

Trashing the Myth of the “Old South”: White Trash Identity- Seeking in Dorothy Allison’s *A Bastard Out of Carolina*

Desechando el mito del “viejo sur”: la basura blanca y la búsqueda de identidad en la novela de Dorothy Allison, *A Bastard Out of Carolina*

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Resumen

La realidad de los blancos pobres del sur de los Estados Unidos no ha sido reflejada con justicia en la tradición literaria americana del sur hasta hace algunas décadas, cuando autores como Dorothy Allison, nacidos en el seno de la pobreza, han comenzado a hablar con claridad en nombre de los suyos. Al derribar el mito literario del “viejo sur”, Allison deja al descubierto la situación social de los blancos pobres o basura blanca a la vez que propone una alternativa al estigma, consiguiendo que sus personajes busquen una identidad en la cual dicha etiqueta social deja de ser insultante o despectiva. Este artículo analiza los mecanismos por los cuales Dorothy Allison derriba representaciones literarias del “viejo sur” así como su enfoque de “la búsqueda de la identidad de la basura blanca” en su novela *A Bastard Out of Carolina*. Para ello, se ofrece una introducción a la literatura de la clase trabajadora, a la que Allison se encuentra vinculada, seguida de un análisis de los recursos literarios de Dorothy Allison en la desmitificación de la noción del “viejo sur” de camino hacia la construcción de la identidad. Una breve reflexión sobre la importancia del trabajo de Dorothy Allison para que otros autores de literatura “basura blanca” sigan sus pasos concluye este artículo.

Palabras clave: basura blanca, búsqueda de la identidad, estigma, el “viejo sur”.

Abstract

The reality of the poor whites in the South of the United States had not been properly represented within American southern literary tradition until a few decades ago, when authors born in poverty, like Dorothy Allison, started to speak out on behalf of their class. Upon taking down the literary myth of the "Old South," Allison exposes the social situation of the poor whites/white trash while proposing an alternative to society's stigmatizing, upon having her characters seek an identity in which the social label is no longer insulting or derogatory. This article aims to analyze Dorothy Allison's mechanisms to dismantle the literary representations of the "Old South," as well as her approach to "white trash identity-seeking" in her novel, *A Bastard Out of Carolina*. In so doing, an introduction to the working-class literature, with which Allison has been identified, is being offered, followed by an analysis of Allison's own literary devices to demystify the notion of the "Old South" on the road to identity building. A brief reflection upon the significance of Allison's work for other contemporary "white trash" literature authors to follow suit concludes this article.

Keywords white trash, identity-seeking, stigmatizing, the "Old South."

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF POOR WHITES IN THE SOUTH

Since the colonial period, poverty has been a concern for many sectors of society as revealed by the testimony of travel accounts, land surveys, essays, studies and research of the time period. Gradually, the representation of poor whites in American written fiction left an imprint in magazines and journals whose short stories and comic strips depicted poor white characters either as laughable subjects, capable of outsmarting the superior whites, or as repositories of social degeneracy.¹ At the turn of the nineteenth century, authors such as William Dean Howell (1837-1920), Henry James (1843-1916) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) started to point out the unpreparedness of rural folks in a new society where business and industrialization began to flourish. The realists related their concerns about the social issues of the time: the effects of the new business economy on individual lives and the identification of white supremacy after the Civil War started to become recurrent themes in their writing (Lauter, 2006: 9-10).

¹ Such are the examples of Yellow-legs in J.J. Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845), or Sut Lovingood, created by George Washington Harris in *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a "Natural Born Durn'd Fool"* (1866), among others.

The first half of the twentieth century gave birth to authors such as Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987) and William Faulkner (1897-1962) with unique approaches on the South; the former embraced the older stereotypes, resulting in portraying the poor as shiftless, dull-witted degenerates² while the latter drew characters beyond the poor white stereotype of "something more than a primitive" to transform them into people whose individual consciousness needed to be examined (Flynt, 2004: 77). Meanwhile, other writers, such as Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949) in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), displayed nostalgia for the "Old South." Mitchell's depiction of the "Old South" would be, in this day and age, very difficult to fathom. Moreover, the old slave-based plantation economy, in which masters and mistresses displayed paternalistic and patronizing attitudes towards domestic servitude and plantation slaves, might feel fallacious to the contemporary reader. Similarly, the slaves' loyalty towards their masters in *Gone with the Wind* seems to belong in a fairytale rather than in a not-so-distant past. As for white poverty, the novel did not contribute to expose the reality of poor whites, but rather it showed their contemptible side through characters such as Emma Slattery, a white trash young woman living in the swamps nearby Tara, looked down upon by the richer neighbors.

The first half of the twentieth century also became witness to the emergence of a framework of a specifically "southern" literary consciousness, as writers reached into their past for material (Guinn, 2000: xvii). Southern modernists wrote about the Civil War and the Agrarian tradition as part of their inherited past. In so doing, these authors left the traditional literary myth of the "Old South" in favor of a mythology built by their own style, mixed in with colorful elements intrinsically southern.³ Matthew Guinn states that scholars such as Bethany Johnson and Simpson Lewis have identified the Southern Agrarians as a group of writers who believed in returning to a "simpler life" represented by the past rural culture of the South, but who also ignored slavery and denounced progress, moved by a nostalgic feeling for the past (2). The Agrarian Pastoral became one of the defining characteristics of southern modernism, as many southern writers adopted its creed to oppose the impingement of modernity. If Faulkner had his doubts about the grandiosity and supremacy of rural culture, "the Agrarians did not; they perceived the southern farm as an oasis of order and stability in an otherwise decadent culture" (Ibid). They also envisioned a "conception of rural or semi-rural life enriched by tradition,

² According to Wayne Flynt (2004: 75), Caldwell's poor in *Tobacco Road* (1932), *God's Little Acre* (1933) and *Trouble in July* (1940) came across as a comic, contemptible sub-specie of the tenant farmer.

³ Such writers also searched for themes attaining the universal, concentrating on dialect and local customs.

religion, stable and predictable social behavior, and feelings of individual worth" (Lawson, 1984:12), for they viewed life in the urban areas as disordered and chaotic. The Agrarian literary framework has remained in the minds of many southern writers long after its collection of essays *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) was published.⁴

Despite their creed, however, skepticism about the Agrarians' reconstructed myth of the "Old South" grew larger in the decades following the nineteen sixties, challenging the very essence of the elements of their modernist theoretical construct. Writers started to question the prevailing assumptions of the South's bourgeoisie and upper class. In the nineteen eighties, a new generation of white writers—born in poverty—began to speak out about the reality of the South, each from a unique perspective. Though not considered a large enough group to constitute a literary movement, contemporary southern poor white writers, such as Harry Crews, Dorothy Allison, Dennis Covington, Tim McLaurin, Chris Offut, Pat Conroy, Rick Bragg, Larry Brown and Amy Greene, to name a few, seem to have attracted the attention of a broad readership. Educated, yet raised in poor white families, these authors rely not only on fiction, but also on biographies, essays, conferences and personal interviews to uncover a reality of the cultural myth of the South never been told before.

In this regard, Dorothy Allison has been placed among the first to unveil the issue of class in southern literature.⁵ One cannot deny that Allison's South has nothing to do with that of previous writers. In the words of Matthew Guinn, Allison's South:

...is impoverished, benighted and repressive—a sort of Third World antithesis to the pastoral plenty of Agrarian conceptions. In venturing to tell her own stories unflinchingly ... Allison has ... made room in southern literature for other stories, other perspectives, in a literature that had previously taken no notice of them. (2000: 6)

Allison grew up within a southern, dirt-poor family whose members would do anything and everything to live off the system. The men in such family would pass the time drinking, gambling, or collecting welfare checks; the women were not any different, as they would marry young and get pregnant immediately to qualify for a somewhat steady income to live on. A very grim picture of what an "American" family is thought to be like. In her collections of essays, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (1994), Allison

⁴ The Agrarian ideology still persists in today's American society. See <http://southernagrarian.org/>, or <http://www.southernagrarian.com/>, for example.

⁵ See Nancy Isenberg (2016: 295).

draws an accurate image of her people and herself: she is her mama's daughter, brought up with a feeling of unity and loyalty to her "tribe," but with a sense of low self-esteem, ready to take in the damage caused by society's labeling them as poor white trash, a social category⁶ that one could either ignore or be proud of. Acknowledging the damage that America's white society has done to its own kind is an act of exposing and denouncing the invisibility of inferior classes —such as poor whites/white trash— so as to commence a process of subjectivity formation. Her first novel, *A Bastard Out of Carolina*, disparages the traditionally constructed literary myths of the "Old South" in an effort to draw the reader closer to the social juncture of white trash, while pointing to identity-seeking.

2. TRASHING THE MYTH OF THE "OLD SOUTH": A BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA

In her writing, Allison makes an honest attempt to "humanize" the notion of white trash identity. Danielle Docka states that "Allison hopes that her fiction will force her audience to replace prevailing stereotypical and distorted images of 'white trash' with sincere identities that speak the harsh truth about economic inequality" (2002). With this goal in mind, Allison takes down the lyricism built around a "reconstructed mythical South" by presenting the reader, instead, with the reality of southern white poverty. The following excerpt of *A Bastard Out of Carolina*, henceforth *Bastard*, goes against the Agrarian's creed that a southern rural life is better, simpler and, above all, enriched by feelings of self-worth:

Greenville, South Carolina, in 1955, was the most beautiful place in the world. Black walnut trees dropped their green-black fuzzy bulbs on Aunt Ruth's matted lawn, past where their knotty roots rose up out of the ground like the elbows and knees of dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars. Weeping willows marched across the yard, following every wandering stream and ditch. Their long whiplike fronds making tents that sheltered sweet-smelling beds of clover ... But at Aunt Alma's, over near the Eutis Highway, the landlord had locked down the spigots so that the kids wouldn't cost him a fortune in water bills. Without the relief of a sprinkler or a hose the heat had burned up the grass, and the combined efforts of dogs and boys had reduced the narrow yard to a smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks. (Bastard 17-18)

The highly lyrical tone of this passage quickly fades at the crude existence of those of low economic means. A run-down fenced yard, barren and dirt-like, does not hint at feelings of

⁶ According to Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (1997), the term "white trash" defines itself as a social category, which both connects and separates race and social class.

self-worth, but rather signals the abandonment of poor southern rural folks. Furthermore, juxtaposing evocative, traditionally-conceived, southern scenes with less-than-desirable living conditions serves the purpose to set the stage on which to bring up class conflict.

Despite such a realistic description of her South, nonetheless, Bone, the child-protagonist narrator of the story, considers this rural land hers, as she feels she belongs in it. The sense of belonging, so deeply ingrained in the protagonist's mind, especially in her childhood years, alters the southern literary perspective on the rural landscape, viewed upon as a land to be enjoyed by an allegedly superior type of whites; a land in which white trash have no place. The following paragraph relates the protagonist's reminiscing—in a quasi-bucolic style—the summer days back at home when she felt safe:

When I think of that summer—sleeping over at my aunts' houses as easily as at home, the smell of Mama's neck as she bent over to hug us in the dark, the sound of Little Earle's giggle or Granny's spit thudding onto the dry ground, and that country music playing low everywhere, as much a part of the evening as crickets and moonlight—I always feel safe again. No place has ever seemed so sweet and quiet, no place so much like home. (22)

Appropriating the quietness and sweetness of southern rural living strips the traditional "Old South" of its elitist entitlement, thus granting visibility to the rural low class. Moreover, that an uneducated, poor white girl might evoke her happy childhood memories in such a lyrical tone dismantles the Agrarian belief that "education of the university sort, not professional or technical, is suited to a small number only."⁷ In such a manner, "the simpler life of the Agrarian South has turned 'complicated' upon the narrative introducing the presence of an economically inferior, landless class" (Guinn, 2000: 26).

Alongside delegitimizing the Agrarian notion of the "Old South," the narrative ventures out into uncharted territory, as far as poor whites' literary representations are concerned. Through the eyes of Bone Boatwright, *Bastard* scratches beneath the surface of a mythical South to bring to the table social stereotyping and stigmatizing of white poverty, never approached from within in literary tradition. The deconstruction of the traditional South, combined with the exposure of poor white/white trash's social ostracism, is Allison's device to initiate Bone into a process of subjectivity formation by which the protagonist may ultimately feel at ease. Bone, however is still far from the final stages of identity-seeking. One evening, perusing through the pages of a copy of *Gone with the Wind*, illustrated with the pictures of the film, Bone comes to the realization that her "type" would never be the "heroine type" depicted in written fiction:

⁷ See essay by Stark Young in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and The Agrarian Tradition* (2006).

... I looked up from Vivien Leigh's pink cheeks to see Mama coming in from work with her hair darkened from sweat and her uniform stained. A sharp flash went through me. Emma Slattery, I thought. That's who I'd be, that's who we were. Not Scarlett, with her baking-powder cheeks. I was part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins, fighting with the darkies and stealing ungratefully from our betters, stupid, coarse, born to shame and death. I shook with fear and indignation. (206)

The lines quoted above are not directed to the Agrarian concept of elitist southern rural life, but rather they refer to the notion of a genteel, slave-owning South. Juxtaposing the construct of a mythical South —portrayed in the Plantation Novel genre, for instance— with the reality of the poor whites allows Allison to make an indelible impression on Bone, as she finally comprehends with stupor to which of the two classes she and her family must belong. Becoming cognizant of one's position of inferiority towards others signals the beginning of a growing-up process in which the feelings of rage and hatred will play a decisive role. In a later passage, the concepts of beauty and ugliness resurfaced, once again juxtaposed, this time in the perception that Bone has got of her herself:

My chin was pink and dimpled, my neck pale underneath, so that I could see the blue lines of my veins threading up to my ears. I put my palms flat on my cheeks, pushed back and slanted my eyes. My face remained unreadable, my eyes blank and silvery. My face told nothing. It was scary, stern and empty ... All of me was ugly, pasty and numb—nothing like Uncle James's girls in their white nylon crinolines and blue satin ribbons. They were the kind of little girls. No part of me was that worshipful, dreamy-eyed story book girlchild, no part of me was beautiful. (208)

The idea of beauty, embodied in Bone's cousins' physical appearance, is sharply contrasted against Bone's own looks. Examining her face in the mirror, Bone is now certain she belongs to the inferior whites for, in her mind, her ugliness, pastiness and numbness leave no room for error. In this regard, Nancy Isenberg points out that in the nineteenth century "observers looked beyond dirty faces and feet and highlighted the ghostly, yellowish white tinge to the poor white's skin—a color they called 'tallow'" (2016: 136). In addition, strips and vignettes, published in installments in comic magazines of the time period, highlighted physical and mental "inherited traits," such as inbreeding, clay-eating, physical deformity and low intelligence, as intrinsic to poor white trash (Wray, 2006: 40).⁸

⁸ Illustrative of this is the character created by August Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870), Ransy Sniffle, who made his first appearance in his collection of stories, *Georgia Scenes*, published in 1835.

The low-life condition "assigned" to the protagonist and her family had already been suggested in the first pages of the novel, though. A single mother, Anney Boatwright delivers Bone at the hospital in a state of semi-consciousness. Of unknown father and absent mother, Bone would be "certified a bastard by the state of Carolina" (*Bastard* 3). Bone's illegitimate status serves to reaffirm her position as white trash. As Vivyan Adair states: "the poor are imagined—and then as result punished and disciplined—as single mothers, who are marked by race, lack of male authority and values, make poor choices, and are a threat to our nation and indeed our children (2008: 591). Bone is a member of the social class that is illegitimate in the eyes of those who would perpetuate the aristocratic and Arcadian myth of the South (Guinn, 2000: 28).

Coupled with the realization of her undignified social condition, Bone feels in the need to connect with an "honorable" past. What lie beneath are Allison's intentions to challenge the aristocratic belief that the "whites" living in the South must be repositories of untainted, pure white blood lineage. The idea of Anglo-Saxon blood purity first surfaced in the antebellum period when intellectual currents in the nation started to develop an ideological framework preaching the future greatness of America: "those of 'Anglo-Saxon descent, impregnated with its sturdy qualities of heart and brain,' would put Great Britain and the United States on a course of global dominance, 'as representatives of this advancing stock'" (Isenberg, 2016: 138). The obsession over an-all-pure Anglo-Saxon blood lineage has since dominated, with different degrees of intensity, the many spheres of American society, resulting in labeling the poor with inherited "bad blood" traits such as laziness, mental insanity and moral degeneracy.⁹

Bone manages to find her blood lineage within the purest of all: the blood of Native Americans:

Every third family in Greenville might have little Cherokee, but I had been born with a full head of black hair. I've got my great-granddaddy's blood in me, I told myself. I am night's own daughter, my great-grandfather's warrior child. I pushed my hair up high on my head and searched my pupils for the red highlights that sparked in the depths, dark shiny red like rubies or fresh bright blood. Dangerous, I told myself. I could be dangerous, oh yes, I could be dangerous. (207-208)

⁹ Barely hundred years ago (1914), white social degeneracy became subject of heated debates between the medical doctors of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission and eugenicists, on the account of the hookworm epidemic. While the former believed that poverty was the result of dire living conditions, the latter insisted that it was their inherited tainted blood what kept them poor. See Matthew Wray (2006: 97-132).

Having found her "dignified" blood lineage entitles Bone to erase the boundaries existing between her and those who hold her down, the whites of pure Anglo-Saxon descent. Furthermore, being hers a blood lineage of Cherokee origins vindicates her social position as well as that of other minority groups, such as American Indians. In addition, the anger and bravery of her Indian blood enables the protagonist to act upon her condition of white trash. Thinking herself "dangerous," Bone is well aware of the fact that she might be of equal or higher status than her white counterparts of pure Anglo-Saxon descent and can, therefore, attain subjectivity within her own class status.

As the narrative disassociates Bone from her socially stigmatized condition, the "Old South's" prejudice against her kind would also be torn down upon the deconstruction of the label "white trash" twofold: firstly, white trash is made to appear as subversive against the establishment. In this manner, "trash" does not equate poor white people, disease-ridden and contemptible, but rather it contains, if left alone, the potential to grow and develop:

"Trash rises," Aunt Raylene joked the first afternoon I spent with her. "Out there where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time." ... "I like to watch things pass," she told me in her lazy whiskery drawl. "Time and men and trash out on the river. I just like to watch it all go around the bend." (180)

Aunt Raylene, Bone's mentor, deemed contemptible by others, lives isolated from society by choice: her outlook on life differs much from that of the common townsfolk. She is a mysterious white trash lesbian whose life choices led her to leave town, but who came back determined to live life in her own terms. Allison assigns this character the role to "normalize" the term white trash, upon Raylene's considering it as another fact of life. White trash transpires in this text simply as an economic condition one may be able to overcome and not as a social location from which it is impossible to escape.

Secondly, white trash unfolds as a stigma dependent upon the notion of the "other." Having come to the realization her type does not belong among the beautiful and socially accepted, Bone becomes acutely receptive of how "others" perceive her. On an early morning at Aunt Raylene's, while watching the cars pass by, the young protagonist feels the sharp stubbing of hateful looks from children on a school bus. Her thoughts are of anger and indignation, "They piss honey?" she declares; "shit morning glory?" she further thinks to herself (262). Bone's hatred towards those watching her will immediately be challenged by Aunt Raylene's response:

"They look at you the way you look at them," she [Aunt Raylene] told me bluntly "You don't know who those children are. Maybe they're nasty and silly and hateful. Maybe not. You don't know what happens to them when they go home ... You think because they wear different clothes than you and go by so fast, they're rich and cruel and thinking terrible things about you. Could be they're looking at you sitting up here eating blackberries and looking at them like they're spit on a stove—could be they they're jealous of you, hungry for what you got, afraid of what you would do if they ever stepped in the yard." ... "Look at it from the other side for a while." (Bastard 262)

Being watched by the children on the bus deeply hurts Bone, as she feels like "the thing observed," the "other" who is not; a rare species to look at. As Matt Wray explains:

...white trash exhibits the general features shared by symbolic markers of stigma and dishonor. Primary among these features are effects of symbolic distancing and social exclusion through moral disapproval, resulting in 'us/them' dichotomies that both enable and enact different forms of inequality, prejudice and discrimination. (2006: 134)

In the fictional reality of the novel, such "us/them" dichotomy becomes blurred as Aunt Raylene's response to Bone's anger leaves the door open for understanding: realizing that perceptions may be deceiving and, as such, must be reconfigured within a bidirectional approach. The image of the bus seems to suggest that social positions may not be interpreted as fixed, "shiftless," or unchangeable. Under this light, one's perception of others' reality becomes fluid, to be considered as subjective within a broader look on life. In the two quotes above-analyzed, Allison vindicates the notion of white trash through Aunt Raylene's words who, despite her white trash condition, unfolds before the reader as wise and open-minded; a non-sequitur, indeed, of the previous popular and literary representations of white trash. Her words are spoken by a person who, according to the stereotype, should have been deemed ignorant, lazy, dirty, social degenerate, poor and contemptible.

Aunt Raylene, though, serves a higher purpose in the novel: along with her condition of white trash, like Bone's, Raylene also represents a social threat to the white American patriarchal community. As the course of the events evolves, the reader positively knows that, in the end, Aunt Raylene, the poor white lesbian admired by her family and despised by the community, will guide Bone on her quest to self-identification. Such an act shakes the very foundation on which the concept of American family rests, while "trashing," once again, "true white American values." As Bone struggles to come to terms with the preconceived ideas imposed upon her and her people through lived personal

experiences,¹⁰ she is offered an out-of-the-norm role model to follow. In this regard, Katrina Irving's theoretical constructs prove insightful: "since 'the lesbian' is only one of the negative positions created by the institutions of patriarchy, embracing that position is the precursor toward recognizing one's kinship with a whole series of other marginalized groups" (Irving, 1998:97-98). As seen earlier,¹¹ Allison's scope of exposure of the "marginalized" is not limited to the social category of white trash; but, on the contrary, it extends, once more, to reach other ostracized minorities, this time those of "deviated" sexual orientation.

In time, Bone's anger is redirected against her mother Anney, a poor white woman incapable of stopping her husband from physically and sexually abusing her daughter. Anney's helplessness translates into defenselessness, as she would rather abandon her daughter than leave her abusive husband. The last beating Bone got from her stepfather reflects Bone's anger at her mother:

I could see her fingers on Glen's shoulder, see the white knuckles holding him tight. My mouth closed over the shout I would not let go. Rage burned in my belly and came up my throat. I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? I let my head fall back. I did not want to see this ... I want everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried. (291)

Anger is also the thrust needed for Bone to escape her stepfather's physical and sexual abuse. In so doing, Bone is putting a stop to her white trash stigma which, at this point in the narrative, begins to bear close resemblance to Allison's own stigma. Considered as semi-autobiographical, *Bastard's* story could also be looked upon, in part, as Allison's story. Anney, Bone's mother, shares many similarities with Allison's own mother: both worked long hours and were physically and emotionally abused by their husbands. Allison, like Bone in the novel, was many times physically and sexually abused by her stepfather who was always unemployed, living on welfare and wanted by the law. Such behavior was very common in working-class and poor families under constant financial stress (Tokarczyk, 2008: 150).

Retaking the interpretation of the above-quoted lines, Bone's mother opts for "loving" her husband more than her daughter and decides to go away with him. This act is the only recourse for her survival, however, as poor white women do not have the choice to get out

¹⁰ Her position of bastard, her disillusionment with romantic notions of the "Old South" and her refusal to be considered inferior, different and "other," to name some.

¹¹ Bone finds her "dignified blood" within her own Cherokee lineage.

of a toxic relationship; on the contrary, their precarious economic situation tethers them to abuse, yet a better alternative to starvation. In the end, lacking the economic means to support her children and herself, Anney leaves town with her husband while delegating on Aunt Raylene the task of raising Bone. In running away, Allison's mother repeats the strategy of crackers¹² a century earlier: to flee and start over somewhere else, thus perpetuating traditionally misconstrued notions of white trash (Isenberg, 2016: 295). Yet, Anney's abandonment directed at Bone turns the narrative in an act of feminist vindication as well. In Vincent King's words: "*Bastard* may be described as feminist because it exposes and seeks to counter the physical, emotional, and economic domination that women suffer within a patriarchal system" (King, 2000: 124). The inevitability for a woman to be deemed inferior in a patriarchal system, regardless of class, is conveyed in the narrative through Anney's only choice to survive.

On her process to identity building, the feelings of hatred and anger that Bone experiences will help her reach acceptance of her mother's actions, of her social position and of herself, just as Aunt Raylene's advice, pages earlier, made her come to an understanding of the subjective nature of the "other." For we cannot begin to accept our own perception of reality unless we admit the existence of the reality of others. As Vincent King states: "Bone cannot rid herself of the hatred that threatens to consume her at the end of the novel until she learns that we are also shaped by who we pretend *others* to be" (King, 2000: 125). Resigned to the idea that her mother will never be what she dreamed her to be, Bone's anger will gradually fade away letting acceptance take its place:

When Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love. I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman. I wrapped my fingers in Raylene's and watched the night close in around us. (*Bastard* 309)

The lines quoted above indicate Bone's final understanding that she belongs to a family marked by social labeling, yet they also point to an absence of hatred towards such a fact. Bone accepts her family lineage as part of her own identity upon depositing all her trust in Aunt Raylene, her kin. Lastly, the fact that Anney, after repeated visits to the courthouse, manages to get Bone's birth certificate corrected provides Bone's identity building with a fresh start. The text reads: "folded into thirds was a certificate. RUTH ANNE BOATWRIGHT. Mother: ANNEY BOATWRIGHT. Father: UNKNOWN ... I had never seen it before,

¹² In the nineteenth century, crackers were defined as those wandering poor whites, living on the fringes of the law, incapable of leading a stable life. See Jim Goad in *The Red Manifesto* (1997: 74-101).

but had heard all about it. I unfolded the bottom third. It was blank, unmarked, unstamped" (309). Having the word "Bastard" erased from Bone's certificate and leaving a blank in its place instead, indicates that it will be up to Bone to fill in the empty spaces of her identity.

In summary, *A Bastard Out of Carolina*, offers manifold approaches on the deconstruction and demystification of the myth of the "Old South." Its highly lyrical passages of an idyllic South serve, in several instances, as the backdrop against the crude reality of poor whites. Elitist and aristocratic conceptions of the rural South such as self-worthiness, beauty, gentility, and purity in blood lineage, to name a few, are contrasted with the helplessness, ugliness, genetically inferiority and "tainted" blood of white trash. In addition, the novel intelligently and eloquently voices the concern of poor whites, drawing on Allison's childhood experiences (Guinn, 30). The novel also posits the growing-up process of a poor white thirteen-year-old girl who becomes aware of the world around her, while gradually acquiring a better understanding of her condition of class. In such fashion, Bone awakens to the outside world in a state of rage and anger, which allow her to "rebel" against her imposed-upon social status. In the last lines of the text, Bone learns to accept others' realities, an opportunity to start reconstructing her own subjectivity.

In telling Bone's story, Allison manages to draw the reader closer to the juncture of the poor whites—and that of other minority groups— by showing their humanness, thus equating them to society in general. To get this accomplished, Allison takes down, honestly and straightforwardly, the misrepresentations of the poor in American southern literature, as in the case of Emma Slattery, the "white other" in *Gone with the Wind* living "dangerously close" to her richer neighbors. For Allison's goal is "to write about the notion of white trash as real people and not caricatures" (Dietzel, 2012: 44). In so doing, the poor white characters depicted in the novel appear as sensible and human, with virtues and flaws and not at all ugly, or dumb-witted, as the stereotype would have called for. Lastly, by debasing the literary myth of the "Old South" and everything it represents, Allison has also pointed the way towards poor white identity building. Though the protagonist will have to learn from future experiences, the realization of her situation—triggering, first, anger and rage while, later, acceptance of others' realities— signals the initial stages for self-definition and identification.

3. A FINAL WORD

Allison's first novel, *A Bastard Out of Carolina*, showcases her ability to instill empathy and relatedness in readers while pointing to the multiple aspects behind her characters' social

junctures. Aspects such as knowing oneself inferior, or being considered the "other" in society, to name a few, signal the white trash conflict in need of resolution. This may be the reason why Allison is so adamant on "trashing" the myth of the "Old South" of southern literary tradition. Furthermore, Allison debunks, demystifies and calls into question mainstream whites' constructions of white poverty by having her characters feel rage and indignation; feelings that, in the end, will set them free within their own class condition. As in any growing-up process, gradual understanding and acceptance of one's own situation in society will provide the basis on which to start anew on the process of subjectivity formation.

Dorothy Allison's writing for and about poor whites/white trash has been considered by scholars as pioneering in providing a different reading to the representations of white poverty in American southern literary tradition. In spite of the efforts of some authors, such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner, to shed light onto southern white poverty, none had managed to draw before a picture of southern poor whites as Allison has. She writes from within the stigma, knowing what being born white and poor means. Her questioning the region's precarious class ideology and defiance towards literary notions of the "Old South" have laid the groundwork for subsequent literary engagements within the region's social structure (Guinn, 2000: 34), as many other poor white writers have started to write about class stratification within whites in the South.

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