward the complex process of construction of her authorial identity.

> "The stories other people would tell about my life, my mother's life, my sisters', uncles', cousins', and lost girlfriends' –those are the stories which could destroy me, erase me, mock and deny me. I tell my stories louder all the time [...] in order not to tell the one the world wants, the story of us broken, the story of us never laughing out loud..." (TTT 71-72)

The narrator grants stories no weaker than existential powers. Stories produced by the myth, which exclude her as an individual although she plays a major role in them as a concept, could literally "destroy" her. The myth reflects "white trash" people in a narrative which is so dominant that an individual could be (and is) persuaded to mould his/her identity and expression to "fit" into it. Continually perceiving a warped but uncomplicated representation of one's self – in the form of the myth – may entail one's gradual acquisition of this simple prefabricated identity. Within the "white trash" myth, the individual could "become broken", and "never laugh out loud". S/he would turn into a mythical caricature of him/herself. Such a transformation would truly destroy the individual because s/he would cease being him/herself.

Through the construction of her authorial identity the narrator deconstructs the "white trash" myth. In order to be able to tell the story, the narrator must first destroy the myth within herself. For this reason the storyteller in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* has to wrestle away from the myth the full authorship of her stories, her life, and herself and endow them with her meaning: "I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means" (TTT 70). The narrator follows with a direct attack on the myth-making process which renders her complex identity flat and simple: "What is the story I will not tell? [...] It is the

story of the life I do not lead, without complication, mystery, courage, or the transfiguration of the flesh" (71). The narrator's subjectivity is created through "the politics of negativity" – pointing to the stories which are not hers she assumes a vast space of stories she might or might not decide to tell.

The narrator addresses the pressure which the "white trash" myth exerts on her life pushing her to lead the mythical paradigmatic existence. She does not only attack the myth itself, but any exclusionary master narrative which imposes upon its objects any notion of a predefined identity:

> "I know. I am supposed to have shrunk down and died. I know. I
> am supposed to be deeply broken, incapable of love or trust or
> passion. But I am not, and part of why that is so is the nature of
> the stories I told myself to survive." (69)

The narrator feels the power of the master narrative, she reads its demands, and knows exactly what behavioral pattern she is "obliged" to follow. Although the quotation is surrounded by the context of incest survival, it resonates with the demands of the myth. According to the master narrative of the victim and the perpetrator, the former is defenseless, condemned to shame for the rest of her/his life, "deeply broken, incapable of love or trust or passion". The narrator can only resist this "fate" through telling stories, creating another reality in which constructs her identity freely regardless of the myth. She counters the mythical demands by living her own fiction.

Storytelling is presented as a survival strategy: "When I began there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive. And if I know anything, I know how to survive, how to remake the world in a story" (TTT 4). By making up stories the narrator creates for herself a fictional reality which helps her to survive in the

reality affected by the myth[98]. She re-creates her identity out of conflating narratives making it fluid, open to interpretation, multiple, incoherent, and most importantly unrestricted:

> "I talked-story-talked, out loud-assuming identities I made up. Sometimes I was myself, arguing loudly as I could never do at home. Sometimes I became people I had seen on television or read about in books [...] In the world as I remade it, nothing was forbidden; everything was possible." (2)

Telling a story of survival however entails the so-called survivor's guilt which is also present in Allison's memoir: "I tell stories to prove I was meant to survive knowing it is not true" (51). This statement destabilizes the narrator's position, and questions the truth value of her stories. It also suggests the narrator is questioning the rightfulness of her authorship knowing somebody else's stories will never be told. This is also the reason why she incorporates other people's stories into her own – she feels like being the voice of "her people" telling simultaneously her story as well as theirs.

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, similarly to other ex-centric autobiographies, there is an omnipresent dialectics between constructing the subject as purely individual as opposed to purely relational, in other words a constant negotiation between "I" and "we" (Perreault 191). The notion of "relationality" in women's autobiographies is derived from Nancy Chodorow's innovative research in ego psychology which postulated that: "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (quoted in Smith and Watson 17). Applying Chodorow's concept on the narrator of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* it is evident that in constructing her subjectivity she greatly relies on her "white trash" community, namely on "white trash" women.

---

[98] The realities surrounding the text are very complex. There is the reality outside the text shaped by the authors mind (memory, interpretation). The author claims that this reality is mirrored in the fictitious reality of the text. The text being a memoir however does not ever fully cross the border between fiction and non-fiction; it incorporates pure fiction as well as pure non-fiction in one narrative.

Allison perpetrates the idea of a singular "white trash" community by accepting the "us" vs. "them" division: "Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum" (1). The narrator positions herself as being one of the "trash", however such a simple identification entails puzzling elements. The superficial derogatory labels clearly signify the simplicity of the myth. Within the context of the memoir they carry an affirmative as well as a negative meaning. The narrator is simultaneously identifying and dis-identifying herself and her community as "trash".

Allison's "white trash" community is further narrowed down to a single extended family which the narrator of the memoir establishes through depicting parts of its "history": "My family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness," and continues, "the women of my family most of all" (32). The memoir basically does not feature other "white trash" people than the narrator's relatives. The identification process thus also covers the question of being or being not a part of a family.

The narrator puts forward the notion that her family has no positive history to relate to. However, the story of the memoir can be seen as creating such a history. She assigns her relatives qualities such as stubbornness, hardness, endurance, etc. which refute any definitively positive or negative value. They empower the family to survive under difficult circumstances but at the same time they keep them from wanting a change. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is thus a complicated history of a "white trash" family, simultaneously a counter-narrative towards the myth and an original story with its own characteristics and principles.

The family history circulates in stories the different relatives talk about and stories which remain untold. Silence unites a community on different grounds than a story; it is a bond of exclusion, and secrecy. When the narrator claims her subjectivity saying "I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means", (70) she follows: "I knew

that as a child. It was one of the reasons not to tell" (70). Silent stories are those whose

meaning is most dangerous and burdening. The narrator here might be referring to her

childhood's history of sexual abuse. She knew that what was happening to her was bad and

forbidden. "One of the reasons not to tell" was that she would break the uniting silence and

the secret of her household[99] which would exclude her from the community.

Telling the story of her "white trash" family also means the narrator is telling *on* them,

and affirming the "white trash" myth. The myth silences the ex-centric subjects in various

ways. The pressure which community members exert upon each another to remain silent

about the life in the community reflects the fear they might comply with the negative image of

the mythical paradigm. Telling the story entails the guilt of breaking the silence, revealing

family secrets, being the "traitor" (hooks 429).

The closest but most complicated bond unravels between the narrator and her female

relatives: "The women I loved most in the world horrified me" (38). She draws the biggest

attention to their similar physical features[100] which also define their personalities and stress

the repetitiveness of their personal histories with a bleak vision of a change: "My sisters'

faces were thin and sharp, with high cheekbones and restless eyes, like my mama's face, my

aunt Dot's, my own" (1) – the narrator comments on the myth's cultural determinism.

The narrator feels united with the women of her community; claiming their life

experiences as her own, living their histories, being their voice, dissolving her "I" in a "white

trash" women "we":

> "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

---

[99] This quotation carries an innumerous number of meanings. The narrator might also be referring to the realization of her unique subjectivity helping her to separate from her community (and the myth), which might be endangered once it became a circulating story.

[100] In this aspect Allison confirms the claim of eugenic scientists that "white trash" people share certain physical qualities.

background with our mouths open, in print dresses [...] ugly and old and exhausted." (33)

Using the "we" the narrator assumes the role of the speaker for her community (or only her family? or only the women of her family?). As a "we" the narrator seems to be accepting the myth which is why she also constructs her identity and subjectivity as decidedly separational. She refuses to participate in the cycle of "death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness", and struggles to break out of it through the process of dis-identification: "Lord, save me from [the women of my family]. Do not let me become them" (38) prays the narrator[101]. The acquisition of the "white trash" woman identity as well as its rejection is never definite. It mirrors the narrator's attempt to defy the myth which she simultaneously accepts.

The memoir is a multivocal text stressing not only the dialogue of the narrator with the audience, and the narrator with the myth; but also the narrator with herself. It discloses her complex subjectivity conditioned as much by her community as by her individuality: "I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told, women I have known" (38). On the one hand, being a part of the community and carrying inside herself her community's stories, the subject is never absolutely free to assign meaning to stories which shape her, stories she makes for herself. On the other, embodying numerous other subjects provides her with a rich her-story she can draw from in the process of self-re-creation. The memoir is a free space displaying an innumerable quantity of voices all united within the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator. It is a mosaic loaded with a single palpable meaning: nothing is for sure, everything must be contested, every simple sign carries a complicated history.

---

[101] It is significant that the narrator says "I prayed a man's prayer" – the first barrier she steps over is that of gender. The process of identification gradually narrows down to the category "women", so in the opposing process leaving this category must be the first step in rejecting the previous identity.

Is Fiction Harder Than Truth?

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure presents itself as a "lyrical, complex memoir" accompanied by pictures "from the author's personal collection" (TTT flap), at the same time, the Author's Note says: "The names of most family members have been changed and other characters are composites-creations based on friends, family, and acquaintances". The text balances on the edge between fact and fiction, truth and lie, myth and reality never entirely becoming one or the other. Its power lies precisely in the notion of a constant instability, and a free interpretive space.

The author of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* attempts to break the fact x fiction divide, and construct a story and a textual identity which is a result of the fluid interference of these two worlds. One of the main messages of the memoir is that fiction in its various forms – be it the myth in a negative sense or the survival story of the ex-centric subject in a positive sense –strongly affects people's lives in reality. A real person can become fictitious through his/her acceptance of the mythical pressure to lead a simplified existence; or a person affected by the myth can become more real (define the myth within her/himself) through putting him/herself into fiction: "Not until I began to fashion stories on the page did I sort it all out, see where the lie ended and broken life remained" (38-39), recognizes the narrator of the memoir. In the world of fiction, the author searches for reason and motivation in the behavior of his/her characters even when they are modeled on his/her own life. The major difference is in the detached view the author acquires in the fictional world which enables him/her to analyze his/her life in reality.

However loose the boundaries of the truthful value of the text may be, it has one prerequisite, one coherent "point of resistance" – that the simplification of the "white trash"

myth is a dangerous lie[102], the only story the narrator refuses to reproduce: "The story I do not

tell is the only one that is a lie. It is the story of the life I do not lead, without complication,

mystery, courage, or the transfiguration of the flesh" (71). The myth is presented as a "mean

story" which can destroy those who come to believe it: "Of all the stories I know, the meanest

are the stories the women I loved told themselves in secret – the stories that sustained and

broke them" (69). In order to discredit the myth the narrator must make her-story powerful

enough to counter it, she must persuade the audience to believe her.

Being a performance piece where the author is simultaneously the performer, *Two or

Three Things I Know for Sure* must have strongly inclined towards factual grounds. In this

light Dorothy Allison was using her body to refute the "white trash" myth, literally standing

up to fight it, persuading the audience that her-story is true, that her physical existence is the

proof of the lie of the myth[103].

Being a written text the balance between fact and fiction becomes more even.

Countering the domineering nature of the mythical narrative, the narrator grants the decision

to accept or refuse her-story to her audience. Tying the rope of the narrative around one stable

point – the argument that the myth is a lie – the narrator subverts all other truth/lie values of

the narrative. It is important to keep in mind that the recipient of the written text is located

within the world of fiction where the value of "truth" is always contested[104].

At the very beginning of the text the narrator questions her own credibility. She

simultaneously affirms and refutes it; for example by letting her audience witness the process

of the making of her story: "I'll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff,

change a few details, add the certainty of outrage" (3). The need for persuasion is clearly

---

[102] From a metatextual point of view, even this prerequisite is shattered because the narrator does accept the concept of the myth primarily by using the "us" vs. "them" divide, and some of the mythical means of expression.

[103] Which again raises the question – is the narrator speaking only for herself, for her family, for "white trash" people in the South, or for all "white trash" people? As a performer Allison was representing herself, countering the myth for herself. Moreover, as an author of a successful novel, a teacher, and basically a working-class escapee she was already distanced from the "white trash" myth, not being its typical representation.

[104] A lie, however, remains fiction in the world of fiction as well as in the real world.

present here, but openly acknowledging her major aim she simultaneously discredits the narration. Using a cookbook simile, once the narrator reveals the ingredients of her story it weakens the mystery of its effect – diminishes her persuasive powers, which paradoxically, enhances her credibility.

"Oh, I could tell you stories that would darken the sky and stop the blood," (51) claims the narrator without specifying whether she is referring to factual or fictional stories, and suggesting the story of the memoir is by far not as powerful, frightening and dangerous. She continues: "The stories I could tell no one would believe. I would have to pour blood on the floor to convince anyone that every word I say is true. And then? Whose blood would speak for me?" (51). The narrator's "true" stories are charged with so much ex-centricity/eccentricity she claims nobody could relate to them or believe them[105]. The quotation suggests that it is more complicated to persuade someone with pure fact/truth than with fiction.

Making a fiction out of her fact enables the narrator to get closer to her audience. She does not have to persuade them she is telling the truth, because "[she] know[s] the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth" (3). Thus, she resorts to fiction primarily because its persuasive powers lie within the story itself and not its author. A fictional story is unique as well as general, it becomes the metaphor of the true story.

The major difference between a fictitious and a factual story lies within the audience; fiction grants the narrator a larger audience than a personal one. The narrator of *Two or Three*

---

[105] The only way to persuade anybody she were telling the "truth" – meaning either the truth of her "white trash" life; or some truth which is more specific – would be for her to "pour blood". This again entails at least two meanings – either her death, or the blood of her sexually abused body. In the first case, the narrator would have to die to prove the "truth" of her life which actually affirms the myth's presupposition of "white trash" people's violent lives and deaths because it suggests that living a true "white trash" life entails a bloody death. It could also mean that trying to prove the truth about her "white trash" life would be so difficult, she would have to metaphorically "pour blood" to make people believe her and refuse the myth. The following sentences speak for the first meaning: "Whose blood would speak for me?" suggests the narrator is no longer able to tell her truth, and there is nobody to follow her in her truth-telling quest. The sentence also suggests a cycle of unending violence proceeding under the cover of silence and secrecy.

Things I Know for Sure coaxes her audience to filter the text and find a personal truth, each for themselves. She closes her memoir granting the audience the ultimate power of interpretation: "I can tell you anything. All you have to believe is the truth" (94), meaning her-truth as well as their/our truth. It only depends on the distinct readers/recipients of her story whether they decide to search for facts of Dorothy Allison's real life or whether they accept her story as a metaphor they might relate to in their own lives.

It is precisely the interpretation of Allison's text which each reader internalizes that is key in deconstructing the myth. Since the myth is a text of innumerous variations with everybody carrying his/her own version of it in their body and mind, it can only be shattered through individual resistance, and personal deconstruction.

Conclusion

The contemporary need to make whiteness visible reflects a mirroring struggle for the freedom of construction of one's individual identity. This process is heavily countered by innumerable myths affecting every human body; the situation when a person becomes an empty signifier for some myth is not restricted only to "marginal" subjects. However, all myths share common features, one of the most important ones being the insuperable distance between the "object" of the myth and its proprietor.

The "white trash" myth is a fluctuating narrative which comprises of various materials of mythical speech, namely words and images which have already been worked on - simplified. Within a distinct context these signs represent the total of a distinct signifier and signified but once they have been acquired by the myth the whole signs become mere signifiers, their signified being overshadowed by the malleable signified of the myth.

Within the "white trash" myth the simplified material has been drawn mostly from stereotypical representations of poor white uneducated Southerners in literature, journalism, and eugenics which lumped various people with distinct pasts and histories under one "white trash" denomination. In literary works the antecedents for the stereotypes can be traced as far back as Petronius' writings which have served as an inspiration to the first American text mentioning poor Southern whites written by William Byrd. It was primarily during the Great Depression through the use of poor whites photographs in national journals and magazines that the textual stereotypes became united with the visual ones and the "white trash" myth was born.

Thus, innumerable bodies come to signify the impalpable yet simple concept of "white trashiness". This impalpability and simplicity is generated by an unambiguous function of the "white trash" myth which is that of "safely" separating the poor from the middle and upper

classes, and materializing the fearful American "other". The boundaries between white and non-white Americans being clearly established by the color of one's skin, it is the "white trash" people who must be held in a position of inferiority to serve as scapegoats for all white people's negative behavior.

"White trash" myth similarly to other patronizing myths uses a number of strategies to keep its objects outside the borders of acceptability; the most important ones being the pressure to internalize/naturalize the mythical assumptions, and silencing objectification. The biggest dangers the marginalized subject faces is the belief in one's worthlessness, and the gradual transformation of the distinct person with her/his unique history into the signifier of the myth re-filled with the simple yet fluctuating mythical concept.

Dorothy Allison enters the literary field with a direct message and a clear goal – to shatter the "white trash" myth from her position as a writer and a public persona. Through uniting the subject-object binary relationship and placing her textual, bodily, and individual self into the center of her narrative, Dorothy Allison unquestionably sets out to defy the "white trash" myth – being at the same time, the embodiment of the empty signifier as well as a "real" "white trash" woman. She acquires a stubborn and angry voice, a bold language, and a wide audience. Through constantly referencing the "white trash" history her texts seem to be "white trash" people's manifestos. However, her fictitious and factual persona plays such a prominent role in her writing that she succeeds in defying the "white trash" myth – but for the most part only for her self.

Through her unconditional acceptance of the mythical separation of people into "white trash" and everybody else, Dorothy Allison's texts unequivocally strengthen and nourish the myth as a thorough destruction of the myth would have to result in the destruction of the concept of "white trashiness" in general. Conversely, what is poisonous for it is Dorothy

81

Allison as a living project who through her performative identity proves that the mythical boundaries are by far not as unbreakable as the myth claims (and wishes) them to be.

Allison did not reinforce the "white trash" myth through the portrayal of her characters; on the other hand, for a superficial reader she might have confirmed some "white trash" stereotypes. The author unquestionably succeeded in disclosing the complex history of the signifiers of the "white trash" myth, their mis-representations, inner feelings, and motivations through transferring their real lives into fiction. This process is however double-edged – on the one hand it replaces the empty and distant signifier by a distinct image creating an intimate relationship between the reader and the character, on the other, regardless of all the truth behind the story, this relationship is as fictitious as the relationship between the recipient of the myth and the myth.

It can be concluded that it is impossible to fight the myth on purely fictional grounds as it merely puts one fiction against another. However, stepping into the realm of the real Dorothy Allison loses the power of the metaphor and stands against the myth only by herself and for herself.

Czech Summary

V rámci kulturních, sociálních a literárních studií ve Spojených státech amerických se v současnosti dostává do popředí odborného zájmu téma „bílé rasy/kultury/barvy pleti". Cílem „bělošských studií" je nabourat bílou neviditelnost a její normativní podstatu, která je stále trvale přítomna ve většině rovin amerického života. Vnímání bílé barvy pleti jako jen jednoho z mnoha dalších aspektů tvořících lidskou identitu otevírá tento koncept nepředpojaté analýze. Nicméně, jak tvrdí jeden z předních teoretiků „bělošství" Matt Wray: „Odborníci, jež se zabývají tématem bílé barvy pleti pronášejí neotřesitelné a trefné výroky, modifikuje-li slovo *bělošský/á* slova jako nadvláda, moc, výsada či hrdost, ale většinou jsou zaskočeni, když následuje slovo *špína/odpad*[106]." Z toho lze usuzovat, že „bělošská" studia jen pokračují v tradici amerického sociálního a kulturního diskurzu a nezvažují danou otázku v celé její složitosti, ale soustředí se pouze na problematiku „rasy" a opomíjejí podstatné souvislosti s třídním rozdělením společnosti, genderem, sexualitou a mnohými dalšími složkami lidské identity. „Bílá špína" jakožto kulturní koncept v sobě spojuje nejrůznější složky lidské identity, a proto musí být podroben mnohovrstevnaté analýze, která zpochybní a nabourá především ty jeho aspekty, které byly vždy považovány za „přirozené".

Co přesně znamená termín "bílá špína"? V americkém kulturním milieu, které zformovalo všudypřítomné popírání třídního rozdělení společnosti a zároveň nezpochybnitelná víra v možnost dosažení „amerického snu", zní spojení „bílá špína" jako pouhý literární oxymóron. Je to ovšem velice pregnantní termín označující bělochy a bělošky, kteří žijí v nekonečném koloběhu chudoby především na zemědělském jihu Spojených států. Toto označení však obsahuje inherentní morální, biologické, behaviorální a intelektuální

---

[106] Můj překlad.

konotace. Označení „bílá špína" znamená lenost, hloupost, nemorálnost, rasismus, přehnaně aktivní sexuální život, násilí a alkoholismus. Uvedené konotace zůstávají již po 300 prakticky nezměněné, což z „bílé špíny" vytváří mýtus.

V *Mýtu dnes* Roland Barthes popisuje mýtus jakožto dvojvrstvý systém signifikace – znak je z jazykové roviny přebrán do roviny mýtické, kde je zbaven svého původního „označovaného" – své individuální historie – a stává se prázdným „označujícím" nesoucím nové „označované" – mýtický koncept. Mýtus si pro svou signifikaci vybírá jazykové znaky vytvořeny z „matérie, která je již zpracována", jinými slovy zjednodušena, a která mýtickému konceptu snadno podlehne. Koncept mýtu Barthes označuje za „vágní" a podléhající „četným nahodilostem". Pohromadě jej drží pouze jeho funkce. Je proto zároveň velice komplexní a jednoduchý. Zásadní prvek mýtotvorného procesu je přetvoření historie v přirozenost, nebo-li „naturalizace" mýtického konceptu, tvrdí Barthes. Mýtus nahrazuje lineární vztah kauzálním, individuální pohnutku „přirozenou" příčinou.

Analýza mýtu „bílé špíny" podle koncepce mýtu Rolanda Barthesa ukazuje, že lidé označení termínem „bílá špína" reprezentují prázdné „označující" mýtu. Zjednodušenou matérií mýtu jsou v jejich případě stereotypní reprezentace chudých bělochů v literatuře, mezi nejznámější patří karikatury Erskina Caldwella, dále definování „bílé špíny" jakožto zdegenerované rasy eugenickými „vědci" na přelomu století a v neposlední řadě masové rozšíření „archetypálních" podob chudoby v tisku během ekonomické krize ve 30. letech 20. století, které přetrvalo v podobě knihy Jamese Ageeho a Walkera Evanse *Let Us Now Praise the Famous Men*. Právě spojení textu a obrazu v žurnalistice vedlo k finálnímu ustanovení mýtu.

Lidé označovaní termínem „bílá špína" jsou mýtem zbaveni své individuality a historie a označují jen proměnlivý mýtický koncept – Barthesovou terminologií „bílou špinavost". Teoretikové „bělošskosti" se shodují na tom, že funkcí mýtu „bílé špíny" je přenesení odpovědnosti za hříchy bílé Ameriky na (mýtem) definovatelnou skupinu lidí. Lidé s nálepkou „bílá špína" jsou například označováni za rasisty, čímž mýtus implikuje, že zbytek bílých Američanů/ek rasistický není. Mýtus navíc vytváří dojem nepřekonatelné propasti mezi chudými lidmi a středními a vyššími třídami, jejichž strach z třídního propadu a třídní nestability je nejsilnějším důvodem pro udržování mýtu „bílé špíny" při životě.

Je vůbec možné mýtický koncept denaturalizovat a samotný mýtus tak dekonstruovat? Barthes tuto možnost zpochybňuje, když tvrdí, že „týž pohyb, jímž se snažíme od mýtu osvobodit, se sám stává jeho kořistí". Mýtický koncept je natolik rozvolněný, že pojímá i svůj vlastní protiklad. Každý pokus o dekonstrukci mýtu tak můžu znamenat jeho posílení.

„Etnifikace" „bělošskosti" je velice důležitým krokem, neboť bílou barvu pleti zviditelňuje a reaguje tak na požadavky takových spisovatelů/ek a teoretiků/ček jako Toni Morrison a bell hooks pojímat bílou barvu pleti jen jako další sociální konstrukt lidské identity a ne jako dominantní normu. Jedinými viditelnými reprezentanty „bělošskosti" je však v současnosti pouze „bílá špína", jejíž „bělošskost" mýtus zpochybňuje.

„Bílá špína" je mnohoznačný termín, který se vyhýbá pevnému ukotvení. Jeho význam a obsah jsou neustále oddalovány (deferred). Na jedné straně se „bílá špína" stala vědeckým tématem, na druhé straně se tento termín používá jako nadávka obsahující stejnou míru politické nekorektnosti jako slova, která byla již dávno vyřazena ze standardního slovníku. Vzhledem k tomu, že „bílá" barva pleti byla a stále je považována za zásadní

předpoklad k úspěšnému životu, jehož znakem je příslušnost ke střední a vyšší třídě, běloši/ky, kteří tento znak postrádají, jsou inherentně považováni za poškozené, deviantní, nenormální a „méně bílé". „Bílá špína" je živoucím příkladem „zkrachovalé bělošskosti", což vede k jejich objektivizaci (vyřazení ze středu) zbytkem americké společnosti. „Bílá špína" se tak ocitá v jakémsi „rasovém" vzduchoprázdnu – na jednu stranu jsou odsunuti do pozice ostatních skupin znevýhodněných vzhledem k barvě jejich pleti, jako jsou černoši/ky, a Latin@s, na druhé straně jim nikdo nemůže upřít „privilegia" daná jejich bílou pletí. Termín „bílá špína" totiž implikuje, že všichni ne-běloši/ky jsou „špína" přirozeně.

„Bílá špína" je pojem známý naprosté většině Američanů. Na první pohled spojuje rasové označení s třídním, ale zúžit jeho obsah jen na tyto dva koncepty by bylo nebezpečně zjednodušující. Ačkoliv se vždy používal především pro označení chudých bělochů/ek, v poslední době se dominantní konotací stává konkrétní způsob chování. Současný koncept „bílé špíny" nenahrazuje chudobu kulturou chování, ale rozšiřuje se tak, že pojímá obě tyto konotace. Ekonomické ukazatele jsou tak potlačeny ukazateli kulturními, což je nebezpečný proces, který tak mýtus „bílé špíny" nadále legitimizuje.

Při naturalizaci mýtu „bílé špíny" byli chudí bílí Jižané a Jižanky zbaveni nejen své historie, ale i svého hlasu. Lidé označovaní nálepkou „bílá špína" byli a jsou objektivizováni a umlčováni právě proto, že by mohli chtít vyprávět svůj příběh ze svého subjektivního pohledu a nabourat tak dominantní příběhy (master narratives) Jihu Spojených států, které s mýtem „bílé špíny" úzce souvisejí. V tomto ohledu lidé označovaní jako „bílá špína" sdílejí osud všech dalších skupin (nejen v USA), které byly a jsou utlačované na základě určitého aspektu své identity. Mýtus „bílé špíny" tak zrcadlí funkci kolonialistického narativu, který kolonizované subjekty odsunuje do pozice „jiného" („other") a vštěpuje jim „přirozenou" podřízenost.

První zmínky o chudých běloších na americkém Jihu se vyskytují v textu Williama Byrda, velitele výzkumné výpravy, která dostala za úkol prozkoumat spornou hraniční čáru mezi Virginií a Severní Karolínou. Dané území v té době bylo divočinou, která skýtala ochranu před právem civilizovaného bílého muže nejrůznějším „živlům" – uprchlým otrokům, americkým Indiánům i bílým psancům – kteří tam kohabitovali bez rasové nesnášenlivosti a nesdíleli Byrdovy názory o „přirozeném" uspořádání společnosti. Pro Byrda nepochopitelný rozklad sociální hierarchie se v jeho textu odrazil tak, že tamější bělochy vylíčil jako divochy zbavené jakýchkoli vazeb na „civilizovanou" bílou společnost. „Bílá špína" tak byla označena za „jiné", neuchopitelné, chaotické, dionýské.

Jaké jsou konkrétní podoby mýtu „bílé špíny"? Jaké procesy probíhají v těle člověka označeného jako „bílá špína", když mýtus naturalizuje, tj. sám v sobě internalizuje? Je možné mýtus „bílé špíny" denaturalizovat a dekonstruovat zevnitř? Odpovědi na tyto otázky nabízí literární texty americké spisovatelky Dorothy Allison, která sama sebe označuje za „bílou špínu" a tudíž ztělesňuje prázdné „označující" tohoto mýtu. Je jednou z velice mála spisovatelek, kterým se podařilo promluvit z pozice „bílé špíny" a postavit svůj příběh, svou historii do centra vyprávění. Allison však neomezuje svou performanci pouze na literární pole, neboť se bojí postmoderního redukcionismu na pouhý text. Naopak, je veřejnou osobností, jejíž aktivity vytváří komplexní anti-diskriminační projekt, kterým se pokouší zbořit mýtus „bílé špíny".

Tematizováním mýtu „bílé špíny" ve svých úspěšných a čtených literárních textech mohla totiž přispět k jeho popularitě a komercializaci (která se ovšem konkrétních lidí označovaných jako „bílá špína" nijak netýká) právě těmi „pohyby", kterými se z něj snažila vymanit. To odráží obrovskou moc, proměnlivost a nestabilitu mýtu „bílé špíny" – požírá

své protivníky a přetváří je ve své nositele. Vzdorný pokus Dorothy Allison mýtus zničit ho tak mohl paradoxně, ale v rámci logiky mýtu, jen posílit.

Srovnání prací Dorothy Allison s mýtem „bílé špíny" odhalí, pokud, jak a do jaké míry sama autorka mýtickou signifikaci ve svých textech internalizovala a podařilo-li se jí mýtus dekonstruovat. V pojetí pracovní morálky proti sobě jasně stojí mýtický text reprezentovaný publikací Georgie Gildera *Wealth and Poverty* (1981), který proklamuje lenost „bílé špíny", a text Dorothy Allison *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), jehož literární postavy se doslova ubíjí v koloběhu tvrdé práce a mizivé mzdy. Internalizace mýtu a emocionálních procesů s tím spojených, které probíhají v těle s nálepkou „bílá špína", se autorka věnuje v eseji „A Question of Class" (*Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* 1994) a povídce „River of Names" (*Trash* 1988). Analýza těchto dvou textů napoví, jakými prostředky mýtus zbavuje své označující jejich historie a naplňuje je svým konceptem. V neposlední řadě rozbor autorčina memoáru/autobiografie *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995) osvětlí možnost dekonstrukce mýtu aktem vyprávění osobního příběhu.

Jedním z mýtů, které Jih sdílí se zbytkem území Spojených států, je všeprostupující mýtus „amerického snu". Jeho dosažení je nerozlučně spjato s puritánským konceptem Tvrdé Práce a předpokladem, že každý běloch má „přirozenou" možnost zbohatnout. Tento mýtus je vytvořen a udržován především vyššími a středními třídami bělochů/ek. Obhajují jím svá privilegia, která nepřipisují zděděnému postavení v společnosti, ale Tvrdé Práci.

Analýza rozporu mezi konceptem Tvrdé Práce, která vede k bohatství a Gilderův mýtický text ji tedy považuje za efektivní, a konkrétní tvrdou prací, která nevede k bohatství a je tudíž označena jako zbytečná, objasňuje proces mýtické signifikace tvrdé práce, kterou provádí „bílá špína", do mýtického konceptu jejich „přirozené" lenosti. .

Ve shodě s Barthesovou teorií mýtu se Allison pokouší ukázat lineární vývoj historie svých postav, kterou mýtus naturalizoval do jednoduchých a „přirozených" faktů. Její bojovou strategií je otřást základy těchto „faktů" a ukázat svému obecenstvu svou pravdu – „opravdové" lidi s jejich vadami i krásami.

Allison věcně načrtává bludný kruh opovrhované tvrdé práce, která jen potvrzuje a upevňuje neprolomitelnou chudobu jejích postav. Ztvárněním „opravdových" pracovních podmínek „bílé špíny" autorka nabourává mýtické pojetí jejich lenosti. Nicméně, aby byl/a čtenář/ka schopen/a rozpoznat autorčino nabourání mýtického konceptu lenosti musí se s ní na tuto průkopnickou cestu vydat od samého začátku. Při četbě románu je zlomovým bodem oddělení mýtického konceptu „bílé špíny", kterou čtenář/ka nosí ve své mysli, od konkrétních literárních postav díla. Vzhledem k tomu, že mýtický diskurz do románu silně prosakuje, jeho povrchní četba by mohla sklouznout do mýtické interpretace, protože je více sugestivní a snadněji přístupná.

Dorothy Allison vede s mýtem „bílé špíny" neustálý dialog, uvnitř i vně textového pole. Je zároveň zosobněním „opravdové" „bílé špíny" a mýtického konceptu „bílé špinavosti". Tyto dvě persóny se vzájemně prolínají a vycházejí jedna z druhé. Netvoří snadno interpretovatelný binární protiklad. Vztah mezi mýtem a tělem označeným termínem „bílá špína" není vnější, naopak zásadní boj mezi nimi probíhá uvnitř konkrétního těla.

Vzdorování „naturalizaci" a internalizaci mýtu je komplexní proces. Daný subjekt nejdříve pochopí, že je zpochybněna jeho lidskost a že je odstaven do pozice „oni". Zlomový moment internalizace – a sebedestrukce – nastává, když tomu uvěří a začne sám sebe vnímat jako mýtické „označované". James Baldwin tento přerod komentuje zcela jednoznačně: „Zničit tě může jen to, když opravdu uvěříš, že jsi, čemu bílý svět říká *negr*.[107]" Vytržení

---

[107] Můj překlad.

mýtu z vlastního těla je možné jen tehdy, když se člověk zmocní sebe sama jakožto individuality a začne na sebe pohlížet s neochvějnou sebeúctou.

Jedna z odpovědí na otázku, je-li možné mýtus rozbořit zvnitřku, je podle textů Dorothy Allison taková, že je nemožné ho rozbořit zvenku. Působení mýtu v konkrétním těle hlouběji odhaluje mýtotvorné strategie a zakládá pevný prostor k odporu. Narozdíl od konkrétního těla s nálepkou „bílá špína" vnější příjemce mýtu nedokáže rozlišit mezi osobním a mýtickým. Zároveň však dekonstrukce mýtu uvnitř konkrétního těla nemusí vést k dekonstrukci mýtu jako takového.

Vzhledem k tomu, že jsou texty Dorothy Allison silně autobiografické, autorské „já" stojí v jejich středu a spojuje v sobě subjekt narativu, jeho objekt i publikum. Nabourává tím jednu z nejdůležitějších strategií mýtu, jíž je bezpodmínečná objektivizace. Allison svou promluvou odmítá ikonické zosobnění mýtu, nestává se tělem, které se nechá „přepsat" vnější interpretací. Naopak, vkládá do textu sama sebe a vytváří tak svou vlastní historii, čímž naplňuje požadavek Helene Cixous na nezávislost ženského psaní, jak jej formuluje v proslulém článku „Smích Medúzy".

Autorská identita je roztříštěna; promlouvá mnoha hlasy, z pozice mnohonásobného subjektu. Její texty tak nabourávají mýtické zjednodušování „označujícího" tím, že tematizují složitý proces konstrukce identity.

Známá teoretička postkolonialismu Gayatri Spivak ovšem klade otázku: „Může (vůbec) podřízené promluvit?" Ačkoliv se mýtus „bílé špíny" vztahuje pouze na území Spojených států, lze jej vnímat v paralelním vztahu k jiným diskriminujícím narativům a nástrojům moci, které vytvářejí a udržují neprostupné hranice mezi většinou a menšinou,

centrem a periferií, nadřazeností a podřazeností. Mýtus „bílé špíny" tak zrcadlí dominantní narativy kolonizátorů. Pokud si těla označená za „jiné", těla „ex-centrická" chtějí uvnitř i vně sebe vydobýt svobodný prostor, musí si osvojit několik komplexních sebe-znovu-utvářejících strategií. Jednou z nich je vyprávění osobních příběhů, které mýtus nabourávají v jeho obecnosti a odtaženosti.

Ex-centrici/čky ve svém vyprávění často využívají postmoderní postupy (nebo je to naopak?): zpochybňování sebe sama jakožto důvěryhodného vypravěče/ky; rozplynutí individua v komunitě a naopak, dialogizmus, podezíravá nedůvěra k jazyku, která vede k novým způsobům vyjadřování, zejména performativitě; proměnlivá podstata subjektu, který se neustále utváří, jehož identita je odkládána (deferred) a podmíněna okolím, postavena jak na „faktech", tak na „fikci" a filtrována, slovy Juliy Kristevy, skrze „politiku negativity". Ex-centrická narace se spoléhá na interpretační sílu svého publika, což znamená, že autorova/čina i čtenářova/čina identita se stává procesem, ne prohlášením.

Obvinění mýtu či dominantního narativu ze lži je však podmíněno sebedůvěrou ex-centrického subjektu a odhodláním popřít „přirozené" a „nezpochybnitelné". Ti/ty, kteří takové kvality projeví a kterým se podaří promluvit a být slyšet přesto, že byli mýtem drženi v tiché hanbě, se mnohým ostatním mohou zdát vpravdě excentričtí.

Dorothy Allison se odmítá podrobit mýtem prefabrikovaným způsobům reprezentace, což se jasně odráží v její nedůvěře k jazyku. Autorka odděluje označující od označovaného, čímž napovídá, že označující může nést i jiné významy, že za mýtickou historií existuje historie osobní. Její texty útočí na zjednodušenou podobu mýtického jazyka, která předepisuje jednoznačné významy znakům nezávisle na jejich kontextu, tím, že rozvolňují pevné vztahy mezi označujícím a označovaným a podrobují je individuální interpretaci. Allison si jazyk přetváří ve svůj vlastní nástroj, který odpovídá jejím potřebám a zkušenostem.

Ex-centrické autobiografie získávají význam pouze, když rezonují s publikem a zprostředkovávají nadindividuální zkušenost, která byla potlačena mlčením. Interpretační komunity spoluvytvářejí daný text, protože mu rozumějí. Zatímco mýtus vytváří a udržuje nepřekonatelnou rozluku mezi objektem mýtu – lidmi nesoucími označení „bílá špína" – a příjemcem/kyní mýtu, texty Dorothy Allison potrhávají společnou zkušenost mezi objektem a vypravěčkou příběhu (v jedné osobě) a jejím publikem.

Zásadním krokem k dekonstrukci mýtu „bílé špíny" je právě interpretace autorčiných textů, kterou si každý čtenář/ka internalizuje sám pro sebe. Vzhledem k tomu, že mýtus je text, který má nekonečně mnoho podob a variací, jež si ve svém těle a mysli nosí každý sám, může být nabourán pouze individuální vzpourou, osobní dekonstrukcí.

Dorothy Allison na literární pole vstupuje s jednoznačným posláním a jasným cílem – otřást mýtem „bílé špíny" ze své pozice spisovatelky a veřejné osobnosti. To, že ve svých dílech neustále poukazuje na svou historii, kterou prožila jako „bílá špína", její texty tak na první pohled hrají roli „manifestů" „bílé špíny". Vzhledem k tomu, že autorčino fiktivní i reálné „já" v jejím díle hrají tak prominentní roli, podařilo se Dorothy Allison rozbořit mýtus „bílé špíny", ale jen pro sebe samu.

Bezvýhradným přijetím mýtického rozdělení lidí na „bílou špínu" a ostatní, texty Dorothy Allison tento mýtus bezesporu vyživují a posilují. Opravdové rozboření mýtu by totiž muselo mít za následek rozpad konceptu „bílé špinavosti" jako takové. Co je naopak pro mýtus nebezpečné, je Dorothy Allison jakožto živoucí projekt, která prostřednictvím své performativní identity dokazuje, že hranice mýtu „bílé špíny" není tak neprolomitelná, jak mýtus tvrdí (a jak si to i přeje).

Zobrazováním postav nesoucích nálepku „bílá špína" Allison mýtus zcela jistě neposílila, povrchním čtenářům/kám však mohla potvrdit některé jejich stereotypy. Autorce se bezesporu podařilo odhalit složitou historii, která se skrývá za zjednodušeným konceptem mýtu, tím, že „opravdové" životy mýtických „označujících" přetavila do fiktivní podoby. Tento proces je ovšem dvousečný – na jednu stranu dosazuje na místo vzdáleného znaku konkrétní obraz a vytváří tak intimní vztah mezi čtenářem/kou a postavou, na druhou stranu, nehledě na sebevětší pravdu, která se za příběhem skrývá, tento vztah je stejně fiktivní jako vztah mezi příjemcem mýtu a mýtem.

Závěrem tudíž zbývá říci, že není možné bojovat s mýtem na čistě fiktivní půdě. Uchýlení se k „realitě" však pro texty Dorothy Allison znamená ztrátu kouzelné moci metafory a autorka tak proti mýtu stojí jen sama za sebe.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Agee, James, and Evans, Walker. *Let Us Now Praise the Famous Men: Three Tenant Families.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, Riverside, 1960.

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina.* New York: Dutton, 1992.

—. *Cavedweller.* New York: Dutton, 1998.

—. *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature.* New York: Firebrand, 1994.

—. *Trash.* New York: Firebrand Books, 1988.

—. *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure.* New York, London: Dutton, Penguin Books, 1995.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies.* Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.

--. "Mýtus dnes." ‹http://cl.ff.cuni.cz›

Byrd, William. *Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina.* Ed. Percy G. Adams. New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

Caldwell, Erskine. *Tobacco Road.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1932.

Gilder, George. *Wealth And Poverty.* New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Cited Sources:

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time.* New York: Vintage International, 1993 (1st edition 1963).

Beaver, Renee Michelle Tyndell. *Theorizing "White Trash".* Thesis (M.A.). Georgetown University, 2004.

Bérubé, Allan and Bérubé, Florence. "Sunset Trailer Park." Eds. Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. *White Trash.* New York: Routledge, 1996. 15-39.

Bettie, Julie. "Women Without Class: Chicas, Cholas, Trash, and the Presence/Absence of Class Identity." *Signs* 26.1 (2000): 1-35.

Blouch, Christine, and Vickroy, Laurie, eds. *Critical Essays on the Works of American Author Dorothy Allison.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.

Bouson, J. Brooks. "You Nothing But Trash: White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina." *The Southern Literary Journal* 34.1 (2001): 101-123.

Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Carr, Duane. *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996.

Cixous,Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893.

Cook, Sylvia Jenkins. *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976.

Dunbar, Roxanne A. "Bloody Footprints: Reflections on Growing Up Poor White". *White Trash*. Eds. Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. New York: Routledge, 1996. 73-88.

Foley, Neil. *The White Scourge*. Berkley/ Los Angeles/ London: The University of California Press, 1997.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

---. "Autobiographics." *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*. Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 183-189.

Graham, Allison. "The South In Popular Culture." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Eds. Gray, Richard, and Robinson, Owens. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 335-351.

Gray, Richard, and Robinson, Owens, eds. *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Gray, Richard. "Writing Southern Cultures." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 4-26.

Griffin, Connie D. "I Will Not Wear That Coat: Cross-Dressing in the Works of Dorothy Allison." *He Said, She Says: an RSVP to the Male Text*. Eds. Howe, Mica and Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. London: Associated University Presses, 2001. 143-160.

---. "Ex-Centricities: Perspectives on Gender and Multi-Cultural Self-Representation in Contemporary American Women's Autobiographies." *Style* 35.2 (2001): 321-341.

Haaken, Janice. "The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychic Trauma." *Signs* 21.4 (1996): 1069-1094.

Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly: a cultural history of an American icon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Hartigan Jr, John. "Name Calling: Objectifying 'Poor Whites' and 'White Trash' in Detroit". *White Trash*. Eds. Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. New York: Routledge, 1996. 41-56.

--. "Reading Trash: Deliverance And the Poetics of White Trash." Visual *Anthropology Review* 8.2 (1992): 8-15.

--. *Odd Tribes. Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.

Henninger, Katherine. "Claiming Access: Controlling Images in Dorothy Allison." *The Arizona Quarterly* 60.3 (2004): 83-108.

Hollinbaugh, Amber. "Telling a Mean Story: Amber Hollinbaugh Interviews Dorothy Allison." *The Women's Review of Books* 9.10-11 (1992): 16.

hooks, bell. "writing autobiography." *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*. Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 429-432.

Irving, Katrina. "Writing it down so that it would by real: Narrative strategies in Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina." *College Literature* 25.2 (1998): 94-107.

Kidd, Stuart. "Visualizing the Poor White." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 110-129.

Kirby, Jack Temple. *The Countercultural South*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995.

Lockley, Timothy J. "Partners in Crime: African Americans And Non-slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia". *White Trash*. Eds. Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. New York: Routledge, 1996. 57-72.

McDonald, Kathlene. "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 26.1/2 (1998): 15-25.

McIlwaine, Shields. *Southern poor-white from Lubberland to Tobacco road*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1970.

Megan, Carolyn E. "Dorothy Allison." *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Perry, Carolyn and Weaks, Mary Louise, eds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. 584-587.

Miller, Laura. "Salon Interview with Dorothy Allison." Viewed March 10 2007. ‹http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/03/cov_si_31intb.html›

Perreault, Jeanne. "Autography/Transformation/Assymetry." *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*. Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 190-196.

Perry, Carolyn and Weaks, Mary Louise, eds. *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.

Ratcliffe, Peter. *'Race', Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining the Inclusive Society*. Maidenhead/New York: Open University Press, 2004.

Sandell, Jillian. "Telling Stories of 'Queer White Trash' – Race, Class, and Sexuality in the Works of Dorothy Allison." *White Trash*. Eds. Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. New York: Routledge, 1996. 211-230.

Segrest, Mab. "Lines I Dare To Write: Lesbian Writing in the South." *Southern Exposure* 9.2 (1981): 53-62.

Smith, Dina. "Cultural Studies' Misfit: White Trash Studies." *The Mississippi Quarterly* Vol. 57.3 (2004): 369-387.

Smith, Sidonie. "Autobiographical Manifestos." *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*. Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 433-440.

Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. "Introduction." *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*. Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 3-56.

Solomos, John and Back, Les. *Racism and Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.

Tracy, Susan J. *In the Master's Eye – Representations of women, blacks and poor whites in antebellum southern literature*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995.

Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=white+trash> Viewed May 5 2007.

Vickroy, Laurie. "Vengeance is Fleeting: Masculine Transgressions in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*." *Critical Essays on the Works of American Writer Dorothy Allison*. Eds. Blouch, Christine and Vickroy, Laurie. Studies in American literature; v. 71. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004. 55-70.

Watkins, James H. "Contemporary Autobiography and Memoir." *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Eds. Perry, Carolyn and Weaks, Mary Louise. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. 447-454.

Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee, eds. *White Trash*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Wray, Matt and Newitz, Annalee. "Introduction." *White Trash*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 1-12.

Wray, Matt. *Not quite white: white trash and the boundaries of whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Consulted Sources:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Telling Stories in Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*." *Southern Literary Journal* 36.2 (2004): 82-99.

Baker, Houston, A. Jr. and Nelson Dana D. "Violence, the Body, and 'The South'." *American Literature* 73.2 (2001): 231-244.

Baker, Moira P. "'The Politics of They': Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina As Critique of Class, Gender, and Sexual Ideologies." *The World Is Our Home: Society And Culture In Contemporary Southern Writing*. Eds. Folks, Jeffrey J. and Folks, Nancy Summers. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 117-141.

---. "Dorothy Allison's Topography of Resistance." *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 5.3 (1998): 23-26.

Bulkin, Elly; Pratt, Minnie Bruce; Smith, Barbara. *Yours In Struggle*. Ithaca: Firebrand, 1984.

Burton-Hardee, C. "Red Dirt Girl as Hero: Dorothy Allison's Cavedweller as Southern White Trash Hero." *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 25.3/4 (2002): 243-245.

Darlington, Sonja R. "Challenging the Canon of Adolescent Literature: Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*." *The ALAN Review* 24.1 (1996): 24-27.

Gaines, Jane. "Feminist Heterosexuality and its Politically Incorrect Pleasures." *Critical Inquiry* 21.2 (1995): 382-410.

Guinn, Mathew. "Writing In The South Now." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 571-588.

Hitchcock, Peter. "They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation." *PMLA* 115.1 (2000): 20-32.

Horvitz, Deborah. "Sadism Demands a Story: Oedipus, Feminism, and Sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*." *Contemporary Literature* 39.2 (Summer 1998): 238-261.

Jarvis, Christina. "Gendered Appetites: Feminisms, Dorothy Allison, and the Body." *Women's Studies* 29.6 (December 2000): 763-792.

King, Vincent. "Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina." *Southern Literary Journal* 33.1 (Fall 2000): 122-141.

Klorman, Renee. "Off Our Backs. Interview with Dorothy Allison." *Women's Interest Module* 28.6 (1998).

Kohli, Priti. "F(r)ictions: Women Writing in Working Class Contexts." *Resources for Feminist Research* 29.3/4 (2002): 59-73.

Lanza, Carmela Delia. "'Always on the Brink of Disappearing': Women, Ethnicity, Class, and Autobiography." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 15.2 (1994): 51-68.

Lindenmeyer, Antje. "'Lesbian Appetites': Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography." *Sexualities* 9 (2006): 469-485.

Manning, Carol S. *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

McCracken, Timothy. "Lolita Talks Back – Giving Voice to the Object." *He Said, She Says: an RSVP to the Male Text*. Eds. Howe, Mica and Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. London: Associated University Presses, 2001. 128-142.

Monteith, Sharon. "Recent And Contemporary Women Writers In the South." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 536-551.

Patterson, Laura S. "Ellipsis, Ritual, and 'Real Time': Rethinking the Rape Complex in Southern Novels." *Mississippi Quarterly* 54.1 (Winter 2000/2001): 37-58.

Perry, Carolyn. "Introduction to Part IV." *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Eds. Perry, Carolyn and Weaks, Mary Louise. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. 421-428.

Saxey, Esther. "Lesbian Bastard Heroes: The Uses of Illegitimacy for Modern Lesbian Fiction and Identity." *Women: a Cultural Review* 16.1 (2005): 33-51.

Tate, Linda. "A Second Southern Renaissance." *The History of Southern Women's Literature*. Eds. Perry, Carolyn and Weaks, Mary Louise. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. 491-497.

Terry, Jill. "Oral Culture and Southern Fiction." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 518-535.