

The Internal Other: Dorothy Allison's White Trash

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Introduction

As early as the 1790s, the American South was singled out in an intellectual and cultural discourse revolving around the material body (Watson 2012, 12). Indeed, in the early days of the American Republic, the material facts of race, class, and gender questioned the fictions of a disembodied, ethereal subject and were used to delimit a space of national belonging (ibid., 10). The colonial tropes of depravation were displaced onto the southern states, whose poor white inhabitants were characterized by “drunkenness, lechery, indolence, gluttony, violence, thick impenetrable accents, and creolized dialects” (ibid., 12). These traits were first found in the Southern Humorists’ obscene, undisciplined, excessively embodied characters, and in later Southern writing the poor whites remained the objects of extreme representations: “They drink to excess, disfigure each other in brawls, lust openly after inappropriate people, eat clay, stage elaborate pranks that physically abase their victims, and in general exhibit a bodily excess and indiscipline that flouts bourgeois norms of bodily etiquette,” Watson remarks (2012, 14).

Born in a poor white family in South Carolina, Dorothy Allison is both a victim of and an heir to these representations, as the subaltern characters she creates are the targets of a typically Southern physical and ideological violence.

Indeed, the definition of white trash by the middle class combines objective data and myths, leading to the creation of a threatening social “Other” who should be confined to a real and imagined space of abjection. The white trash group is the victim of fixed representations and seems to be condemned to wander in social and human limbo because it fails to match the cultural ideals. As she describes the ambiguous white trash position, Allison questions the conception of normative whiteness and enriches the discourse developed by whiteness studies. As we shall see, whiteness is often associated to invisibility and perfection, and is considered a guarantee of social superiority. However, Allison’s white trash questions the homogeneity of the white group; at the same time white and poor (a characteristic associated to Blacks in the traditional South), the white trash can be considered an internal danger, spoiling the dominant white group. This threat, I shall argue, requires the creation of a specific space, designed to welcome the white trash aberrations, and aimed at protecting the clean, pure middle class from contamination.

Neutral, normative whiteness: the fantasy of purity

Social theorists have reflected upon the reasons that make the white group a dominant and normative category. Explaining how the white race is constructed in the collective imagination, Richard Dyer examines the implications and connotations of whiteness, remarking that the studies on “race” conducted prior to the publication of his own work (1997) did not focus on the white race *per se*. Indeed, white people had very often been depicted as being the neutral representatives of a human norm, so that the term “race” had only been applied to non-white groups: “Other people are raced, we are just people,” Dyer explains (1997, 1), noting that white people see themselves as “unmarked, unspecific, universal” (ibid., 45). Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz also remark that the invisibility of whiteness has made the neutral white body a template in the

evaluation of other bodies (1997a, 3); and Ross Chambers exposes the negative consequences of this conception when he remarks that the other races, compared to unmarked whiteness, are found abnormal and incomplete (1997, 189). Since it is linked to transparency and normalcy, whiteness is considered an unremarkable characteristic, as suggested by the very title of Chambers's article, "The Unexamined," which encapsulates the idea that until recently whiteness had not been an object of study because it did not deserve the theorists' attention. Conversely, the other races have been scrutinized and controlled because they were aberrant: Social science borrows from linguistics the terminology of marking, only to associate it with the notions of deviance and abnormality. A symbolic reading of the visibility of races thus suggests that the unmarked groups (whiteness, in our case) are equated with normality and domination, which exempts them from being studied. Chambers coined the term *unexaminedness* to qualify this privileged position (ibid., 188). On the contrary, being marked means being deviant, inferior, and deprived of power (ibid., 189). However, the equation of whiteness with domination has its limits, and the general considerations of whiteness forget to point to the diversity of the white group. The white race is not a homogenous category, the members of which share the same cultural identity (Hartigan 2005, 188-89). On the contrary, the smooth definition of whiteness hides fundamental differences within the group.

Revealing the heterogeneity of the seemingly unified white group, John Hartigan, Jr. explains that "[u]nderstanding how whiteness works requires grasping how the visage, speech, and actions of certain whites can so disturb notions of belonging and difference that they are simultaneously marked as white yet expelled from the privileged social domain of whiteness" (2005, 59). The appearance and behavior of certain white people are precisely what led to the creation of a ladder of acceptability within the white group, a distinction that presupposes the definition of a normative form of whiteness and the targeting of

some personal or regional specificities (physical distortions, dialects, manners and local customs, for instance) as being symptoms of deviance from the white norm. Consequently, the various groups constituting the white race are also submitted to the marked/unmarked division which is usually applied to races. It could be argued that, compared to the paradigmatic white middle-class individual, some sub-groups within the white race are “raced,” their purity being tinted, or tainted, by certain demeaning characteristics.

Strategies of categorization

The distinctions made within the white group liken certain people to the inferior races, but they are mostly based on class considerations. Certain class-related traits allow the creation of sub-categories within the white race according to socio-economic status. Physical appearance and social position thus mingle in that creation, sometimes leading to the clear distinction of barely distinguishable classes.

For example, David Reynolds synthesizes two sociological studies carried out in the Deep South in 1941 and 1978, which show how the lowest social classes systematically attempt to distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of appearance and behavior. In his work, Reynolds reveals that the will to create hierarchies results in the multiplication of levels of value, and insists that classification is subjective, each social class evaluating itself and others according to its own criteria (qtd. in Docka 2002). In such a process of categorization, the white trash is a social model in opposition to which the other poor white groups define themselves, insisting on their own respectability. The despicable white trash group is placed at the bottom of an artificial social ladder which distinguishes the “good poor” and the “bad poor” according to subjective definitions. When considering the additional social levels created among the

poorest groups, Reynolds thus differentiates the “physically and morally clean” people and those “not clean in either respect” (qtd. in *ibid.*).

The white trash is then turned into an economic scapegoat, “the low other” (qtd. in *ibid.*), and the categories of *good poor* and *bad poor* “claim to describe the innate, inevitable, immutable essence of devalued or stigmatized groups” (Baker 2000, 118). Yet in fact, as Baker remarks, “these categories serve to rationalize and justify the domination of one group by another” (*ibid.*, 118). John Hartigan, Jr. expresses the same idea when he analyzes the expression “those people,” stating that it “encodes the selective, exclusionary strategy of projecting a delimited form of difference – whether in terms of race, class or gender – that allows a normative center to operate” (2005, 3).

The distinctions described above find an echo in Dorothy Allison’s introduction to her collection of short stories *Trash*, where she defines two conflicting figures: the “good poor” are “hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable,” contrary to the “bad poor,” the group her family belongs to (Allison 2002 vii). She explains: “We were men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes” (Allison 2002 vii). Similarly, her memoirs *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* open on a compilation of terms used to define her social group: “Peasants, that’s what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum” (Allison 1996, 1). The comparative expression “lower orders” makes of the white trash an internal Other in the poor group, a category which requires additional delimitations in order for the honest, better poor not to be “contaminated” by the low morals and depraved way of life of the unworthy white trash.

Dorothy Allison exposes the workings of class relations in the South and denounces the unfair categorization she and her family were the victims of. She precisely describes the strategies of othering and debasement developed by the Southern middle class in order to marginalize the white trash and assert its own worth. In the majority of her writings, she draws a line between the white trash characters (avatars for her own family) and the southern community which despises them. Most evidently in her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), the white trash are the targets of verbal and social violence, confined to the bottom of the social and human ladder, considered unworthy of attention. Quite interestingly, the white trash heroine Bone is obsessed with the color white, an obsession which makes clear her feeling of exclusion from the sphere of social normality. Bone mentions the color white when she compares herself to her middle-class cousins, literary heroines, and fairytales characters. She grants importance even to the slightest white details, be it when she despairs of not looking like the “princesses with pale skin” or “Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks” (Allison 1993, 206), or when she sets herself apart from the family circle, painfully envying her wealthier cousins’ “white nylon crinolines” (Allison 1993, 208). Bone defines herself in complete opposition to the pale, fragile heroines, when she remarks that she is “as dark as walnut bark,” “part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins” (206), and deplors that “no part of [her is] beautiful” (208). Beauty, delicacy and paleness are closely associated with social status, and the close attention Bone pays to the differences between herself and the worshipful girls reveals her feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. Finally, Bone quickly becomes friends with Shannon Pearl, an albino girl whose extreme whiteness provokes disgust in other people, and fascination in Bone. Shannon’s parents are in a better financial situation than Bone’s, and the girl’s whiteness is an ambiguous marker of social superiority: even though Shannon is the victim of appearance-based scorn, her translucent skin is turned into a symbol of pre-

eminence. Indeed, when commenting upon this unprepossessing characteristic, Shannon's mother turns the defect into a symbol of perfection, Shannon's clearly visible veins becoming "fine blue blood vessels" showing against "the ivory of her scalp," itself compared to linen (155). Blue blood associates Shannon to the refined and pure aristocracy, a symbolic perfection which is conveyed even by her name, Pearl. Bone is thus surrounded by fictional characters and real people whose appearance constantly reminds her of her inferior status.

If Bone creates for herself a scale of values based on color, her mother Anney is placed at the bottom of the ladder by people who rely upon factual and imagined characteristics. Anney is a poor, uneducated waitress, who has to put up with demeaning remarks that place her at the bottom of the moral, economic, and social ladder. In the description she offers of Anney's feelings towards stigmatization, Allison translates the social hierarchy into a visible, physical hierarchy: Bone remarks that Anney "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" (3), conveying an image in which Anney is physically dominated by people of a higher rank. The community's opinion is encapsulated in a short enumeration of insults, "*No-good, lazy, shiftless*" (3), which Bone compares to a "stamp" being affixed to her mother (3), conveying the violence of the categorization process by comparing it to an act of branding. The terms chosen by the community to define Anney perfectly correspond to the white trash characteristics developed in the American collective imagination, and listed by Kelly L. Thomas: "lazy workers, irresponsible parents and citizens, domestically incompetent, excessive and often perverse in their sexuality, and unsound in consumer practices" (2002, 168). This broad generalization, like Allison's enumeration, reveals the constructed nature of the "bad poor" and the exaggeration that characterizes the instrumental definition.

As David Reynolds explains, the tendency to create new levels within a group is an approximate enterprise aiming at asserting one's social and moral superiority (qtd. in Docka 2002). Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper also question the objectivity of these representations and remark that hegemonic power does not simply manipulate differences between individuals or social groups. Rather, it produces and reproduces differences to create modes of social and spatial division that contribute to the perpetuation of its authority (Hooper and Soja 1993, 184-85). The need to maintain domination leads to artificial definitions, so that social categorization appears as a subjective process, requiring the invention of social norms that will allow the perpetuation of the dominant group's superiority. Social norms are thus performative, established and perpetuated through repetition.

The white trash as cultural aberrations

White trash is “the most visible and clearly marked form of whiteness,” Wray and Newitz observe (1997a, 4). Although it partly relies upon verifiable economic and social data, the process of categorization which creates the white trash also depends upon myths and stereotypes anchored in the collective imagination (Baker 2000, 120). White trash is thus not so much a socio-economic as a *cultural* category, composed of devalued individuals to whom real and fantasized characteristics are applied. Sylvie Laurent remarks that the poor white trash arises from “a cultural conception” according to which poverty consists in a “series of noble or despicable behaviors and values” (2001, 151-52).¹ For Laurent, “white trash” is an indicator that the definition of poverty has to do with discourse more than with economic realities. The poor white trash is an imaginary individual, who is used to “ward off the fear of alterity” (ibid., 152).²

¹ My translation.

² My translation.

Since whiteness is associated with domination and privilege, poor whites are a discursive anomaly and a social aberration whose definition combines privilege and destitution. In her essays, Allison also analyzes the process of rejection of the Other: She denounces the development of a “politics of they,” stating that “human beings fear and stigmatize the different while secretly dreading that they might be one of the different themselves,” a fear that leads to a vicious circle of oppression (Allison 1994, 35). She further explains that class stratification results from the certainty that one’s well-being depends on the oppression of others (ibid., 36). The expression “the politics of they” conveys the idea of a division of the American society according to norms which exclude some individuals from the circuits of normality. The pronoun “they” creates a level of abjection which confirms that the individuals it designates are set apart from the dominant, normal group. Allison’s considerations find an echo in Annalee Newitz’s argument that a monolithic, stereotyped Other is created when a class feels that it is losing control of the categories of “good” and “bad,” its anxiety leading to the creation of negative images of whiteness (Newitz 1997, 133). The insulting expression “white trash” connotes dirt and uselessness, suggesting the white trash is human waste, an embarrassing and symbolically messy group which has to be distinguished from the pure white middle class.

Dorothy Allison also illustrates how the white trash deviate from the pure white norm when, in her poem “Upcountry,” she describes how her uncles’ pickups were “parked aslant in the yard” with “bottles that rocked from board to rim/shotguns point down beside the gears” (1991, 10). The neighbors’ attitude and merciless looks speak for themselves: “I watched the neighbors squint their eyes/‘no count, low down, disgusting’” (ibid.). The trucks parked aslant and the rolling bottles symbolize the uncles’ deviation from the social norm, while the insults point to social inferiority as well as to metaphorical dirt.

Blurring the frontiers: the contaminating white Other

Situated at a crossroads between races and classes, the white trash is the victim of an economically motivated racism. It forms an unstable group within which whiteness and blackness, privilege and poverty are mixed, race being used to explain class. The oxymoron *white trash* qualifies the unspeakable and puts it at a distance. As Kelly L. Thomas explains, white trash is “the proverbial black sheep of the white flock” (2002, 169), composed of individuals who are not white enough, and whom Wray and Newitz call “the white Other” (1997b, 168). The white trash subject is thus abject, if we recall Julia Kristeva’s definition of abjection as that which perturbs an identity, system, or order (1983, 12). It is not the absence of cleanliness which makes something abject, but rather the fact that limits, positions, and rules are questioned and displaced. The abject is thus ambiguous and mixed (Kristeva 1983, 12).

The white trash indeed perturbs an order and questions the frontiers of race and class, thus interrogating the superiority of the white race. Matt Wray qualifies the expression “white trash” as a “boundary term” (2006, 41), which blurs racial, social, economic, and symbolic boundaries, and expresses a tension “between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt” (ibid., 2). The recurrence of terms relating to the threshold in Wray’s study signals that white trash is at the crossroads between different categories. He points to a “disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other,” and concludes: “*White trash* names people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order” (ibid.). If Wray suggests that white trash is neither one term nor the other, John Hartigan, Jr. affirms that white trash is *at the same time* one and the other when he explains that “though ‘white trash’ first appears as a form of otherness, its most troubling aspect is its dimension of sameness” (2005, 60). This definition echoes the definition Kristeva offers of the

figure of the Jew as the unbearable, abject conjunction of the One and the Other (1983, 217). Like Kristeva's Jew, Hartigan's white trash is at the same time the One and the Other, the dominant and the inferior, displacing the frontiers of class and associating notions that should be kept distinct. The unthinkable subject is the object of fantasy, rejected because of the instability it provokes. Signified by the notion of dirt, white *trash* accomplishes a transgression that operates at the level of the body, provoking physical disgust and abjection, and polluting the space of normality.

The feeling of abjection in turn reinforces the negative cultural productions concerning the white trash, thus maintaining a vicious circle of fear, representation, and abjection. Indeed, exaggerated representations play an important part in the construction of a despicable Other, as already pointed out by Frantz Fanon, who affirms in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the racist creates his inferior by setting up discriminatory practices denying the colored man his value and turning him into a parasite (1976, 75). As Fanon remarks, the colored body is submitted to a reconsideration, a thematization when submitted to the white man's gaze. In this comparison process, the black man no longer owns his body, which is dismembered, colonized, and made incomplete, the object of what Fanon called a "myth of the Negro" (ibid., 94). Sara Ahmed explains that the assimilation fantasy – the fear that the Other might absorb the subject – justifies violence against the Other whose mere existence becomes a threat to one's life (2004, 64). The representation of the Negro as a cannibal brute in Fanon's myth echoes the representation of the white trash individual as dirty, contaminating waste; in both cases, the dominant white group is under threat, either of being eaten or of being polluted, so that by exacerbating the Other's strangeness and making him abnormal and monstrous, the white group operates a holding off which must guarantee the group's integrity. Stereotyped, erroneous representations protect the

group's integrity while at the same time justifying acts of violence (Ahmed 2004, 64).

Allison also illustrates the collapsing of race and class when *Bastard Out of Carolina's* Bone and her albino friend accompany Shannon's father as he prospects Greenville County to hire Gospel singers. During one of their trips, Bone is startled by the beautiful music and powerful voices of a colored church choir, and suggests that Shannon's father hire the singers. Shannon's answer, "An't no money in handling colored," makes clear her opinion about colored people, yet the girl goes one step further when she replaces the neutral term "colored" with the racist slur "niggers," making black skin prominent to the point that the artistic value of the choir is forgotten (Allison 1993, 170). This episode is an efficient demonstration of the similarities between racial and social stigmatization. Indeed, Bone is shocked by Shannon's openly racist remarks because the racist slur reminds her of the insults she has to face daily. When the girls start to argue, a parallel is quickly established between the colored Gospel singers and Bone's white trash family, as the focus of the argument shifts from the singers to Bone's social status.

Shannon turns class into a tool to demean Bone, telling her that "[e]verybody knows [her family members are] all a bunch of drunks and thieves and bastards" (170). She uses the insult "trash" several times, suggesting that trashiness is a sort of malediction and that Bone belongs to an immoral lineage which she cannot escape: "You ... you trash. You nothing but trash. Your mama's trash, and your grandma, and your whole dirty family..." (171). When Bone answers Shannon's insults and starts her own demeaning rant, she shifts the focus back to race, revealing how closely related race and class are where stigmatization is concerned: "You bitch, you white-assed bitch," Bone exclaims, committing to the division of the white group instituted by the middle class and perpetuating the division to her own advantage (171). The adjective "white-assed"

here applies to Shannon only and takes on a negative connotation, so that Bone voluntarily excludes herself from the white group she suddenly rejects and despises. She willingly positions herself in-between the races and classes, in a limbo between white privilege and black inferiority. After making Shannon a representative of the racist white group, she kicks red dirt onto the girl's skirt and colors it. The act has a strong symbolic reach, since Shannon becomes as dirty as Bone's "whole dirty family." The distinction between the two girls is definitely blurred when Bone trips and falls into the dirt which colors her hands, thus abolishing the social and racial hierarchy by making both girls red as dirt. The shift from open racism to class hatred, from the black gospel singers to the white trash girl, only mirrors how class- and race-based insults can be juxtaposed, and reveals how shifting the frontiers of race and class can be when focusing on white trash.

The space of the Other: white trash heterotopias

The process of othering which targets white trash is completed with the creation of specific spaces designed to welcome them, quarantine areas aimed at preserving the purity of the dominant white group. Michel Foucault describes the "crisis heterotopias"³ designed by primitive societies as "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (1998, 179). These heterotopias were created to welcome people whose physical condition prevented them from living with the community (aging, menstruation, childbirth), but later on individuals have been assigned a place in this social space because of moral or

³ Foucault first proposed the concept of heterotopia in the preface to *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), expanding on the idea in a 1967 lecture entitled "Des espaces autres." This lecture was published in revised form, shortly before his death, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), translated as "Different Spaces."

behavioral characteristics. Thus the creation of heterotopias is linked to the notions of norm and deviance, whether they refer to the body or to morals.

We can easily associate Foucault's and Erving Goffman's studies in a reflection about quarantine spaces. Indeed, in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman studies the social codes of categorization and the influence of stigmata on social identity, explaining that "[s]ociety establishes the means of categorizing persons" and decides what attributes are ordinary and natural for each category (1970, 11). In Ancient Greece, "stigma" were signs inscribed on the bodies of slaves, criminals, or traitors, whose moral anomaly was made visible during a ritual. Blemished and polluted by cuts and burns, they were to be avoided (ibid., 11). Goffman opposes "stigma symbols" with "prestige symbols," both used to classify individuals according to their worth (ibid., 59) and to decide whether they should be socially acknowledged. Moreover, according to Foucault, the heterotopias of crisis were progressively replaced by "heterotopias of deviation," which welcome the individuals who deviate from a certain norm (1998, 80). Besides, Judith Butler argues that it is the individual's very humanity that is questioned in the process of categorization, the norm being associated with the notion of dignity (2004, 2). She writes that "sometimes the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human," and concludes that the recognition of the individual as less than human "does not lead to a viable life" (ibid.).

Furthermore, each individual's position on the human ladder conditions their possibility to move freely within a highly regulated symbolic or physical space. In Foucault's study, the individual is "constrained to enter [...] or has to submit to rituals and purifications" (1998, 183). Butler and Goffman, on the contrary, never consider the process of holding off as a privilege; isolation is a punishment that does not require any ritual or purification; rather, it is the

marginalization of the spoilt individual which allows the purification of the social space. When applied to whiteness, these considerations allow us to define the possibilities opened up by racial identity: Sara Ahmed explains that whiteness grants bodies a certain worth (2006, 129) while at the same time allowing them to move freely because it “trails behind” bodies which do not have to confront their whiteness as a remarkable characteristic (ibid., 132). Ahmed explains that “[t]he white body in this way expands; objects, tools, instruments, and even ‘others’ allow that body to inhabit space by extending that body and what it can reach” (ibid., 132). Conversely, the whiteness of white trash bodies is a characteristic that has to be confronted. As Wray and Newitz affirm, social and economic data racialize the white trash body which, contrary to hegemonic forms of whiteness, is marked as being at the same time white and trash (1997b, 169-170), thus making whiteness palpable, an obstacle to the free circulation of bodies within the social space. Kelly L. Thomas remarks that the distinction between “good poor folk” and “poor white trash” depends not so much on physical appearance as on behavior, the bodies of white trash losing their worth and being “coded as trashy” when they are linked to uncontrolled reproduction, perverse sexuality and laziness (2002, 169). Wray and Newitz state that white trash is considered as “something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance,” because of its ambiguous status: “White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside whiteness, becoming difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness” (1997b, 169-70). Wray and Newitz here expose the impossibility of purifying the white group: the very status of white trash prevents the middle class from rejecting it completely, since white trash has its origins in the group. It thus constitutes a persistent internal threat.

Allison also divides space between normality and otherness, and reveals how people are segregated according to their social status. Deploring the fact that the white trash lives are not as worthy as everybody else’s, Allison, in the essay

“A Question of Class” (1994), describes how one of her cousins was sent to jail when he was eight years old. After being caught breaking into payphones with another boy, he was arrested and sent to the county farm, while the other boy was sent back to his parents. The episode makes clear the unfair treatment inflicted on the white trash child, and how social status matters in the unfolding of the individual’s life. A member of the Other social group, Allison’s cousin is given no chance at all: “He never went back to school, and after jail he couldn’t join the army” (1994, 29), whereas the other boy, a member of the “clean, well-dressed, contemptuous” dominant group is spared (29). Allison explains: “We were trash. We were the ones they built the county farm to house and break” (29), thus denouncing the huge gap that separates the white trash from the middle class. The county farm could be compared to a dog pound where the unwanted or stray animals are cooped up; the bodies of the socially deviant individuals are displaced, locked up and isolated, made docile and harmless.⁴

In an episode of *Bastard Out of Carolina* devoted to a family gathering, the white trash girls have tea on their own in the backyard. They are called “Anney’s girls” (Allison 1993, 101), a demeaning designation that deprives them of their identity, and are not allowed to enter their middle class uncle’s house, whereas their cousins are free to run “in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, tracking mud in on the braided rugs” (ibid.). The girls are an unnamed Other, deprived access to the space of social privilege for fear they might pollute it, yet quite ironically the privileged cousins are precisely those who bring dirt inside the house and contaminate the preserved space. To borrow Ahmed’s expression, the cousins’ bodies expand into space (Ahmed 2006, 132), but Allison denounces the unfair segregation by describing them as reckless, dirty animals

⁴ I borrow the expression “docile bodies” from Foucault, who thus describes the bodies that move in a scrutinized and controlled environment (2010, 159).

who literally mark their territory. The threat does not come from where the uncles expected it and pollution stains the preserved space, no matter how careful they are. Thus, contrary to the healthy separation of the living, the sick, and the dead in a city contaminated by the plague, where space is enclosed, divided, and surveyed (Foucault 2010, 230), the setting up of a disciplinary organization in Bone's uncle's house fails to preserve the purity of the territory. Space is divided up but not enclosed, the disciplinary order fails and contamination occurs despite careful isolation.

Conclusion

The construction of an abject subject in the American collective imagination is a social and cultural process, the result of facts as well as myths and stereotypes. Dorothy Allison illustrates this process of othering as well as the process of creation of a space of abjection, dedicated to welcome the unwanted individuals. The marginalization and stigmatization of white trash people reveal the anxiety of the middle class, whose fear of being polluted by the white trash leads to attempts at isolating the dangerous, internal threat. Allison's heterotopias in fact point to the fear of losing control, and to the need to define some individuals as less-than-human in order to reassert one's superiority and worth. The devalued white trash subject is an object of fantasy for the dominant community, an undesirable Other within the social and cultural space. Bearing the stamp of otherness, white trash people are visually distinguishable and physically put at a distance from the sphere of normality. However, despite the constant attempts at marginalization, and the extreme care with which white trash individuals are rejected, the threat of pollution and contamination can never be completely avoided. As exemplified by the confrontation episodes in Allison's works, the blurring of race and class, as well as the failure to enclose spaces properly, lead to the inevitable spoiling of the protected territory. By illustrating the persistence of white trash, or the

contamination by the middle class of its own reserved space, Allison enriches the social and whiteness studies, revealing that social categorization is not only artificial, but also unfair and unnecessary. As she writes about the cultural, imaginary, and spatial distinctions established between human beings, she denounces the conception according to which some lives can be constrained and made “unlivable,” and condemns the social processes by which the human is made alien.

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