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“What’s your name? Who’s your daddy? Is he rich like me?”

Identity, class, and the legitimacy of the poor white writer in *Bastard Out Of Carolina* by

Dorothy Allison

By introducing the reader to the main character of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone, a young girl who transcends the powerlessness of class and illegitimacy to claim her own identity and tell her own story, Dorothy Allison addresses the issue of class in America, in particular, the effects of being poor and white, the stereotypes of white trash, and how poor white writers as a marginalized group can claim their own literary birthright.

Dorothy Allison’s novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a gripping, passionate tale of poverty and abuse that explores the struggle for personal identity and the search for a literary truth. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a novel that transcends white trash stereotypes in order to examine what it truly means to be poor and white in America thus giving a voice to this often silenced group. Furthermore, *Bastard Out of Carolina* through its use of poor white themes and language gives an overall legitimacy to the poor white novel.

Class is defined as a group of people connected to one another yet separated from each other by their interaction while producing goods and services (Zweig 11). Class begins in the workplace but expands outward into culture and politics because the rules and expectations that guide the economy are formed in accordance with the wants and needs of the economically powerful (Zweig 11).

Therefore, like racism, classism in America involves power relations. It involves one group having power over another. But, more importantly, it involves one group feeling powerless. Historically, racism and classism involved actually physical power over the life and freedom of another. Today, it involves power over economics, politics, social status, and the individual right to self-actualization. Bone herself sees the connection between racism and classism.

The way Shannon said “nigger” tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering “trash” when she thought I wasn’t close enough to hear. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 170)

In a now famous literary legend, F. Scott Fitzgerald said the rich are different from you and me. To which Hemingway replied, “Yeah, they have more money.” But, Fitzgerald understood what Hemingway, child of middle class America, did not. He understood that being rich goes beyond the mere possession of wealth; it is a way of life, a series of attitudes, and a different sense of reality. If this is true for the rich, it is truer for the poor where poverty influences everything about them from their physical health to their relationships (Harrington 16).

There is, in short, a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a worldview of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates the society. (Harrington 17)

The Boatwright's of Allison's novel live in this culture of poverty. They are racially white, but they are economically and socially colored (Griffith 1).

In a country where two-thirds of the poor are racially white, Bone and her family feel the sting of being different from the mainstream WASP culture, being the white “other” (Zweig 79).

Just for a change, I wished we could have things like other people, wished we could complain for no reason but the pleasure of bitching and act like the trash we were supposed to be, ... (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 66)

Bone and her family are the victims of the American myth of equal opportunity. This myth involves the idea that anyone through hard work and perseverance can rise above his or her social status and economic conditions to join the upper class.

It is deeply ingrained in the American psyche that the individual is all-important, and that social mobility based on individual effort is possible. In fact, as late as 1999, four out of five Americans believed that individual effort is an extremely important characteristic in being a good American (Gilens 34).

Americans have been brainwashed to believe that we are all descendants of hardy pioneers and that America is a classless society. This myth, of course, requires that we focus on one or two success stories and ignore the masses of poor that are unable to rise above their circumstances because of an inherently flawed economic and political system. The fact that some people move up the class hierarchy doesn't mean that everyone can. Upward mobility is limited by the structure of the economy. A current example of this is the fact that although more people are obtaining college degrees most of the new jobs being created are in the low paying service industry (Zweig 42). Therefore, no amount of individual effort including obtaining a college degree can change economic circumstances if the system remains unchanged. According to Michael Zweig, luck remains a huge factor in social mobility, and the single most important piece of luck happens to be what family you are born into (46).

The myth of social mobility is a catch-22 for poor whites because it is falsely believed that if one possesses white skin one possesses access to education, opportunity, power, and

money. A person can't change their skin color, but they can change their speech, their education level, and their social skills. Therefore, it is believed that poor whites have no excuse for their poverty. It is concluded that since poor whites have the advantage of whiteness their situation is the result of their own laziness, their own inferiority.

The Boatwright's of *Bastard Out of Carolina* believe this as attested by Raylene's judgement of her jailed brother's life. " All you kids think your uncles are so smart. If they're so smart, why they all so goddam poor, huh?" (Allison 217).

The myth of equal opportunity in American prevents poor whites from seeing themselves as a marginalized group. Thus, poor whites become caught in the trap of blaming themselves and each other. In an essay on class, Allison discusses her cousin's imprisonment, his anger toward his jailers, and the awareness of her destructive view toward him and herself.

As much as I hated that man, and his boy, there was a way in which I also hated my cousin. He should have known better, I told myself, should have known the risk he ran. He should have been more careful. As I grew older and started living on my own, it was a litany I used against myself even more angrily than I used it against my cousin. I knew who I was, knew that the most important thing I had to do was protect myself and hide my despised identity, blend into the myth of both the good poor and the reasonable lesbian. (Allison, *Skin* 29)

In truth, the ideology of American as the land of social mobility, individualism, and political equality prevents poor whites from truly understanding that they do live in an alien culture with different values and different social and family structures. Culture being defined as a format for living and making daily decisions that is passed on from generation to generation and believed without question to be the correct way of life for members of that culture (Ryan 124).

For example, large portions of poor whites live in the Appalachian Mountains, geographically isolated and economically depressed. Entire communities that depended on the coal and steel industries have been unable to bounce back. They lack the funding to build better roads and make other necessary improvements in order to attract new industry. Thus, through no fault of the individual worker, entire communities become economically and spiritually rundown. Poor whites become caught in a self-destructive cycle of defeat (Coiner 260).

In the novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone herself adopts this culture of defeat and sees her future and that of her cousins as bleak.

Stupid or smart, there wasn't much choice about what was going to happen to me or to Grey and Garvey, or any of us. Growing up was like falling into a hole. The boys would quit school and sooner or later go to jail for something silly. I might not quit school, not while Mama had any say in the matter, but what difference would that make? What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama in the diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 178)

Understanding that poor whites live within economically depressed communities and adopt the attitudes and norms of their culture even the self-destructive ones placed on them by the upper class is not enough. It is important and necessary to understand both the historical factors that created the prejudices against poor white culture as well as the current reality that continues to oppress poor whites.

Historically, the majority of whites coming to America came as indentured servants to a few wealthy whites that paid their passage. At the same time, black slaves were beginning to outnumber their white owners. In 1676, the white servants and black slaves joined forces to rise

up against the minority ruling whites in what was called Bacon's rebellion (Zinn 39). This rebellion frightened the elite whites. They were afraid of losing their privilege.

Edmund Morgan, on the basis of his careful study of slavery in Virginia, sees racism not as "natural" to black-white difference, but something coming out of class scorn, a realistic device for control. "If freeman with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope, the result might be worse than anything Bacon had done. The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous black slaves by a screen of racial contempt." (Zinn 56)

In short, racism and classism became practical for the upper class (Zinn 56).

One percent of the nation owns a third of the wealth. The rest of the wealth is distributed in such a way as to turn those 99 percent against one another; small property owners against the property less, black against white, native born against foreign born, intellectuals and professionals against the uneducated and unskilled. (Zinn 571)

It was necessary to create social, political, and economical separation based on differences, real or imagined. It was necessary to believe that poor whites were descendants of criminals and other undesirables brought to America in its formative years (Carr 3).

Today, because most upper class Americans are afraid of losing their wealth and with it their power, it continues to be necessary to apply the rules of racism to poor whites. It is vital to encourage and maintain stereotypes against the white "other" in order to maintain social control (Coiner 260). As Allison comments, "Some people begin to believe that the security of their families and communities depends on the oppression of others" (Allison, *Skin* 35).

Stereotypes, as defined by the Encarta Encyclopedia, are generalizations made about an individual or group, either favorable or unfavorable, based on some preconceived judgement or opinion of that individual or group (1). An example is the stereotypical idea that African-Americans are shiftless, lazy criminals (Shipler 1).

Although equally damaging, stereotypes can have both negative and positive aspects. Some examples of negative stereotypes involve the idea that individuals or groups that are different from the mainstream are biologically inferior, lazy, and criminal.

Historically, physical differences, such as skin color, have been a way to oppress those considered biologically defective. For poor whites, the unavailability of proper medical care has indeed lead to the idea that they have a different physical appearance from their upper class counterparts. Malnutrition and diseases such as malaria have lead to a people who look physically different than their healthier upper class counterparts. The inability to obtain or afford proper dental care leads to the very familiar stereotype of poor whites as toothless hillbillies (Harrington 15).

Furthermore, because they lack a proper diet and access to quality medical care, poor whites are often more sick than upper class workers causing them to be absent from work more often, further encouraging the stereotype of poor whites as lazy. Allison herself describes these white stereotypes in speaking about her family.

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 long hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and wrong attitudes. My cousins quit school, stole cars, used drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables. We were not noble, not grateful, not even

hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. My family was ashamed of being poor, of feeling hopeless. (Allison, *Skin* 18.)

The opposite of the negative stereotype of white trash is the idea of the noble poor. An example of this kind of stereotype is the way in which American Indians are seen as the noble savage, a people who have a deep spiritual connection to the earth (USA today 1).

The good white trash, the noble poor, are often portrayed as good country folks. They are the hard working people who live below the Mason-Dixon Line or in the Appalachian Mountains. People viewed as simple-minded, zealously religious, salt of the earth country music lovers, people that were union organizers fighting against big business and corporate greed. Allison herself fought the desire to portray her characters as these mythical good country folks.

Even now, past forty and stubbornly proud of my family, I feel the draw of mythology, that romanticized, edited version of the poor ... My family's lives are not on television, not in books, not even comic books. There is 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. (Allison, *Skin* 17)

One of the strongest characteristics of Allison's writing is that she takes both negative and positive stereotypes of poor whites and molds them into real characters.

In showing the hunger, the despair, the limited choices, and the shame of contempt and class hatred, Allison forces the reader to confront the everyday realities of her characters, to see them as larger than their stereotypes. (McDonald 18)

Although, Allison's writing does contain stereotypical two-dimensional white trash or country folk ideas and perceptions, her characters are three-dimensional. They are real people who live

and breath. Allison states with regard to her characters, "I didn't want anyone to ever be able to use the words 'white trash' again without thinking of my characters" (Hollibaugh 16).

For example, the character of Uncle Earle does indeed possess the traits of a stereotypical white trash male character in that he is a hard drinking, woman-chasing, gun loving redneck similar to the ones portrayed in the movies or on television. Yet, never is Uncle Earle portrayed as a hateful racist or a wife beater. On the contrary, the aunts comment on his love for women and his grief for his lost family. "A sad wounded man who genuinely likes women" (Allison 24). Moving beyond a stereotype, Allison gives the reader a broader understanding of the character of Uncle Earle.

Still further, it is stereotypical to portray Uncle Earle as the defender of his family. Although the reader rejoices when Uncle Earle and his brothers fiercely defend Bone by beating Daddy Glen and sending him to the hospital, this is a stereotype of the good country man willing to defend his family to the end (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 245). In his defense, Uncle Earle makes this declaration.

I'm not ashamed of beating that asshole. I'm not ashamed of sitting here drinking. I'm not ashamed of a damn thing. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 255)

Allison overcomes this stereotype by making the reader realize that no amount of blood shed in the name of honor can protect Bone from the abuse. "All of us were screaming, and no one could help" (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 106).

Another stereotypical image connected with poor whites is idea that they are all religious zealots. It is a preconceived judgement that poor whites are crowding into churches to be saved by sweating, fire and brimstone preachers. It is falsehood, proven by the character of Uncle Earle, that poor whites are waiting to meekly inherit the earth. Having Uncle Earle not only

doubt religion but also hold himself above religious people shatters this stereotypical image of poor whites.

They want you, oh yes, they want you. Till they get you. An't nothing in this world more useless than a hardworking religious fool. Religion gets you and then milks you dry. Won't let you drink a little whiskey, Won't let you make no fat-assed girls grin and giggle. Won't let you do a damn thing except work for what you'll get in the hereafter. I live in the here and now, and I need my sleep on Sunday morning. But, I'll tell you Bone, I like it that they want me, Catholics and Baptists and Church of Gods and Methodists and Seventh-Day Adventist, all of them angry for my dirty white hide, my pitiful human soul. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 148)

Another powerful aspect of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is Bone's own coming of age story, her own ability to rename herself. From the circumstance of her birth, Bone is doubly marked. She is white trash and a bastard.

In a society that is held together by patriarchal rules and morality, fatherless children are considered a threat because they do not fall under the direct control of a man (Early 15). Therefore, once again, social control is applied; this time through shame. Illegitimacy is a word that places a label of shame on those born out of wedlock. Bone's birth is a mark of shame for her mama and her.

Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of everyday she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. No-good, lazy, shiftless. She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shaper, her mouth to her bent and awkward smile-anything

to deny what Greenville County wanted to name her. Now a soft-talking black-eyed man had done it for them-set a mark on her and hers. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 3)

Furthermore, growing up is a search for your identity, a search for who you are and where you belong. The search for self-identity is an even more passionate desire for Bone than for other children because the circumstances of her birth have taken away a part of herself. She envies her sister, Reese, who has another family and a different understanding of her identity. She envies Reese because she has different options because she is legitimate. She is more accepted in the eyes of society.

She had another family, another side of herself to think about, something more than Mama and me and the Boatwrights. Reese could choose something different for herself and be someone else altogether. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 59)

For Bone, there is only the identity she can form from her birth, from the Boatwrights, from Daddy Glen, and eventually from within herself. From the beginning of the novel, Bone's identity is in question (King 126). Uncle Earle gives her the nickname of Bone because she is no bigger than a knucklebone. This nickname is a non-gendered, non-human description (King 127). Furthermore, Daddy Glen's treatment of her allows Bone to take on the characteristics of this name. A bone is something that is hard, breakable, and easily tossed aside (King 127). In essence, Bone's experiences and identity began to merge with her name thus leading her to believe that she is indeed all the things that Daddy Glen says she is.

I was nobody special. I was just a girl, scared and angry. When I saw myself in Daddy Glen's eyes, I wanted to die. No, I wanted to be already dead, cold and gone. Everything felt helpless. He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself. It was like sliding down an

endless hole, seeing myself at the bottom, dirty ragged, poor, stupid. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 209)

Throughout the novel, at the same time that Daddy Glen is tearing her down, Bone is building herself. At the opening of the novel, Bone believes her mother without question “I believed everything that Mama said was so” (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 18). However, by the end of the novel, Bone has become aware of her mother’s infallibility. “I no longer accepted everything Mama told me as gospel...” (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 145).

Allison uses the stereotype of poor whites as religious zealots to illustrate Bone’s search for her own identity. Bone attends church and attempts to convert her uncles to Christianity because she wants them and herself to be made pure, whole, and to have a sense of belonging.

I wanted the church to fill up with everything I knew. I wanted the way I felt to mean something and for everything in my life to change because of it. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 152)

In attempting to rename herself, Bone is tries on different identities. For example, at a new school, in response to being labeled white trash once again, she becomes Roseanne Carter from Atlanta (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 67).

Still further, Bone begins to search for role models in which to follow. While visiting Uncle Earle in prison, Bone sees him as smart and possessing the power she craves. Thus, she adopts his outlook on life.

I felt mean and powerful and proud of all of us, all the Boatwrights who had ever gone to jail, fought back when they hadn't a chance, and still held onto their pride. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 217)

In fact, she adopts Earle's outlook to such a degree that it gives her the courage to commit a crime herself. "The look in his eyes was a match for the one I'd seen in Earle's, the one I imagined in my own" (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 218).

Another role model created by Allison is Aunt Raylene. Aunt Raylene is a woman who did indeed rename herself literally and figuratively. Literally, Raylene runs away to the carnival and begins calling herself Ray (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 179). However, it is not the name change but the way in which Raylene lives her life that has the most influence on Bone.

The very first words the reader hears from Raylene are a commentary on the literal trash that floats in the river that passes by her house.

"Trash rises," Aunt Raylene joked the first afternoon I spent with her. "Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time." (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 180)

It is also a commentary on Raylene's life, in particular, her relationship to the rest of the world and her deviance of the label of white trash that is placed on her.

Furthermore, only Raylene who created her own life apart from what everyone thought she should be as a Boatwright, as a woman, as a worker, can fully understand Bone's own search for identity.

I like my life the way it is, little girl. I made my life, the same way it looks like you're gonna make yours-out of pride and stubbornness and too much anger. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 263)

Raylene also helps Bone to cope with her anger. When Bone targets her anger toward a group of unknown children, Raylene gives her a new outlook on the way that she sees her world as well as a way to cope with her identification as white trash.

You don't know their daddies or mamas, who their people are, why they do things, or what they're scared of. You think because they wear different clothes than you and go by fast, they're rich and cruel and thinking terrible things about you. ...could be they're jealous of you, hungry for what you got, afraid of what you might do if they ever stepped in the yard. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 262)

In the final scene of the novel, Bone's Mama, Anney Boatwright, gives Bone a new birth certificate, one without the stamp. There is a blank space at the bottom where the mark of illegitimacy used to be signifying that Bone can now write her own life story; she can now define herself.

It was blank, unmarked, unstamped. ...Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or do before I was born? ...Her life had folded into mine. What would I be like when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed? (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 309)

Just as Bone needs to create an identity for herself, so do most poor white writers. Just as Bone has to fill in her birth certificate and create her own identity, poor white writers have to come to terms with their identities. They need to create literature from their own experiences. They need to redefine literature by recording their lives using the themes and language of their culture.

The poor can be described statistically; they can be analyzed as a group. But they need a novelist as well as a sociologist if we are to see them. They need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives. The cycles and trends, the massive forces, must be seen as affecting persons who talk and think differently. (Harrington 17)

There are various ways to describe literature. It can be described as anything that appears in print. Or, perhaps, it is the written embodiment of the spirit or culture of a people. But, more likely, it is the forms of writing that reflects the values of the dominant group at any particular time (Schleifer 560).

Being a poor white writer presents a challenge in a literary world that defines literature with the terminology, themes, and ideals of the upper class. A highly praised and reoccurring theme in mainstream American literature is individualism. For example, the novels of Horatio Alger, a turn of the nineteenth century American writer, glorify the individual effort (Zweig 41). This presents a problem for poor white, working class writers because their communities are often not centered on the individual (Coiner 253). More often as not, they are community oriented. The economics of poverty call for a gathering together of resources and a spirit of cooperation: an echo of Uncle Earle's statement that we all got to help each other in this life. (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 68)

Since art is a direct reflection of culture, it would follow that in a culture oriented toward community thought most of the art would be community related such as quilting and the singing of gospel songs. Poor white art is often experienced in these group settings in a certain place and certain time; therefore, they are excluded from the traditional definition of art as being timeless and unchanging.

However, literary studies continues to be class bound focusing on upper class writing ignoring other forms of artistic expression such as street literature, hymns, dialect, and oral storytelling (Coiner 251). This robs an entire population of people of their right to literary role models resulting in disempowerment.

The disempowerment of the population of ordinary people who are denied a genuine history of their own cultural activities through the access to authors who wrote about strikes, rebellions, mass movements, the work experience, famous political trails, the tribulations of political commitment, as well as about love, sex, the family, nature, and war from a class-conscious, internationalist, socialist-feminist, and antiracist point of view. Instead, the population [of ordinary people] is often exclusively presented with literary role models that inculcate notions of culture that distort visions of possibilities for social transformation. (Wald 284)

American Indian Activist Ward Churchill address this fact, “Literature crafted by a dominating culture can be an insidious political force, disinforming people...”(1).

In short, controlling how someone tells their stories or determining what stories are told is another means of silencing and controlling marginalized groups. Furthermore, as the Civil Rights Movement demonstrated, silencing a central aspect of a person’s identity strips them of power over their lives and leaves them nameless. A full self-identity is a basic human dignity (Zweig 61).

For working-class women, writing or telling one’s story, breaking the silence, the privacy of home and kin, is an individual act of courage and a means of collectively resisting class oppression. (Zandy 6)

Sadly, it is both a historical fact and present truth that most of the writing that is considered literature and thus accepted and published is indeed written by upper class white men. Even more deeply wounding is the fact that most of what is written about marginalized groups is written from the upper class white male point of view.

For example, many people believe that William Faulkner accurately portrays poor whites in his novels. The truth is that Faulkner was not impoverished nor did he come from an impoverished background and most of his characters are stereotypical being described as angry, animals (Carr 91). Faulkner himself voices his thoughts on poor whites when commenting on his famous literary characters, the Snopes family, "I have hated them and laughed at them and been afraid of them for thirty years now" (Carr 82).

Once again, fear prevents a realistic portrayal of poor whites and an accurate telling of their story. Thus, it becomes a necessity for poor whites to step outside of their culture and tell their own stories. As Allison comments on writing *Bastard Out of Carolina*, "When I couldn't find my story, I wrote...I made my own story, writing it down so it would be real" (Irving 105).

However, in a world where poor white literature is often not accepted by the mainstream, telling a poor white story becomes a challenge. It is a challenge because poor white writing differs in both theme and language from what is considered literature. The themes of mainstream literature, as mentioned previously, often deal with the individual struggle, not for self-awareness, but to obtain. The struggle of the protagonist in mainstream literature often is a struggle to obtain: love, money, social status.

Rarely does mainstream literature deal with social issues such as abuse or poverty, themes that are common in the writings of marginalized groups. Mainstream literature does not cope well with themes considered socially unacceptable such as healthy feminine sexuality. And, if mainstream literature does not deal well with healthy feminine sexuality, it certainly cannot be expected to understand incest or Bone's masturbation to violent fantasies.

I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten

in the first place. I lived in a world of shame. I hid my bruises as if they were evidence of crimes I had committed. I knew I was a sick, disgusting person. I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but I was the one who masturbated. I did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the stories I told myself about it? (Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* 112)

Certainly, the Civil Rights Movement did a great deal to raise awareness about African-American culture to broaden the idea of what literature is, for example allowing that spirituals are indeed a valid means of creative expression and can be considered literature. And, without a doubt, groundbreaking writers such as Alice Walker have indeed broken their silence and unabashedly told their stories. The Civil Rights Movement left a crack in the door of literature through which fine writers such as Walker have been able to sneak past the literary guard.

Unfortunately, in a post-Civil Rights Movement society where most people would never dream of using the term nigger, terms such as white trash, trailer trash, and redneck are thrown around with abundance. As Jeremy Iggers puts it, "Hatred of the poor may well be the last acceptable bigotry." (145)

Therefore, once again, poor whites are faced with that double-edged sword of being a marginalized group that is not seen as such, an economically and culturally disadvantaged people not aware or permitted to be so.

An element of marginalized group literature that prevents it from gaining acceptance is language. Most marginalized groups have an oral culture. Denied access to written language, many of these groups passed down legends, family stories, and moral tales from generation to generation through the art of storytelling. For example, Bone's grandma in *Bastard* is indeed using oral culture to pass along family stories as well as her own experiences.

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

Bone's grandmother would not have enough education or even access to enough education to actually put all these stories onto paper, but she can indeed orally "write" them. She is indeed as much of an artist as any male, upper class writer. She just does not have the same method of expression available to her. She does not use the same language.

The language of poor whites born from generations of oral storytelling is more rhythmic. It is a language born from gospel and country music. It is language meant to be spoken; therefore, it is not easily transferred onto the page. Allison speaks of these language differences.

Now, the language rhythms of the people I am writing about come entirely from gospel music, country music, and the church. By the way it is generally written down it is as if it is the back pages of men's magazines with the letters cut off and a whole lot of extra letters thrown on. It's barely intelligible and has an aura of stupid about it. And that I had to absolutely refuse because the people whose voices I am using are very bright. They are simply uneducated. (Pratt 31)

Allison herself had to battle to include many culturally significant terms as Mama and an't and the use of the phrase black, black hair.

I had to argue for my spelling of two words in particular. One was "mama." And other was "an't" – as in "I an't having any." Also, I noticed that in a lot of Southern speech, one of the big things is alliteration repetition. There are places where I describe, for

instance, the uncle as having “black, black hair.” Well, it means something different to say “black, black hair” than to say “black hair.” But I had to really fight for these speech patterns. (Pratt 32)

Beyond language and themes, poor whites face a final challenge in making the transformation from oral to written language, the challenge of breaking their silence

With all the preconceived ideas and stereotypes surrounding the stories, characters, themes, and language of poor white, many writers from a poor white background run the risk of being misunderstood at best and ridiculed at worst. When you are bombarded by images of whom you should be and how you should act, either the good country folk or the violent redneck, where is your truth?

To dare to write about working-class literature in a culture where the working class is denied a name, never mind a literary category, is to plunge in over one’s head. (Zandy 9)

With her groundbreaking novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison does plunge in over her head to tell the story of class in America. The characters of *Bastard Out of Carolina* shatter the stereotypical images of poor whites, and Allison, in the manner of Alice Walker, opens the door of literature for other poor whites.

By writing with the themes and language of her culture, Allison finds her identity, redefines American literature, and brings a new acceptance and legitimacy to the poor white novel.

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