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Eliminating Barriers and Expanding Borders through White Trash Literature:

A Study of Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons

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Eliminating Barriers and Expanding Borders through White Trash Literature:

A Study of Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons

Dissertation Abstract

by

Rebecca Harshman Belcher

The phenomenon of whiteness studies seeks to eradicate racism by creating a definition of the white race based upon its distinctive characteristics rather than on what it is *not*. As this goal is reached, the literary canon will replace exclusionary paradigms with all-inclusive borders that recognize racial distinctiveness without bigotry, and the white race will be seen as providing only one of many perspectives from which a writer may view the world. While sociologists, cultural studies experts, and demographers have produced studies that expose the outdated norm of whiteness, southern fictional writers such as Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons have deconstructed whiteness through characters who live in a white subculture.

This study focuses on Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Connie May Fowler's *Before Women Had Wings* (1996), and Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987) as literary works that approach the subject of white trash with honesty, depth, and sympathy. Each novel employs the narrative point of view of a young girl, the physical and psychological realities of abuse, and the appearance of the marginalized "other" as a savior for the abused child. The problem of whiteness is revealed through novels that are peopled with characters who embody all of the physical stereotypes of white trash and yet who elicit the readers' empathy. Identification with the characters breaks down the

barrier of racial difference between white trash and other whites and between white trash and people of color.

To name part of the white race as an “other” is either to racialize it or to embrace white trash as a definitive part of what has been called whiteness. In the works of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons, whiteness serves as more than background; it is examined and differentiated. In the process, each author creates permeable and accessible borders within the diverse cultures of America.

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Introduction: I am an “Other”—Do I Belong in This Discussion?

For many writers . . . the border has come to symbolize the plural, syncretic, sometimes conflicted nature of the nation as a whole.

(Clayton 109)

Such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transition zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.

(Rosaldo 207-208)

The word “borders” is becoming the newest metaphor in cultural studies in the United States, as cultural theorists such as Jay Clayton in *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory* (1993) and anthropologists such as Renato Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989) use the term to describe the phenomenon of plurality which characterizes how America now sees itself.¹ No longer the “melting pot,” an amalgamation of diverse backgrounds, America is a “salad bowl,” a conglomeration of diverse cultures. Traditionally, the melting pot theory represented a country unified in its beliefs and passions. In reality, however, the beliefs and passions reflected the thinking of the privileged, who were most often white and male. Whether consciously or not, this group of privileged ones did much to create barriers to reject any voices not agreeing with its prevailing philosophy.

Beginning in the 1960s with the advances of civil rights in the political realm and the theories of deconstruction in the literary realm, however, the barriers began to be removed, being replaced by these borders of which Clayton and Rosaldo speak. In the wake of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive and explosive ideas of valuing the unprivileged, the unsaid, the unrecognized, the space between the lines, new texts are

being accepted in a spirit of egalitarian enterprise. The very basis or foundation of his theory seems to reside in a word like “acceptance.” Instead of creating an exclusive canon which operates from the notion of standards which separate, criticize, or simply neglect, a theory such as Derrida’s helps to create the opportunity for inclusion of all kinds of works from all kinds of authors with all kinds of interpretations—never-ending interpretations. Of course, many other theorists, at the same time as Derrida, were exploring new ways to examine and interpret texts: reader response theorists, including Louise Rosenblatt, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland, and J. Hillis Miller, offered new approaches to the reading of a text. In fact, all the various theories of the past thirty years have helped to break down the barriers which the old canon of the privileged white male had erected to keep texts and authors out.

The challenge remains to continue to break down barriers and to put into place borders, borders which allow movement back and forth between one kind of text and another, between one kind of author and another, between one kind of style and another, between one kind of worldview and another. A border recognizes the difference between two entities without valuing one over the other. A border can be crossed, allowing free access between the entities. Such a metaphor is apt for our contemporary, post-deconstructive, post-reader response canon. Not only can we accept the idea of an endless dialogue about the meaning of a text, but we can also accept an endless number and variety of texts and authors. We have learned to hold all things in tension, not privileging one above another, not allowing one interpretation to swallow another, not giving lip service to difference while hoping it will go away: we truly can accept borders

that allow various texts, voices, writers, readers, and worldviews to co-exist, to interact, to borrow from one another, but to remain autonomous and valuable in their own rights. Both in the area of physical borders, such as those in Rosaldo's anthropology, and in the area of literary metaphor, which is Clayton's venue, borders can be creative, productive sites for the exchanging of various cultural distinctives.

Whether the borders be race, social class, geographic location, or sexual orientation, writing which describes such borders deserves exploration, acknowledgment, and acceptance. Three such texts deserving recognition are Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Connie May Fowler's *Before Women Had Wings* (1996), and Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987). These works fit within several border categories. One is the work of a lesbian; one, of a manic-depressive; one, of a chronically depressed person. They are all written by women; they are all written by southerners; they are all written about the South; they all share characteristics of survivor fiction; and they all have a precarious hold on the canon. That hold on the canon, for all three of these authors, is recognizable in their inclusion in a staple item of academic libraries, the bio-bibliographical, critical reference work *Contemporary Southern Writers* (1999).

Beyond that reference work, Connie May Fowler, whose work is still new and untried by many readers, has not yet been examined by the critics to any great extent. Kaye Gibbons, on the other hand, has a considerable body of work which critics are beginning to examine closely. Most often, critics comment on her finely-drawn women who speak with firm, yet ordinary, voices of the South. Linda Adams Barnes in "Telling Yourself into Existence" and Veronica Makowsky in "The Only Hard Part was the Food"

concentrate on the strength of Gibbons's characters to rely on themselves and to create their own success. Makowsky compares Ellen Foster to Huck Finn and Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda; similarly, Fred Hobson in *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991) has called Ellen a female Huck Finn (77). Such a comparison points to both the veracity of Gibbons's vernacular and the spunk of her main character in *Ellen Foster*. Nancy Lewis, writing in the anthology *Southern Writers at Century's End* (1997), also comments on the vernacular authenticity of Gibbons, as well as her creation of women with backbone (113).

One other important study of *Ellen Foster* by Giovanna Munafo considers Gibbons's transgression of the "color line," with Ellen's growing awareness of her prejudice, even as her friendship with African American Starletta grows (44). Munafo's study becomes even more important because it examines the relationship between the issues of race and class within the story. "Translating class differences into racial differences," says Munafo, "magnifies its distance from the white self—magnifies, in other words, its otherness—to insure the stability of white, upper-class identity" (48). Ellen, the daughter of an upper-class mother and a working-class father, is not only considered "trash" by her maternal grandmother, but is considered the same as blacks, people not to be accepted as equal. Some of the early book reviews of *Ellen Foster*, including Ralph Wood's article in *The Christian Century* and Alice Hoffman's in the *New York Times Book Review*, comment on the picture of the rural poor which Gibbons paints, but the overwhelming majority of critics focus on Gibbons's women. Not until her fourth book, *Charms for the Easy Life* (1993), does Gibbons create any kind of strong

male character, but even that book is dominated by her strong intergenerational women, similar to those of her third book, *A Cure for Dreams* (1991). Because of her own emphasis on women, critics also have concentrated on Gibbons's women.

Of the three authors under consideration here, Dorothy Allison, without a doubt, has garnered the largest volume of critical study. One reason for that is that she has been publishing work longer than the other two writers. The main reason for the voluble criticism, perhaps, has to do with Allison's sexual orientation. She first gained prominence in the lesbian publishing community for her early collection of short stories entitled *Trash* (1988), as well as her untiring work as editor and publisher of lesbian and feminist literature. Even though *Bastard Out of Carolina* was published by a mainstream publishing house, many of the reviews and critical articles pertaining to it have to do with its feminist themes and the latent lesbianism of the protagonist Bone as well as the overt lesbianism of her Aunt Raylene. An accompanying emphasis in the criticism is the theme of sexual abuse and the strong sense that this story is survivor fiction. Allison herself has aided in such a portrayal of the novel, being entirely candid in many interviews concerning her own sexual orientation and the strong autobiographical nature of the book. Interviews with Blanche M. Boyd in *The Nation* and Michael Rowe in the *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* deal almost exclusively with the subject of sexual orientation and Allison's lesbianism. Two articles in Ruth O. Saxton's anthology *The Girl: Construction of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women* (1998) are examples of a more general view of gender orientation in Allison's story. Renee Curry emphasizes the importance of the girl narrator as wise, rather than innocent: Curry compares Bone in

Bastard Out of Carolina to Earlene in Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* and to Annie in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. In "The Battleground of the Adolescent Girl's Body," Brenda Boudreau deals with *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, and Sandra Berkley's *Coming Attractions* as novels that share the theme of the girl's body becoming "a literal battlefield, the target for, and a means of, humiliation and control, particularly by men" (45).

Alexis Jetter, taking a cue from a publicized statement of Allison, entitles her article "The Roseanne of Literature" and writes about Allison's white trash roots while alluding to her concern for incest survivors. She quotes Allison as saying, "The huge issue for any incest survivor is learning to enjoy sex. It is why I do the sexually explicit writing I do" (57). Although *Bastard Out of Carolina* is not explicitly sexual, it does give enough details to allow the reader to see Bone, the main character, as a survivor of incest. Minrose Gwin augments the discussion of incest survival in her article "Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse" in which she examines Lee Smith's *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Using Faulkner's various pictures of incest in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom* as a standard of earlier fiction, Gwin notes that these contemporary writings are different in that they "reveal and dramatize the effects of incestuous abuse on the female victim/survivor *from her perspective*," rather than from that of the male perpetrator or some omniscient narrator (420).

In addition, Gwin introduces the idea that class and gender oppression interact in Allison's work, giving the reader a picture of the "violence that erupts as a result" of that

interaction (434). Lynda Hart, too, in her book-length study *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (1988), emphasizes the connections between sex and class in Allison's work, saying that "Allison is one of our most articulate speakers on the imbrication of differences, particularly the intersection of sexuality and class" (191). Hart moves quickly, however, from matters of class to matters of sex, as she wishes to highlight Bone's role as survivor, as well as Bone's "sexual fantasies . . . [as] shaped by the sexual abuse" (179). "Dorothy Allison's Topography of Resistance," an article by Moira P. Baker in the *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, gives yet another insightful view of how Allison's lesbian orientation "provides a locus for opposing the violence visited upon the working poor by an abusive class system . . . [and] affords a site for beginning the process of surviving childhood sexual abuse" (23). Here Baker does not so much elide class and sex as juxtapose the problems caused by both. Others, such as interviewers Carolyn Megan in *The Kenyon Review* and Marilee Strong in the *San Francisco Focus*, present Allison's strong concerns about the issue of class in America.

Such criticism of Allison's, Fowler's, and Gibbons's works, as suggested by the above excerpted examples, verifies that these authors and their works are being examined and accepted in the academic community. Certainly, in the past thirty years, the canon has increasingly opened its borders to works by and about women, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians; therefore, the acceptance of works by these authors is not that unusual by today's canonical standards. Their works, however, also carry within them a characteristic which is still not accepted as a norm in literature. The time has come to break down this remaining barrier in the canon, a barrier which, having within it

parameters of both race and class, is doubly hard to eradicate. Furthermore, it is one-half sacred, for it speaks from the privileged position of the white race, and it is one-half cursed, for it speaks from the lowest possible societal position, commonly referred to as "trash." The barrier to be broken down is that against white trash literature: either literature which portrays the life of a class of people almost totally ignored in American fiction or literature which is the writing of a person self-proclaimed to have a white trash background. All three of the works to be considered herein break through this barrier.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison tells the story of Bone, the illegitimate daughter of a fourteen-year-old teenager. The mother Anney tries hard to provide a good home for Bone and then also for Reese, her daughter of a marriage that ends with the death of the husband. Her next attempt at stability is a second marriage to Glen, a middle-class man who seems the perfect answer for this woman who is scrambling to escape her white trash background. Instead she has picked a man so insecure that he cannot keep a job. He lashes out in anger and frustration at anyone or anything in his way: often that "anyone" is Bone. Bone's narrative recounts the escalating physical and sexual abuse she receives at Glen's hands, culminating in a rape. Her mother Anney, although aware of the abuse, cannot pull herself from the codependent relationship with Glen. Only through the help of others in the family, especially Aunt Raylene, is Bone able not only to survive, but also to have hope for a future.

Connie May Fowler tells the story of Bird in her novel *Before Women Had Wings*. Bird Jackson's white trash background is apparent from the behavior of both her parents.

Bird is the younger daughter of a “wanna-be” country singer who abuses both alcohol and his wife. When he commits suicide, Glory Marie, the mother, moves Bird and her other daughter Phoebe to the property surrounding a small hotel where they can live in a travel trailer in exchange for work. Their poverty is compounded by the lack of a father’s income. Glory Marie, buckling under the economic pressures, increasingly turns to alcohol to solve her problems. In drunken rages she begins to physically abuse both daughters, with the younger Bird receiving the brunt of the attacks. Bird seeks comfort in the arms of a Black woman named Zora, who becomes the means to a new start for all three of the Jackson women.

In *Ellen Foster*, Kaye Gibbons tells the story of a young girl whose sickly mother commits suicide rather than stay in the home with the alcoholic, abusive father. Thus Ellen is left at age ten with a totally irresponsible father whom the grandmother calls “trash.” Ellen learns to pay bills, buy food, and stay out of the way of her father and his drinking buddies. She especially tries to avoid her father who, confusing her with her mother in his drunken stupors, begins to sexually abuse her. From an aunt’s house to a teacher’s house to the grandmother’s house, Ellen is shuffled, not finding a permanent home in any of them. Her own relatives are so verbally and emotionally abusive that Ellen searches for a good home, finding it with a foster family where there is acceptance both for her and for her best friend Starletta, an African American who is shunned by Ellen’s real family.

All three authors, Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons, use the term “white trash” and its accompanying characteristics in their fictional works. Allison and Fowler identify their

backgrounds as “white trash,” while Gibbons identifies her background as “poor white,” a term which often is used interchangeably with the epithet “white trash.” A precedent for using the terms interchangeably is clear in earlier southern work. According to Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s text *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty* (1991), at one and the same time, Caldwell “attacked . . . a social system that exposed them [his poverty stricken characters] to hunger, disease, and persecution,” thus showing the humanity of the “poor white,” and “held them up to moral irony and incongruous humor,” thus exploiting their “white trash” stereotypes (5). The difference, of course, between the earlier Caldwell and these three contemporary southern authors is the distance from their subjects. Caldwell tends to be critical of his characters, even while stressing the need for social reform (Cook 108), but Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons sympathize with their characters. Using the poverty of their backgrounds as settings for works which bear resemblance to their own lives, these three writers have created their own versions of courageous lives that struggle against abuse, both the racial abuse of non-acceptance by the “polite” white world and the very real physical and emotional abuse which often accompanies the poverty of the white trash world. Dorothy Allison’s appropriation of the term “white trash”² has been hailed by Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray in “What Is ‘White Trash’? Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the U. S.” as a “[p]otent symbolic gesture of defiance, a refusal of the shame and invisibility that comes with being poor” (58). The same words could apply to both Fowler’s and Gibbons’s work. By putting words on paper for the world to read, these women have made an

invisible class more visible, thus breaking down one last remaining barrier in the canon and replacing it with a border across which communication can occur.

These women and other contemporary writers like them are not making their defiant gestures in a vacuum. They fit into a much larger phenomenon that is sweeping the country: whiteness studies.³ The proponents of such studies, mostly found in academic departments of sociology and cultural studies, have as a goal the eradication of all racism by creating a definition of the white race based on its distinctive characteristics, rather than on its traditional definition: what it is *not*. The white race, then, would take its place alongside all other ethnic and cultural groups, each defined by distinctive characteristics. When the goal is reached, not only will racism be a thing of the past, but also the literary canon will be rid of its barriers, replacing such exclusive paradigms with all-inclusive borders recognizing distinctiveness without bigotry. Instead of the white race functioning as the norm against which all other races are judged, it will be one of many perspectives from which a writer will view the world.

Because they provide a picture of white people who are not the norm, authors who have already written of white trash are vitally important to whiteness studies. When authors describe the characteristics of white trash, readers can match those characteristics to “others” in writing to prove that some of the characteristics previously associated only with the minority “others” can be seen in white trash. The characteristic is thus universalized, making it part of the white norm and now enlarging that white norm to include “others” in it. For example, characteristics such as laziness, drunkenness, abusiveness, and filthiness are supposedly found only in “others.” Since those

characteristics are found in the white trash characters of literature, as well as the white trash of today's media coverage, they can no longer be said to be outside the realm of possibility of the white race. The white race can no longer define itself as the race which is *not* lazy, *not* drunken, *not* abusive, and *not* filthy; instead it will have to describe characteristics which it indeed does possess. It also will have to admit that some of the negative characteristics it has denied are true reflections of the human condition, universal in their inheritance.

Of course, there are some proponents of white studies who want to look at what whiteness is not; Maurice Berger in *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* (1999) says that "to make it [whiteness] visible so that we can better understand its potency, scholars might well contemplate the value of admitting what it is not" (206). Especially, Berger feels that "[m]any of these studies overestimate what most other white people can learn about their own racism from the white trash experience" (204). Part of his concern lies in the fact that he sees all whites as somewhat privileged, saying that they have "an almost constant dividend" in that their whiteness gives "freer access to a social sphere that is controlled by white people" (168). On the whole, however, whiteness studies appear to examine both the characteristics of whites and the characteristics of nonwhites in order to gain a clear view of racial characteristics. In fact, Richard Dyer in *White* (1997) questions the use of non-whites in the defining of whiteness because it objectifies the nonwhite into a "function of enabling" the white person to understand himself (13). He does caution, however, that "the point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less to make a show of reinstating it,

when, like male power, it doesn't actually need reinstating)" (10). With those words, Dyer shows that he, too, understands and adheres to the caution that Berger espouses.

While sociologists, cultural studies experts, and demographers produce scholarly studies to expose the outdated norm of whiteness, southern fictional writers such as Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons deconstruct whiteness through characters who live in a white subculture. Through their life-likeness, these characters force readers to examine their own social and cultural constructs. Whiteness is not so much exposed as revealed through novels that are peopled with characters who fit all the physical stereotypes of white trash and yet who elicit the readers' empathy. Identification with the characters breaks down the barrier of racial difference between white trash and other whites and between white trash and people of color. Whiteness becomes something to be examined and differentiated, instead of something to be accepted as background. Permeable borders appear in place of those unassailable barriers.

Historically, whites have not been conscious of their "whiteness." According to Ruth Frankenburg in her book *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993), "cultural/racial specificity to white people" is "at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals (5)."⁴ Her statement seems to say that whites are unable to view their own characteristics. Very early in this century, W. E. B. DuBois, the great spokesman for the progressive blacks in America, noted this phenomenon he called "personal whiteness" in "The Souls of White Folk," stating that it was a "very modern thing" among the "world's people" (298). He, unlike Frankenberg, thought that the whites were "painfully conscious of their whiteness"; he spoke of "those

in whose minds the paleness of their bodily skins is fraught with tremendous and eternal significance" (298). In fact, he characterized "white" thinking as follows: "I am white and you are nothing" (299).

Contemporary blacks have also examined whiteness through their "other" lens. Valerie Babb in her study *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998), which traces the lives of early white settlers in this nation, calls white settlers a "disunified polyglot" of slaves and indentured servants who used whiteness as a "unifying device" that diffused "class warfare" (23-24, 41). Of colonial times Babb says that "[t]he ideal of white identity incorporates economic privilege, yet when faced with the specter of a non-white race, it elides class difference in the interest of racial solidarity" (84). When she views the historical aspects of whiteness, she sees that it helped form "a nascent national identity and minimized class warfare" (37). She notes that settlement houses for immigrants were denied to African Americans, while all sorts of white immigrants could "parlay" their skin color "into an asset advancing a transformation into 'authentic' Americanness" (148). Two scholars examining the historical construction of whiteness agree with Babb. David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) states that "in labor-short seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America the work of slaves and that of white servants were virtually interchangeable in most areas" (25). It was in the first sixty-five years of the nineteenth century that "working class 'whiteness'" evolved, according to Roediger (14). Furthermore, he points specifically to the Irish immigrants as those who "won" their whiteness (136). Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*

(1995) attributes the transformation of the darkly colored Irish into the white race to the fact that claiming whiteness opened up positions otherwise not available to the immigrants. Historically, then, Babb is on solid ground with non-African American racial theorists. From her African American standpoint, Babb says that “what the history of whiteness in the United States reveals is that we need to enlarge our conception of what whiteness is” (44), while never considering enlarging her own conception to include white trash who have been rejected by the white majority.

bell hooks is another prominent African American who writes on the subject of whiteness. In her work entitled *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), she, too, fails to make a distinction between dominant whites and white trash, merely stating that all whites “over-value” whiteness and that “central to this process of unlearning white supremacist attitudes and values is the deconstruction of the category ‘whiteness’” (38). Her agenda is not that of “critiquing status quo” but of subverting, offering alternatives, transforming world views, and “making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision,” a paradigm shift (4). hooks looks forward to a time when whiteness will no longer have the ability to “inspire terror,” no longer signify the “right to dominate”; it will become a “benevolent absence” (178).⁵

Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize-winning African American novelist, speaks about whiteness also. In her only book-length critical work, entitled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison views whiteness as something against which “a nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae have been constructed— invented—in the United States” (90). She sees her project as “an effort to avert the

critical gaze from the racial object [the African American] to the racial subject [the white person]; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90). Morrison's work has been labeled the "watershed moment for formal investigations into the specific character of white identity" by recent scholar Kelly L. Thomas (4). Thomas may be right. Because of Morrison's sterling reputation as writer, scholar, and critic, her words will carry more weight than most others'. If she says that "whiteness" must be deconstructed, then many, both black and white, will agree. For those standing outside "whiteness," only the total deconstruction of the term/practice/ideology will do. Such a deconstruction will necessarily also mean a deconstruction of the term/stereotype/reality of white trash—a welcome event for those who suffer under its domination.

Whiteness has been the standard against which all other "Others" have been judged. Frankenborg defines whiteness as "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. . . . [I]t is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look" at themselves, others, and society, and it is "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (1). Matthew Wray and Annalee Newitz in their anthology *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1997) concur with such a definition of whiteness, saying that it "serves as a sort of invisible norm, the unraced center of a racialized world. Whiteness is different from blackness (or any other 'racial-ness') in that it has long held the privileged place of racial normativity" (3). Dyer essentially says the same thing in this powerful indictment: "The colorless multi-coloredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness. . . . Any

instance of white representation is always immediately something more specific [such as English middle-class, Italian-American]" (qtd. in Berger 89). Now, however, whiteness, as a racial category, must carve out its own niche of difference among all the other differences. Examining white trash gives whiteness the ability to do so. Wray and Newitz speak of such illuminating self-examination:

Because white trash is, for whites, the most visible and clearly marked form of whiteness, it can perhaps help to make all whites self-conscious of themselves as a racial and classed group among other such groups, bringing us one step closer to a world without racial division, or, at the very least, a world where racial difference does not mean racial, symbolic, and economic domination. (4)

Wray and Newitz hope that their anthology, which focuses directly on so many facets of the white trash phenomenon, will "serve to undo whiteness as racial supremacy" (4).

John Hartigan, Jr., a contributor to Wray and Newitz's anthology, calls for the same process to occur through objectification of the "natural and unmarked" whiteness to "grasp the core concerns and anxieties that white trash frames" (52). In other words, while Newitz hopes that "'good' whites can see themselves as a racial and classed group" by observing white trash "occupying the position of the 'bad' Other" (136), Hartigan hopes that the objectification of the total category of "bad" whiteness will bring "good" to those who have had to suffer the ignominious label of "white trash."

Frankenberg also engages in this dialogue with her sense that race is a "socially constructed rather than inherently meaningful category, one linked to relations of power

and processes of struggle, and one whose meaning changes over time” (11).

Frankenberg’s very placement of race in the field of social construct indicates that she thinks that changes can be made; the construct can be deconstructed, and the paradigm can shift, echoing bell hooks’s hopes for the end of whiteness. Babb, too, calls for “an awareness of whiteness as an ideology, a system of traditions, practices and beliefs that privilege some over the many” in order for a “multiracial, multiethnic, and multireligious culture” to thrive (168). The calls come from both white and black to end whiteness as a means of dominance and oppression.

An end to such dominance and oppression will also be noted on other fronts as well. Wray and Newitz point out the pervasiveness of the social construct: “[T]here is a growing need for developing our understanding of how the construction of whiteness varies across lines of class, gender, and sexuality and how these constructions vary according to the politics of place and region” (4). Frankenberg, of course, is interested in seeing women freed from the domination of a white patriarchy. She points to the “consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s” as a watershed time after which “accounts of personal experience” were transformed into “politicized and theorized terrains” (7). She notes that “the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity not only their own position but also that of the oppressor/privileged, and indeed the shape of systems as a whole” (8). Frankenberg is convinced that “race shapes women’s lives,” and that both “white people and people of color live racially structured lives” because of the non-examined underlying dominance of whiteness (1). When whiteness is examined,

women's lives will be changed even more, just as they have changed with the emergence of feminist theories since the 1960s.

When whiteness as a tool of the patriarchy is examined, then the image of the white male will change, too. Newitz, citing Fred Pfeil's work *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (1995), calls for a "progressive transformation" of the male image which neither humiliates nor celebrates (151). She points out that "[w]hite guy-ness is not just an immutable, ahistorical category which can or must be destroyed. Rather it requires radical refashioning. Most importantly, white hegemony is not the only source of social injustice; class and gender antagonisms need to be addressed alongside questions of race" (151-152). Mike Hill, in his article "Can Whiteness Speak?", would agree, although perhaps not so sympathetically. He believes that, although "more obviously connected to race and class issues, whiteness sustains itself ultimately on sexual grounds" (157). He therefore agrees with and borrows Phillip Brian Harper's statement in "Race and Racism: A Symposium" in calling for "the wholesale reconsideration of what counts as masculinity in this [white] culture" in order to interrogate "the black/white racial paradigm" (173). When whiteness is no longer the prevailing paradigm, then all the categories which have been defined by it will be transformed. Class, race, gender, sexuality will all be affected by the total deconstruction of the term. Barriers will become borders and communication will flourish among various categories, including new categories that encompass various groups of white people.

Newitz and Wray put the examination of the white trash identity solidly in the middle of the deconstruction of whiteness:

“White trash” identity is one we believe a critical multiculturalism should address in order to further its project of re-examining the relationships between identity and social power. Unlike the “whiteness” of vulgar [essentialist] multiculturalism [where all racism stems from whiteness], the whiteness of “white trash” signals something other than privilege and social power. (“What Is” 57)

As Wray and Newitz declare in the introduction to their anthology, “[W]hite trash is one place multiculturalism might look for a white identity which does not view itself as the norm from which all other races and ethnicities deviate” (5). White trash is a little section of the seemingly monolithic whiteness: to recognize it and its borders is to pose the possibility of other “little sections” of whiteness with their borders. The monolith would disappear; in its place would be a multitude of acceptable “others,” composed perhaps of white ethnic groups, white social groups, white religious groups, and white political groups.

Whiteness studies have emerged as the latest step in the progression which began with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. From that time to this, Americans have become increasingly aware of the diversity of the inhabitants of the American countryside. Within the academy that awareness has been changing the whole shape of the canon as contemporary critics react to the notion that value is not limited to the work of “dead white males,” but to living, breathing human beings of varied “stripes and colors.” Eric

Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations* (1993), a study of African American literature, explains the new value system: “Value, after all, is not solely an aesthetic criterion. To put it another way, value cannot be severed from justice and, therefore, from politics, no matter what anxiety now exists in certain quarters about the ‘politicization’ of literary study” (17). Sundquist observes that some items should be admitted to the canon which are not the best “stylistically” but which render a picture of American culture (19). What Sundquist believes about African American literature, aesthetics, American culture, and the canon can be applied to any previously marginalized group which has now been recognized as candidates for the literary canon: value derives from many sources.

The only problem with Sundquist’s view is that while it values justice and equality, it seems to admit a lower stylistic quality, an admission that the new literature of marginalized or minority groups might not rise to the standards which earlier critics set for the literature of “dead-white-guys.” Such an admission would seem to say that the new canon is different but not, perhaps, as inherently good as the original canon; Sundquist himself appears to fall into the old value system, privileging the standards of “dead white men.”⁶ Can such standards be trusted as objectively sound? Of course they cannot, because they begin from their own particular value system.

“[O]nce a system is set up, once it has been decided what the legitimate objects of study are and what sorts of knowledge are valuable,” says Patrick Colm Hogan in his rather humorously titled study “Mo’ Better Canons,” “those who wish to study other objects . . . and those who have other sorts of knowledge . . . are put at a disadvantage, for their interests and expertise are devalued” (184). The devaluation of which Hogan

speaks, of course, would appear to be that of aesthetic value. “It is only under racist and ethnocentric assumptions,” says Hogan, “that non-Western or non-white or non-male works might be expected generally to be eliminated from curricular considerations on aesthetic grounds” (187). In other words, what appears to be aesthetic devaluation is, instead, a rejection of materials which do not fit the confines of the canon of “dead-white-guys.” He suggests giving “the benefit of the doubt to those who value non-canonical traditions” (189), “those” being the writers and critics of formerly marginalized (and now somewhat begrudgingly accepted) literatures. His comments encourage an enlarging of the boundaries, an acceptance of new borders.

Some critics see this emphasis on acceptance of the marginalized as a moot point. According to David Simpson in his study *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (1995), there has always been a cultural push to accept the marginalized. He says that “[d]espite the rigors of (for instance) modernism and theory, literature has never quite managed to set itself off from the demotic narratives that provide its not-so-binary antagonists” (18). Obviously, Simpson’s concern is postmodern literature, popular literature, or the literature of mass culture, but he, too, sees the connection with various marginalized topics, such as feminist, multiculturalist, and gay-lesbian studies, which he says “have emerged as topics of concern because they are academically inflected formulations of change taking place in and around the academy” (8). He says the “one of the best and most persistently declared ambitions of the academy [is] the effort to reach an audience beyond the ivory tower” (10). Here again rears the ugly head of the monster which is the original canon, metamorphosed into the “ivory tower.” If the

traditional canon continues to be accepted as the norm against which others are judged, the new literatures from marginalized groups might well not be accorded due respect in the academy of the “ivory tower.” The dilemma of normalizing all kinds of literature remains because there are as many different ideas about what constitutes “value” as there are critics and theorists.

A helpful view in normalizing, and, therefore, accepting, all literatures is seen in Kathleen Wheeler’s statement about language in the 1997 study *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-century Women Novelists*: “[L]anguage is not inherently patriarchal; it is only constructed as such in part, and those parts can be disassembled to promote new perspectives. One uses the language of the center to escape its domination, because the language never belonged to the center alone” (321). Granted, Wheeler’s interest centers on the feminists’ notion of value, but her argument applies to any literature that “promotes new perspectives.” Her argument seems to be an answer to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s question in their *No Man’s Land* (1988): “Is it possible, then, that the idea that language is in its essence or nature patriarchal may be a reaction-formation against the linguistic (as well as the biological) primacy of the mother?” (264). Wheeler’s answer dispels the notion of essential or natural patriarchal language in favor of language independent of true ownership, neutralized by the user. Perhaps she can view language as such because her primary assumption is that “concepts and attitudes passed off as natural and factual, biological and true, are mere social constructs, and these constructions can be changed” (319). Just so, the canon, a social construct, can be changed, can be appropriated by others other than the original “owners,” and can be

valued in ways that have not been considered before. Formerly marginalized groups have indeed “disassembled” patriarchal language by using words in ways unknown to “dead white guys” and their champions. The new canon includes works in which language reveals itself to be constructed, in which genres overlap to form new patterns, in which words are placed on a page to reveal truths not readily discernible using the old system. The barriers are disappearing; in their place are permeable borders.

Of course, there will always be naysayers and diehards, and in the academy the skeptics of today’s canon are well-educated, eloquent speakers of their position. John M. Ellis, a highly respected critic of the new canon, offers the following condemnation in *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1997): “The academy has degenerated so much that it in some respects has become a social liability rather than an asset” (216). He blames this degeneration on the changes in the study of literature, which, he says, is now “heavily involved in political and historical matters” (2). Whereas most of the current writers see the climate following the reign of deconstruction in literary criticism as very healthy for new literature, Ellis sees it as just another twist on the rigidity of the old canon. Although race, gender, and class are “just causes,” according to Ellis, they are trivialized by their connection with the language of deconstruction. He notes that “[p]oliticized criticism [of race, gender, class] gives deconstruction an apparent seriousness of purpose, and in return deconstruction makes a rigidly moralistic position seem avant-garde and sophisticated” (10).⁷ Ellis’s words, however, belie his own “just”-ness. Whether for political reasons or for other unspoken, unwritten prejudices, Ellis cannot accept the criticism and, by extension, the literature of

race, gender and class. What he does not say is that deconstruction itself is “trivial” and that criticism of race, gender, and class is “rigidly moralistic.” He would accept “serious purpose” in deconstruction and “avant-garde and sophisticated” position in race, gender, and class literature. His standards are basically those of a Formalist, indicating his own bias: he is a critic who would erect barriers. Because of his narrow standards, his judgments concerning the “degeneration” of today’s literature become suspect.

In *Starting Over: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Critique* (1994), Judith Newton, concerned with the way deconstruction has trivialized literature, voices fears that cross borders from that of feminism to other marginalized groups. She fears that feminists “have sometimes participated in [the] erasure of their own intellectual traditions, have been too ready at times to accept the position of the marginalized ‘other,’ especially when so fashionably presented as in the past few years” (30). Her fear has everything to do with “institutionalization.” Whenever a new idea becomes the prominent idea, it changes from the strength associated with rebellion to the weakness associated with establishment. She sees the position of “Other” becoming just another “other” with no lasting ability to retain its prominence in the literary canon. The many “others” will be shuffled together and “shuffled off” into oblivion while the old, former canon will remain solidly behind. As another postmodern critic Ziauddin Sardar has written in his 1998 study *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*, “The postmodern prominence of the Other becomes a classic irony. Instead of finally doing justice to the marginalized and demeaned, it vaunts the category to prove how unimportant, and ultimately meaningless, is any real identity it could contain” (13).⁸

Fears that the category of “other” will not be able to withstand scrutiny and will collapse under the weightiness of its “otherness” may be justified.

Whether such fears will be realized remains to be seen, but such fears cannot stop the current direction of literary criticism. The ramifications of deconstruction, postmodernism and the ubiquitous category of “otherness” will continue to influence the dialogue concerning today’s canon. One positive view of this continuing dialogue is that of Kathleen Wheeler, whose statement may well become the standard for future canonical inclusion: “Texts are valuable within specific contexts and in different but equally relevant ways” (317). Jay Clayton wholeheartedly agrees with such an assessment, saying that “[e]ach of us participates in multiple canons” that are assembled for various purposes” (150). Clayton calls the phenomenon a “literature without masterpieces,” explaining that “[t]he inability of any writer or style to hold sway is a defining characteristic of the times. . . . It is certainly not the result of some decline in the imaginative energy of the nation’s culture” (148). Such statements as Wheeler’s and Clayton’s recognize the value of “otherness” as an ongoing property of literary texts. Various marginalized groups must not only capitalize on the continuing dialogue and reiterate the value of difference, but must also push for ensuring an enduring place in the literature of tomorrow. They can most easily do this when the academy recognizes the borders of multiple canons instead of the established canon’s barriers which essentially serve, whether consciously or not, to reject any piece of literature which threatens the status quo.

Differences from outside a group always become less threatening to an established system when they are understood. Understanding often leads to acceptance, and in the case of both white trash literature and white trash as a reality in society, such acceptance could mean the establishment of borders to create a space for white trash. A superficial understanding may come from technical definitions found in specialized dictionaries. Mitford Mathews's *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (1951) states that the terms "white trash" and "poor white trash" date from 1833, originating as slaves' "contemptuous reference to white servants." More important to understanding the term—and the reality of white trash—are book-length studies such as *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1997) by Matthew Wray and Annalee Newitz, perhaps the leading scholars today in the study of white trash as a social and historical phenomenon. Wray and Newitz claim that "the emergence of white trash in the context of black slavery and white servitude speaks to the racialized roots of the meaning of the term" (2).

Many scholars are concerned with this issue of the underlying importance of race in understanding "white trash." Laura Provosty and Douglas Donovan, in their University of Virginia web page entitled *White Trash: Transit of an American Icon*, use the same basis for their definition of "white trash" when they say that "social history in the Antebellum and Reconstruction South reveals a class of poor whites whose particular blend of economic inferiority and racial superiority results in an unstable position between the white haves and black have-nots in the regional caste system." To speak of white trash is to speak, necessarily, of race, but it is race in a very precarious position: to

be white is to be above black in the original historical context of the term, but to be trash is to be below those house slaves who had far more than the economically deprived white servants, who had neither property nor money, as did their white brothers, the slaveholders.

In the South, according to Constance Penley, a contributor to Wray and Newitz's book, economic failure is noted for poor white trash because "socially and economically they have sunk so far that they might as well be black. As such, they are seen to have lost all self-respect" (90). Furthermore, when they "flaunt their trashiness," says Penley, they are reminding us of "stark class differences" denied by "anyone trying to maintain a belief in an America whose only class demarcations are the seemingly obvious ones of race" (90). White Americans usually view all white people as different from African Americans; when they begin to see white trash as being different from middle- or upper-class white Americans, then they have to acknowledge the differences in class within their own race. Immediately the reaction is to make sure that white trash are seen as exactly the same as African Americans who are fairly invisible to white people. Wray and Newitz further explore this phenomenon which conflates race and class: "In a country so steeped in the myth of classlessness, in a culture where we are often at a loss to explain or understand poverty, the white trash stereotype serves as a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor. The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority" (1). The use of the term creates a barrier to separate trash from the other classes.

White trash, according to the director of *Pink Flamingos*, self-proclaimed trash guru John Waters, is “the last racist thing you can say and get away with” (Friend 24). Class has become race. It has become race because the term specifies a race within its class perimeters. Wray and Newitz, citing Waters’s epigraph, agree that white trash is a “racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves” (2). Newitz and Wray also point out a salient connection between the use of the term “nigger” and the term “white trash”: “We don’t say things like ‘nigger trash’ precisely because ‘nigger’ often implies poverty to a great extent” (“What Is” 57). In other words, “nigger” or, for that matter, “black” or “African American” are often used as class markers just as much as they are racial markers. Because “white,” on the other hand, does not automatically imply poverty, trash is used with it to refer to the “classed” position of this race, which is, as Newitz and Wray point out, a “dysgenic race.”

Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins in a current anthology called *Race, Class, and Gender* (1998) make very clear that race and class are very closely related.⁹ After pointing out that only in America is race “construed as a biological function,” as opposed to in Great Britain where it is “typically understood as a political construct,” Anderson and Collins declare that “increasingly class differentiation within racial-ethnic groups reminds us that race is not a monolithic category” (4). At the turn of the last century, two African Americans, Charles W. Chesnutt and W. E. B. DuBois, were arguing the same thing: “[R]ace’ was itself a metaphysical notion constructed of cultural, not biological inheritances” (Sundquist 228). One hundred years later scholars still make the same point to a country that is still basically racist. The only difference is

that since such a politically and socially constructed concept changes with time, racism as a concept does also. Anderson and Collins define racism as “a system of power and privilege . . . manifested in people’s attitudes but . . . rooted in society’s structure and . . . reflected in the different advantages and disadvantages that groups experience based on their location in this societal system” (71). According to their definition, white trash experiences the problems of racism because of its “location” within the system. “Dominant ideology renders the working class [of which white trash would be part] invisible,” say Anderson and Collins (81). For our time the politically correct “race” to ignore is the one that can so easily be rendered invisible: out of sight, out of mind—white trash.

Historically, people have tried to connect white trash with the African American race, citing mixed heritages. In her compilation *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919* (1988), Nicole H. Rafter notes that the earliest social scientists, who lived in a time when “assumptions about native white superiority were both widespread and unself-consciously expressed” (8), were quick to note the “inferiority of foreigners and dark-skinned people” while asserting that most of the “clans” studied included a mixed heritage including Indian, Negro, and Gypsy (7). Likewise Gael Sweeney, in her article entitled “The King of White Trash Culture,” notes the historical presence of a “Tri-Racial Isolate Group” of White, Black, and Indian which whites shunned because of a fear of miscegenation and contamination (253). Allan Berube, in “Sunset Trailer Park,” describing the differences between the children who lived in houses and those who lived in the trailer parks in the near American past, relates that “white kids from the houses,

trying to position themselves as better than us trailer park kids, experimented with ways to challenge us as not ‘white enough’ or even not ‘really white’” (32).

More commonly, though, mere physical proximity to African Americans has caused the connections to be made between the class “white trash” and the race “black.” John Hartigan, Jr., writing of the influx of hillbillies [white trash] into certain neighborhoods in Detroit, Michigan, says that “[s]outhern migrants . . . shared regional commonalities in speech and lifestyles” with blacks in the area. “White Detroiters were appalled, too, at the way these character traits blurred a rapidly collapsing social line between black and white racial orders” (42). Similarly, Penley says that when white trash try to show themselves to be different from blacks it is “hard going because the differences between the everyday lives of poor blacks and poor whites in the rural South are few and ephemeral” (90). Sweeney adds her support to this view: “Poor Blacks and White Trash are linked together in an almost symbiotic relationship of enmity and necessity while attempting to survive in the poorest states in the nation” (251). All of these statements appear to link the two races as one class, not because of any inherent inferiority, but because of shared homelands. Just as Michael J. Weiss has noted in his demographic text *The Clustering of America* (1988), people living in the same areas are doing so because of financial reasons, and, consequently, they share lifestyles and preferences as well.¹⁰ Class, therefore, is much more important in these comparisons than race, but, because of the nature of white privilege in America, “the race issue,” according to David H. Tabb, “has often served as a symbolic equivalent of a class issue” (108).

The problem for white Americans who tend to conflate race and class, of course, is that once combining the two groups of people, African Americans and white trash, the characteristics of the two groups are inseparable. Since all characteristics are “shared,” no certain characteristics can be used to prove the inferiority of blacks. Sweeney describes this quandary for white Americans with the following example: white trash are “acting like Blacks” by being “lazy, shiftless, no-account, diseased, ignorant, degenerate.” She says such behaviors “reveal the lie of racism: that the so-called inferiority of Blacks is embedded racially” (252). If whites are exactly the same as the blacks, then such behaviors are inferior, not because of race, but because of some other commonality between the two groups.

The white privileged tend to look at all non-Western peoples, most of whom are not white, as “under-civilized,” according to Newitz (“White” 134). Citing Marianna Torgornick’s book *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (1990), Newitz says that “one way racial difference gets talked about is a kind of temporal discrepancy, where white Westerners exist in ‘the present’ and non-whites are living in a more savage, natural, and authentic past” (134). Then, “[l]ower class whites get racialized and demeaned, because they fit into the primitive/civilized binary as primitives” along with the nonwhite, non-Western groups of people (134). The situation in Detroit’s working-class neighborhoods, according to Hartigan, fits such an image: white trash in Detroit are more like blacks than like other whites. He explains that “[w]hile white trash emphasizes a certain sense of class threat and contempt, it does so in a situation where the once emphatic cultural boundary between whites and blacks become unstable” (47). Other

white workers in the neighborhood are “interested in asserting a sense of class solidarity” (49), yet they do not feel a sense of unity with the new white trash; they only fear that their middle-class lifestyles will be jeopardized by white trash who seem much more like blacks than like themselves. In such structures, according to Hartigan, “white trash designates ruptures of conventions that maintain whiteness as an unmarked normative identity” (46). If white trash individuals share characteristics of blacks, whether those characteristics be “degrading” or “primitive,” they no longer fit the norm of white, thus becoming a distinct “Other.”

The “Other” has been a term much used in the literature of multiculturalism, designating those people who do not fit the Western patriarchal paradigm: the white race and, more specifically, the white male. To name part of the white race as an “other,” therefore, has far-reaching and quite radical consequences. On the one hand, to do nothing but shun white trash, either in its reality as “poor plain white folk” or in its stereotype as “trashy, violent, irresponsible indigent,” is to do exactly what has been done for the last one hundred and fifty years: to ignore white trash and to deny them access to middle-class American privileges. With such action, the controlling segment of dominant, wealthy whites, for all practical purposes, has done exactly what so many critics have noted: racialized white trash, making them one and the same with the other “Other,” black folk. On the other hand, to begin to recognize the “otherness” of white trash as something specific in itself is to begin to realize the “otherness” of all whiteness. As Newitz and Wray succinctly put the case: “White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside of whiteness, becoming the difference within the white Other which inhabits the

core of whiteness" ("What Is" 58). Only now are dominant whites being forced to accept the growing multiculturalism within America; never before have they had to consider the parameters and features of whiteness.

Unfortunately, it is the dominant white race, not multicultural groups, which is recognizing the importance of white trash. Since "difference" is now politically correct, it behooves the white population to find ways to be "different," to be another "other." Appropriation of white trash symbols, foods, clothing, cars, language, or music is the ticket to acceptance as an "other." Mass media has popularized white trash images on television, especially through the FOX network, which, according to Tad Friend, is "virtually a white trash network" (24). Friend sees the attitude as a covetousness on the part of the well-to-do of "what they perceive as the spontaneous authenticity of the poor" who appear to be freer and to lack worries (24). These "slumming well-to-do believe that by affecting trash poses," says Friend, "they are tapping into authentic despair and alienation" (28). Friend is alarmed by the "exponential spread in stereotypically white-trash behavior, whether exhibited by those in the underclass [which he says is a "rapidly growing group"] or by figures like Roseanne Arnold and Bill Clinton" (24).

In yet another bizarre twist to the examination and appropriation of the white trash life, talk show hosts such as Howard Stern use "trashiness" to advance their own agendas. Penley notes that Stern "needs all the trailer trashness he can muster to cut through the false decorum of all that unexamined fury [of the white male losing his privilege]" (103). Newitz adds yet another dimension of mass media's appropriation of the white trash image. Through violent "cop" films and television shows, there is a

“growing familiarity with—if not acceptance of—lower-class whiteness as a racially marked and male Other” which can allow whites who are not trash to seem to be “innocent of racially marked whiteness and its attendant brutality” (138). In fact, since many of the “cop” films show white-on-white brutality, white observers can displace their interracial guilt into intraracial hatred, using, according to Newitz, “racial self-punishment and humiliation” instead of true penitence for the brutality of white domination (139-140). She explains the attitude with these words: “By admitting their complicity in the savagery of their ‘inferiors,’ whites can convert their hatred of the other into a hatred of themselves. Directing racism and classism at themselves, whites appear free of both while at the same time clinging to them fiercely as a basic component of their identity” (144). If Newitz is correct in her judgment, what could be a deconstruction of the brutal images of whiteness has become instead another vindication of the brutality.

Provosty and Donovan worry about yet another aspect of the appropriation of white trash standards by middle-and upper-class whites: “America freely takes the bits and pieces of the cultural stereotype it desires, restores them to a level of social acceptability and then uses this newer, popular version to distinguish itself from the undesirability of the original possessors” (4). Using the example of the appropriation of blue jeans by the upper class with its updated designer versions, they note that “as these poorer whites attempt to imitate the cultural standards of the upper classes . . . as they attempt through this economically-determined materialism to connect themselves to the classes above, their cheap copies and substitutions only further steep them in the ‘white trash’ stereotype” (4). The appropriate item or style will always be adapted just enough

to create a difference from the original so that poor whites can do nothing but fail when they try to imitate the new fashion. Provosty and Donovan further castigate the appropriation of such white trash symbols because of the fickleness involved:

[S]uch a freedom with this subversive cultural stereotype allows its operator to either appropriate and attach its virtues to himself or to belittle its moral and cultural deficiencies as a means of asserting his own moral and cultural superiority. . . . America . . . rips the white trash stereotype out of its regional and economic context, and, depending on the national sentiment of the time, counts it among her ideals or her great shames. (4)

The picture Provosty and Donovan portray is another example of how whiteness fails to be deconstructed because it protects itself by appropriating and then “othering” imitations of the appropriations.

The problem, according to Newitz and Wray, is the way the middle-class interprets poverty “as a consumer choice, rather than an economic condition of scarcity and deprivation.” The middle-class thinks about class differences “in terms of images [like those sold on television or in film] rather than material realities” (“What Is” 67). The reality, then, say Wray and Newitz, is that “[i]f we consider that the popularity of the term white trash is associated mainly with stereotypical representations of low-class, ill-mannered white folks, we might be tempted to say that such ‘culture’ is a displaced method of talking about real impoverished whites” (7). Displacement, of course, allows objectification without engagement; the only objectification that will help white trash is

the objectification of all of whiteness, thus necessarily engaging those of the middle- and upper-classes.

Another form of displacement which has kept white trash literature from being taken seriously is its identification with the old South. As long as white trash can be dismissed as a particular “other,” it can be ignored. Of course, the term “white trash,” having originated in a southern setting, is materially linked to the South in such a way that readers often imagine a southern setting for any poor white depiction. While Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons share a common southern background, white trash literature can be found in writings from other geographical regions. As barriers to “otherness” have been attacked, writers across the country have begun to write of their own poor rural or working-class roots. For example, authors such as Carolyn Chute of Maine and E. Annie Proulx of New Jersey write realistic stories of poor white characters who had never been considered fictional material before.

In one sense, associating white trash literature with the South is quite useful. The general perception is that the New South resonates with issues of interest to all Americans. According to Fred Hobson in *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (1983), “[T]he literature that explores and explains the American South will continue [because] the Southern experience is now more than ever not only the South’s but the nation’s” (16). Hobson is referring to the phenomenon of the South as an encapsulated miniature of the country as a whole: as goes the South, so goes the nation.

Hodding Carter III in a *Time* magazine article entitled “The End of the South” bemoans this new phenomenon, saying that the “South as South, a living ever

regenerating mythic land of distinctive personality, is no more. At most, it is an artifact lovingly preserved in museums of culture and the shops of tourist commerce precisely because it is so hard to find in the vital centers of the region's daily life" (82). In *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991), however, Hobson, although he does acknowledge that southern authors after the 1970s have had a "relative lack of southern self-consciousness" (6), is pleased with the new southern fiction which he calls "superior . . . optimistic . . . [and] forward looking" (7). In fact, Hobson says that there are "significant numbers of young southern writers one could claim—with truth, integrity, and no sectional bias—as among the nation's finest" (*Postmodern* 73).¹¹ Hobson's assessment of contemporary southern writers adds validity to the study of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons, none of whom published before 1984.

Hobson's comments indicate that the connection between the good writer and the unself-conscious writer is strong. An unself-conscious writer has a certain quality that Donald Davidson identified as the "autochthonous ideal" in 1926¹²: The autochthonous ideal is "a condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with his social and cultural environment, was nearly *unconscious* of it as a 'special' environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain" (Hobson 80). This social and cultural environment was more often than not humble, according to Hobson, and these new writers of the "humble backgrounds" felt no need to "identify with the gentry," a characteristic Hobson attributes to earlier "humble" folks such as William Faulkner and Katherine Ann Porter. Hobson describes these new southern writers as those "whose family had little past to hold on to, little history in

which ancestors had played important parts, little reason to live dramatically, little high culture to protect" (*Postmodern* 22). What makes contemporary southern writers so important, says Hobson, is that they accept rather than invent their worlds, they are not given to fantasy and they do not, in their fiction, "question the whole assumed relationship between narrator and narrative" or "the nature of fiction itself" (*Postmodern* 9). This world that southern contemporary authors accept is the world of the poor and the working-class, about which authors such as Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Ann Phillips, and Richard Ford, according to Hobson, write "approvingly" (*Postmodern* 21).

"Approvingly": that word says much about the stance of new southern writers and their topic. Class—lower class, working class, white trash—has become an approved topic in the literature of today's South, the literature that speaks for the country. Hobson calls class the "next enlivening issue" for consideration (*Postmodern* 20); Joseph Flora and Robert Bain, in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South* (1993), call it one of the "perspectives long silent in Southern fiction" (5). Nancy Stone and Robert Waters Gray, in their preface to *White Trash* (1976), their anthology of contemporary Southern poets, call their collected poets a "much neglected group" with an "authentic kind of writing" (xiii-xiv). James H. Justus in his foreword to *Southern Writers at Century's End* (1997), states that "contemporary Southern fiction is frankly engaged with . . . the struggle of the poor and marginal working class to wrest some meaning out of their lives beyond survival itself" (xii).

Frank engagement with the struggles of the poor is lacking in many of the following contemporary nonfiction white trash texts: *White Trash Cooking* (1986) by

Ernest Mills Mickler, *Red Lobster, White Trash, Blue Lagoon* (1988) by journalist Joe Queenan, and *You Might be a Redneck If* (1989) and *Red Ain't Dead* (1991) by Jeff Foxworthy. “Tongue-in-cheek” describes the attitude of these authors to their subject matter. Such an attitude is a concern for Jillian Sandell, contributor to the Wray-Newitz anthology, who says that a story from the category “white trash” “only becomes tellable as a lie, joke, or dirty secret” (212). She reiterates David Reynold’s words that “while the white trash character is deeply engrained in the American literary consciousness, it is a character frequently made accessible either through the trope of ‘the grotesque’ and/or through humor” (212). Sandell gives a reason for this limited view of “white trash”: “In a culture that promotes storytelling and the confessional narrative to almost hyperbolic proportions, the fact that stories about impoverished whites have been virtually *untellable* suggests a profound collective anxiety about what such narratives might reveal” (Sandell’s emphasis 213). In a new text entitled *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (1999), however, Fred Hobson reviews several confessional and conversion narratives that cover both racial and class issues of a cross section of twentieth century white southerners. Although the main portion of the text retells the struggles that these white southerners had overcoming racial prejudices, his last chapter points to the intersection of race and class. He reiterates that the lower class whites’ recollection of their treatment of African Americans was “less reprehensible” and “far more *egalitarian*” than that of the “more privileged white southerners” (137). Recounting C. P. Ellis’s story, which was first told in Studs Terkel’s *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, Hobson gives Ellis’s reason for joining a group such as the Ku Klux

Klan: wanting to belong to something, to be part of something. Ellis finally realizes that what he believes in is the “bond of poor people, black and white” (147). Hobson’s book of conversion narratives seems to point to the fact that southerners of the white lower class (white trash) are finally able to speak honestly of relationships that they have had with African Americans because they share the bond of poverty.

Fortunately, other serious scholars of non-fiction, such as Rafter, in her historical eugenics study, and Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, in their cultural studies about white trash, are also approaching the subject with honesty, depth, and sympathy. What remains is to identify fictional writers who also cover the topic of “white trash” with that same honesty, depth, and sympathy. As Fred Hobson and others suggest, several authors qualify, including Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford, Fred Chappell, Reynolds Price, Clyde Edgerton. Why then should this study focus on Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons? Besides the fact that they, too, approach the subject of “white trash” with honesty, depth, and sympathy, they share the narrative point of view of the young girl, the theme of abuse, and the use of the marginalized “other” in their writings. Their use of the “other” is unique because the white trash element represents the persons who accept the challenge to become “saviors” to the abused. These “saviors” could themselves be rescued, being “others,” but instead they take on the role of rescuers.

Chapter one of this study will survey *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Before Women Had Wings*, and *Ellen Foster* for those general stereotypical markers of white trash; chapter two will examine the lives of the young narrators; chapter three will expose the

abuse which brings the narrators to new levels of experience from their innocence; and chapter four will reveal the importance of “others” as rescuers. A final chapter will look forward to other contemporary novels which break barriers and erect crossing borders. This study, then, by examining the three works closely, will demonstrate why Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Connie May Fowler’s *Before Women Had Wings*, and Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*, are so important in the expanding canon, both for their political and social qualities and for their “formal” literary worth. In addition, these works indicate the importance of imaginative fiction in the further development of whiteness studies. Through these works and others like them, real social barriers can be broken down and replaced by borders which will provide access to the canon for all the culturally diverse writers in America.

Notes

1. Jay Clayton's book-length study is a thorough examination of the roots of contemporary theories and their impact on the writers of today.
2. Dorothy Allison says of the label white trash: "I wanted to have that reference there. It took me a long time to be proud of being trash, and to be a kind of trash that confronts the label. . . . [M]y family is consummate trash. . . . And to say that there is something good and valuable in that heritage is an act of rebellion, and almost revolutionary" (qtd. in Brandt's "Dorothy Allison: Telling Tales, Telling Truths" from an interview conducted January 10, 1990, and previously published as "Trash and Proud of It: Writer Dorothy Allison Stays True to Her Roots" in the *Advocate*, March 13, 1990).
3. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (1997), edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, is probably the most thorough examination of this new area of scholarly research. Delgado and Stefancic have gathered 114 different essays/excerpts in eleven categories in order to present diverse opinions about whiteness studies and diverse approaches to solving the problems inherent in a nation which has yet to face its racism directly.
4. Frankenberg's 1993 text is an excellent case study of women's perceptions of themselves and others. It deals with the interaction of white women and women of color in the United States.

5. bell hooks praises the use of "Otherness" within the literary world: "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. . . . [I]t is a contemporary revival of interest in the 'primitive,' with a distinctly postmodern slant" (21-22). hooks's position is optimistic, much like that of Eric J. Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993) or Lawrence W. Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988). Sundquist believes that American literature has always been "both a single tradition of many parts *and* a series of winding, sometimes parallel traditions that have perforce been built in good part from their inherent conflicts" (18). If Sundquist is to be believed, there have always been "others" that have merely heightened the quality of all of American literature. Levine sees the past as a time of "political and philosophical conceits" that "have erected prefabricated and stereotyped categories that transform complexity into banality" and the present as a "reaction" to these conceits (255-256). His words, too, seem to give the nod to the "otherness" which has always existed but which until now has been rendered banal by prefabricated, stereotyped categories. In *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-century Women Novelists* (1997), Kathleen Wheeler agrees with these assessments about the historicity and contemporaneity of "otherness":

"Both post-structuralist theory and international English literatures show that 'literary' traits are always applied in politicized and partial ways, and not objectively, as early critics pretended. . . . Texts can be valued and even evaluated, but never in an objective, purely literary realm. Texts are valuable within specific contexts and in different but equally relevant ways." (317)

6. True American culture is the topic of Lawrence W. Levine's 1988

Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America in which he delineates two kinds of people who could probably be matched to formalists and the newer theorists of the marginalized:

Real debate . . . [is] between those on one side who "know" what culture is and what it is not, who have a map of its fixed perimeters and a profile of the identity of its creators and its followers, who perceive culture to be something finite and fragile, which needs to be conserved and protected from the incessant Philistinism that threatens it, and those on the other side who, possessing no map and little liking for fixed and unmovable fences and boundaries, believe that worthy enduring culture is not the possession of any single group or genre or period, who conceive of culture as neither finite nor fixed but dynamic and expansive, and who remain unconvinced that the moment an expressive form becomes

accessible to large numbers of people it loses the aesthetic and intellectual criteria necessary to classify it as culture. (255)

Levine is speaking more generally of culture than of literature, but the parallels seem fairly obvious: formalists were keepers of a rigid canon that was exclusive, both in regard to its members (creators) and in regard to its audience (followers), whereas theorists of the marginalized group (no single group or genre or period) actually encourage publication and acceptance (accessibility), both for the authors (creators) and for the audience (followers). For Levine, the “defining and redefining of the contours of culture,” by understanding that it is “not finite nor fixed but dynamic and expansive,” is extremely important because culture does not deal with “intellectual abstractions,” but with “lives and minds” who deserve “an open search for and a careful understanding of what culture has been in our past and can become in our future” (256).

7. Also, Ellis attributes the same reductive attitude to the new theorists and formalists alike: the new literature professors “view the very idea of a canon of great works as an elitist notion and even question whether there should be a distinction between literature and other kinds of writing; that, too, is elitism” (8). He worries, too, that the new theorists have such specific concerns that there is no general critical reflection, just one “definite theory” that is the “one indispensable tool of a critic” (9).
8. Sardar’s point is well-taken: to celebrate “the Other” only as “other” becomes a cause, but such celebration does nothing to obliterate the “Otherness” nor to allow

for the “urge of every culture to be true to its Self, to be self-confirming and self-propagating” (291). What Sardar says of non-Western cultures is also surely true of marginalized groups within Western culture.

9. Anderson and Collins’s work is an excellent sociological study of American society today. The book is a college text with instructor’s manual.
10. Weiss’s text, although not labeling any one cluster as “white trash,” uses characteristic stereotypes identified with white trash in two or three demographic clusters. Weiss’s work gives an interesting perspective to the confluence of geography, economics, and ethnic background.
11. Two of Hobson’s books also deal with the importance of the African American in the contemporary South. *Tell about the South: A Rage to Explain* (1983) ends with a call for the resolution of racial issues, while *The Postmodern World* (1991) hypothesizes that the rural southerner who has lived longest on the land, thus having the most resources and memories for writing about it, is the African American.
12. The original article by Donald Davidson, entitled “The Artist as Southerner,” was printed in *The Saturday Review*, May 15, 1926: 782. Apparently the good southern artists of our day are not much different from those of Davidson’s day: they will not be driven to interpret or to explain, but to tell the story, to paint the picture.

Chapter 1: Who Wants to Live in a Trailer?

Everyone knows somebody who's white trash . . . but nobody thinks they are.

(Patrick, frontispiece)

Roseanne, Madonna, Courtney Love, Brett Butler, Tonya Harding, Howard Stern, Jeff Foxworthy, John Wayne Bobbitt, President Bill Clinton—all have been called white trash by various critics, detractors, or admirers. Some of them would acknowledge the title; others would deny it. Their own attitudes toward the label really have nothing to do with its being applied to them: white trash is a label given, not earned or claimed. They happen to be celebrities whose names and actions are well-known; most who are called white trash are the “little people” of America, people who live in various parts of the country, who work—or do not work—at various jobs, who dress in various ways, who speak with various accents, who hold various political and religious beliefs, but who are united by the very fact that others have attached the label “white trash” to them. They probably do not see themselves as white trash, but they probably recognize “white trash” traits in others.

Because white trash is a label, as journalist Tad Friend says, “ever . . . in the eyes of the beholder” (26), defining the term is difficult: there are as many definitions as there are users of the term. Friend, using lists garnered from demographer Michael J. Weiss, compiles “markers”: “artificial grass, velvet paintings, double-wide trailers adjoined as a sign of status, fish sticks, Spam, muscle cars, John Deere caps, sideburns, collections of dolls or Hummelware, pink flamingos in the front yard, painted tires that hold flowers, and people who like Liberace or Elvis” (27). And then he adds a fashion statement list: “candy apple lipstick, chipped cherry-red nail polish, fishnet stockings, rhinestone

earrings, dime store barrettes" (24). Most people in a casual conversation can add their own lists of characteristics: junk in the yard, cars on cement blocks, ragged, mismatched clothing, distasteful make-up, snotty noses.

Such markers only describe objects which might figure large in some people's environments; however, a far more distinctive and dangerous kind of marker appeared in studies conducted by the first American social scientists. Nicole H. Rafter, in her compilation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century eugenic studies, says that "[t]hese studies identified tribes whose inferior heredity was considered the source of alcoholism, crime, feeble-mindedness, harlotry, hyperactivity, laziness, loquacity, poverty, and a host of other ills" (1). From the studies, according to Rafter, came the quintessential white trash image: "the degenerate hillbilly family, dwelling in filthy shacks and spawning endless generations of paupers, criminals, and imbeciles" (2). The problem with the studies, and, therefore, with the image proffered, is that those early social scientists, so bent on carving out a niche for themselves as part of the new professional middle class, "tinkered" with the evidence, "habitually conflat[ing] value judgments with evidence" (Rafter 23). Rafter condemns their findings, saying that they targeted the rural poor who had been self-reliant and untouched by the social programs of the government until that time. She squarely points the finger at these new middle-class professionals, saying that by engaging "in an almost religious crusade for class preservation and aggrandizement," they created "documents that, through a process of accretion, fabricated a mythology" (17, 30). That mythology, of course, is the mythology

that today carries the name “white trash” with its accompanying baggage: slovenliness, laziness, violence, incest, promiscuity, alcoholism, stupidity.

As late as the 1960s, according to Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle-Class* (1989), some social scientists still blamed poverty on mental illness (50). Neither Rafter’s compilation nor Ehrenreich’s study specifies “white trash” as the mentally ill, but, through extrapolation from poverty to white trash, the label applies. Rafter mentions current interests in sociobiology, “heritability” of intelligence, and genetic engineering as three modern-day examples of eugenics mentality (31). One of the foremost proponents of such “science” is Charles Murray, who not only wrote *The Bell Curve* (1994) in collaboration with Richard Herrnstein, but also *Losing Ground* (1984), in which he defines one segment of poor Americans as “‘trash’—not just because they are without money, but also because they are uncouth and generally unpleasant company.” These people are “bums,” “no good,” and “consigned to the lowest circle of status” because they are not “responsible for taking care of themselves and their families” (180). Like the authors of the early eugenics studies, Murray conflates value judgments with evidence.

Popular writers add their rather critical definitions of white trash. Ernest Mickler’s *White Trash Cooking* (1986) contains a method for dividing white trash populations: “The first thing you’ve got to understand is that there’s white trash and there’s White Trash. Manners and pride separate the two. Common white trash has very little in the way of pride, and no manners to speak of, and hardly any respect for anyone or anything” (1). Friend describes Mickler’s first category with these words: “True trash

is unsocialized and violent. . . . True trash takes what it needs and claims it's what it deserves. True trash is one long boiling tantrum, primed to explode. True trash is the terrible twos forever" (30). Provosty and Donovan agree with Mickler's binary division by historically tracing the two elements: "white trash," in Mickler's terms, is also "white trash" in Provosty and Donovan's, while Mickler's capitalized "White Trash" with manners is Provosty and Donovan's "plain-folks" (2). "Plain-folks" are poor whites with "integrity, independence, self-respect, courage, love of freedom, love of fellow man and love of God" (2). Provosty and Donovan argue that America has "received" the image of common white trash from various authors and chroniclers of the South, such as H. L. Mencken's coverage of the Scopes Trial in Tennessee in 1925, William Faulkner's and Erskine Caldwell's various fictional depictions of poor white trash, and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1936). The white trash character can be described as a "whiskey-drinking, slow-talking, tobacco-chewing, wife-beating, cousin-marrying, bible-beating hillbilly" (4). On the other hand, Provosty and Donovan say that through literature America also "encounters the image of the plain-folk: the simple, honest, industrious, religious, loyal, patriotic, rustic good-ole-boy" (4). Such a dichotomy only confirms that some believe there is a class of people who are indeed "trashy," as opposed to those who are merely poor.

Thomas Sutpen, the hero-villain of Faulkner's masterpiece *Absalom, Absalom* (1933), comes from a quintessential white trash background. In one part of the narration, Sutpen describes to Quentin Compson's grandfather his childhood home in the mountains of Virginia as one of several "log cabins boiling with children" (179). No one had more

than one room nor more than one door to a cabin. He shows the prevailing attitude about possessions in these words: “[E]veryone had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for power or whiskey”(179). This laissez faire attitude, seemingly so typical of white trash, is described by Sutpen as innocence: an innocence based on true equality of economic conditions. Since all the inhabitants of the area are poor, they have no reason to be envious. When Sutpen’s father moves the family to the Tidewater area, however, Sutpen notices the differences between his family and others, both black and white. On the plantation where they sharecrop he sees slaves “who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to” (184). He notes that the plantation owner not only lives in a fine white brass-decorated mansion, but also has shoes for the summertime. For the first time comparisons based on possessions, wealth, and position are pushed upon him.

When he is refused admittance at the front door of the mansion where he has gone to deliver a message, he realizes how the owner has viewed his family:

[C]attle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cut-down and patched and made-over garments bought on exorbitant credit because they were white people, from stores where niggers were given the garments free. (190)

Sutpen vows from that moment to become an owner, to wear shoes in summer, and to rule the “niggers.” Faulkner’s whole book hinges on the motivation of one who has been labeled “white trash” and who refuses to accept that label. For the rest of his life, however, Sutpen remains an outsider in his chosen home of Jefferson, not ever quite correctly speaking, gesturing, or behaving as the true Mississippi gentility would have him do. His whole life is a struggle to execute what he calls his “design,” his creation of a non-white- trash Sutpen family.

Thomas Sutpen, however faithfully drawn he is, remains a historical, albeit fictional, character. The difference between what Faulkner (and other writers like him who portrayed white trash or poor whites in modernist literature) did and what new authors are doing is distance. Readers can distance themselves from the Sutpen of Civil War days, perhaps imagining his kind of character to have disappeared with the turn of the twentieth century. Distance can be gained by remembering that O’Connor’s and McCullers’s mid-twentieth-century depictions are so grotesque as to be unusual in today’s world. Nothing can distance readers from the contemporary characters of Allison, Fowler or Gibbons. These are characters who resonate with today’s culture. Their language, their dress, their actions, and their attitudes are to be found not only in prime time television, but also in the local news show; not only in the city one hundred miles away, but also in the house three blocks away. Allison voices her goal to bring these poor whites to the attention of the country:

I have wanted our lives taken seriously and represented fully—with power and honesty and sympathy—to be hated or loved, or to terrify and obsess,

but to be real. . . . That our true stories may be violent, distasteful, painful, stunning, and haunting, I do not doubt. But our true stories will be literature. No one will be able to forget them, and though it will not always make us happy to read of the dark and dangerous places in our lives, the impact of our reality is the best we can ask for our work.

(“Exile’s” 15)

To have an impact, to make their characters real, to acquaint fellow Americans with their poorer white neighbors are goals which Allison, Fowler and Gibbons seem to share. In creating such realistic pictures, they negate Marilee Strong’s description of the traditional place of white trash in art and literature: “Their existence is all but invisible—or savagely caricatured” (1). Allison understands this invisibility when she says, “We had been encouraged to destroy ourselves, made invisible because we did not fit the myths of the noble poor generated by the middle class” (*Skin* 17). Perhaps that is why Allison, as Farar Elliott says, makes her characters so “alive and gut-wrenchingly real” (12-13); she wants to make sure they are visible, truthful, real. All three of these authors strive to give a truthful depiction which will both enlighten society and force it to be “ashamed of itself” (Allison qtd. in Strong 5). But all three authors also tend to show us something like Provosty and Donovan’s two variations: white trash and plain-folks. Their works contain both harsh stereotypes and warm human beings who deserve our sympathy.

Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like

she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. No-good, lazy, shiftless.

(Bastard Out of Carolina 3)

The first reference to trash in Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* sets both definition and condition. To be trash—"no-good, lazy, shiftless"—is to be called "trash" by someone with authority and stature. Thus, from the beginning of this narrative told by Bone Boatwright, bastard daughter of this mama who is so concerned over the "illegitimate" stamped on the child's birth certificate, readers are made aware of the "called" status of trash: it is not an inherent characteristic; it is established by the rest of society to mark a portion as different from themselves. Because the label is given, not earned, Anney, Bone's mother, is constantly fighting it by making her children uphold strict standards of conduct. At one point, when Bone wants a pair of "classy little-girl patent-leathers with the short pointy heels" and Mama denigrates the arrogance of such a choice, Bone thinks to herself, "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" (66).

Bone clearly sees the difference between "being" and "acting": she is not trash, but she would like to behave like trash occasionally. On the other hand, after their encounter with bill collectors, although Anney maintains that they are not bad people, just people who "can't always pay when people want," Bone and Reese, her younger sister, do not believe their mother. When Bone narrates, "We knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were," the underlying

premise is that not only do neighbors call the family "trash," but also the girls accept this label (82).

Even the girls' new stepfather, Daddy Glen, accepts and uses the label. When Glen Waddell decides to marry Anney, he thinks that he will "marry the whole Boatwright legend," a legend filled with stereotypical white trash images (13). In the Greenville, South Carolina, community, the Boatwright men are known for their drinking, fighting, stealing, and cursing; their women, for standing by their men, bearing children outside wedlock, and dipping snuff. In addition, these men and women are known by the common blue collar jobs they hold: mill workers, gas station attendants, waitresses, truck drivers, grocery clerks, and dairy delivery men. These jobs contrast starkly with those of most of Glen's family: his father owns the dairy, one brother is an attorney, the other is a dentist, and the mother stays home. Glen, the "black sheep" of the family (12), longs for the excitement he can create by marrying Anney to "shame his daddy and shock his brothers" (13). Meanwhile Anney has dreams that marriage to Glen will elevate her daughters and her from the white trash "legend" of her family to the middle-class status of his. Unfortunately, Glen has no need to be other than himself to shame and shock his family. He, the youngest son, according to Bone's Uncle Earle, "didn't seem like he would amount to much, driving a truck for the furnace works" (10), and possessing a temper which "made people very careful how they talked about him" (55). Even without the legendary background, Glen fits the stereotypical white trash male figure: a man who cannot earn much money, a man who has an evil temper, a man who is not worth much.

When Anney meets Glen Waddell, she sees him as a potential husband, but she also sees him as a home provider. She thinks to herself, “I need a husband. . . . Yeah, and a car and a home and a hundred thousand dollars” (13). A home is important to her because the Boatwrights are a family of renters. All of Bone’s aunts and uncles live in rental properties where they never “stay any one place long” (79). Bone recalls the “baked dirt and scattered rocks” and the “tin roof” of Aunt Alma’s house while describing her own rented house as a “tiny duplex” (18, 21). When Anney marries Glen, the new family, contrary to Anney’s hopes for their future, only move from one rental property to another which was “over by the JC Penney mill near the railroad tracks” (49). As shiftless Glen moves from one poorly paid job to another, the family moves, too, from “rented houses” to “leased” houses to “shared houses” to “a place standing empty” to “twice—Jesus, *twice*—brand-new houses clean and bought on time [they] didn’t have” (64). At one point Bone describes a new rental house as “small and close and damp-smelling. . . . It was just like all the houses Daddy Glen had found for us—tract houses with white slatted walls and tin-roofed carports. The lawns were dry, with coarse straggly grass and scattered patches of rocky ground. . . . [T]he houses always looked naked and abandoned” (79). These white trash rental properties directly contrast with the houses that Glen’s brothers owned, “with fenced-in yards and flowering bushes” (80).

Bone recalls the rental houses as “shabby imitations” of what those men had and what Daddy Glen wanted: “a new house with a nice lawn and picture windows framed in lined curtains” (81). He, however, can easily see the difference between his “cinder-block house where the tile floors were always peeling . . . but [in] a decent

neighborhood” and Uncle Nevil and Aunt Fay’s place, which he calls a “goddam nigger shanty” (83, 82). Glen equates the houses of white trash, other than himself, and that of “niggers,” and, in so doing, equates the racial positions of the two. Such judgment only reinforces for Bone the uncertainty of the status of her mother’s family, because her cousin Butch has told her that a distant relative swore that he was “as dark and wild as any child ‘born on the wrong side of the porch’” (54). Later she hears Glen’s brothers speak of her mother as “just like any nigger trash, getting something [a car] like that” (102). Bone has ample opportunity to believe that her family is no different from the class of people considered lowest by white southerners.

Bone experiences that difference from the other white southerners as a “dizzy desperate hunger edged with hatred . . . hunger in the back of the throat . . . an echoing emptiness that ached for the release of screaming” (98). Being considered white trash is, for Bone, not a labeled characteristic but a lack of the “necessary,” whether that be money, house, furnishings, car, or food. Sometimes the hunger was real, not metaphorical. Bone relates that by the time she started fourth grade, they “were eating biscuit dinners more often than not” or cold tomato soup or pork and beans “right out of the can” because the power company had turned off the electricity for lack of payment (72). After serving a meal of crackers spread with ketchup and sprinkled with salt and paper, Anney angrily tells Glen that she had vowed her girls would never “know what it was like” to be “hungry or cold or scared” as her siblings and she had been (73). Immediately after this domestic scene, Bone describes Anney as “coldly beautiful” as she dons the tight sweater and stiletto heels of a prostitute in order to provide a sumptuous

breakfast with flour, jelly, butter, tomatoes, fatback, eggs, and milk purchased with her night's earnings (76). Anney's actions clearly indicate that the stereotypical white trash behavior is the result, not of crass coarseness, but of desperation for the well-being of her daughters.

Often Allison paints this sympathetic picture of Anney, a woman who constantly fights her white trash background, from the very beginning of the narrative when she refuses to accept the shame that a preacher tries to lay on her for the illegitimacy of Bone. Although her job as waitress in the town diner stereotypes her class position, her behavior is not that of a flirtatious, openly provocative, "trashy" woman; instead she has "a reputation for an easy smile and a sharp tongue . . . friendly but distant" (10). In the revolving round of rental houses which Bone described as "icy," Anney "sewed curtains, washed windows . . . polished floors" and "put in flowers" in an attempt to create beauty and match the warmth of her sister's houses (80-81). When Bone steals Tootsie Rolls from the neighborhood Woolworth's, Anney uses as an example of a "bad" person Bone's cousin Tommy Lee, who stole from everyone and blames everyone else for his bad behavior. She says to Bone, "You're my pride. Do you know: You and your sister are all I really have, all I ever will have. You think I could let you grow up to be like that?" (94). Later she tells her girls, "You do the right thing because the world doesn't make sense if you don't" (145).

Words such as these indicate strength in Anney that is lost when she refuses to see the reality of Glen's abuse of Bone. Her love for him blinds her to his actions. When faced with the truth, she admits her shame, yet cannot acknowledge his brute cruelty,

saying, "He loves her. He does. He loves us all. I don't know. I don't know. Oh God. Raylene, I love him. I know you'll hate me. Sometimes I hate myself, but I love him. I love him" (246). Even after Bone's rape Anney continues to deny the truth: "And I just loved him. You know that. I just loved him so I couldn't see him that way. I couldn't believe. I couldn't imagine . . ." (306). In the next breath she is saying to Bone, "You don't know how much I love you. . . . How much I have always loved you" (307). At the end of the narrative, Anney's behavior, abandoning Bone, seems to be just another example of stereotypical white trash humanity rejecting its children, yet her words indicate the anguish of this woman who "just wanted it to be all right" (247). It will be left to Bone, the daughter she has raised with pride and principles, to overcome the impoverished environment and lead a strong life.

Allison paints realistic, sympathetic pictures of many of the other characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* as well. Bone's early description of Granny has both the elements of the white trash stereotype and the emotionally astute quality of the sympathetic character: "Granny put her arm down and squeezed my wrist. She leaned over and spat a stream of brown snuff off the side of the porch" (20-21). The second action reveals her background; the first, her love for Bone. The dichotomy can also be seen in Bone's description of her uncles: "Though half the county went in terror of them, my uncles were invariably gentle and affectionate with me and my cousins. Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be" (22). Later, an encounter between Uncle Earle and Aunt Ruth reveals the tender feelings between the two after Ruth has accused him of not accepting

responsibility for his drinking, cursing, and lack of a good job. As he tearfully admits that he blames his ex-wife because she eats “the heart out of” him, Ruth apologizes with the words, “I. . . . [k]now how you ache for what is gone. Don’t think I don’t hurt for you, baby” (129).

Aunt Alma is yet another character whose utter soulful humanity belies the stereotypical appearance of white trash. After Alma has gone on a rampage and destroyed almost everything in her house, Bone describes her appearance:

[H]er pale stockings had slid down over her broken-at-the-heel brown shoes. There was mud on her calves and knees, plainly visible where her yellow flower-print dress was pulled up. A strip of the hem on her white cotton slip hung down behind her knees. The sleeves of her faded blue sweater were rolled back, and it was all covered with dried mud like the dress. Her hands were as dirty as the rest of her, stained dark, her nails broken and the cuticles torn. (267)

Such an appearance denotes an unkempt uncaring woman, even as her words, “I’m gonna cut his throat” (268), seem to denote a stereotypical, irrational anger. However, the situation behind the appearance and the anger is anything but stereotypical. Aunt Alma is reacting to the death of her child from heart disease, not some insignificant flaw of her husband.

Allison portrays Glen, the violent abuser, as a person who has reason to be troubled and emotionally unstable. Bone relates that Daddy Glen’s daddy “was horrible,

and working for him must be hell" (207). Because of the mistreatment from his father, Glen had been wounded in such a way as to make him one who could easily wound.

These people, though often called white trash by others and, sometimes, even by themselves, live lives filled with desperation. In her picture of white trash life, Allison has exposed those "dark and dangerous places" which America must explore if white trash people are to be more than stereotypes. She cunningly uses the stereotypical traits in the service of depicting people who have depths of emotions, desires, fears, and hopes.

My family, we needed to get the hell out of this roach-infested shack stuck in the middle of the Devil's grove. If we didn't, we'd never be decent people with happy lives. No. We'd continue to be tiny chickens suffocating at the bottom of the heap. Bewildered folks—the sort moneyed people make fun of and never give jobs to. Dumb-assed crackers who drink till dawn in a sorry attempt to forget about all the things they will never have, never become. But there's no forgetting when you're white trash—smirks. Stares, stolen glances remind you at every turn that you're not worth squat.

(*Before Women Had Wings* 73)

Bird, the young narrator of Connie May Fowler's *Before Women Had Wings*, identifies the "white trash" label with location. As long as her family lived where they did, they would be "trapped" (73). When Bird and her mother and Phoebe move to Tampa, they are still "trapped" because they live in a trailer on the grounds of a motel. Bird's "classmates made it perfectly clear that their parents and they believed that anyone staying at The Travelers [the motel] had to be white trash" (102). Just as Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina* did not see the white trash label as something inherent, but rather something assigned by others, so Bird associates the label with a geographical

phenomenon, a house, rather than with inherent characteristics. Yet those classmates of Bird continue to taunt her with the label, assuming that those who bear the label behave in predictable ways. When Bird sports a butterfly bandage, she unerringly believes she should boast that the cut came from fighting with a boy. Instead of being admired for her prowess, she is castigated by a “prissy” girl who says, “You white trash people fight constantly” (227). In addition, in Bird’s experience, the term “cracker” is synonymous with “white trash.” She chafes when the boy whom she has fought uses the term to taunt her with the words “[o]nly crackers say ‘ain’t’” (220), yet she herself is not averse to using the term to describe others whom she doesn’t care for. When she and her daddy are spying on the snake-handling congregation, she describes the people as “poor crackers all” (48).

Most of the time, Bird, her mother Glory Marie, and her sister Phoebe are more concerned with the level of their family’s poverty than with any particular labels attached to that poverty. Phoebe, who voices her fears of going to a new school and meeting students, fears not just that they will not like her, but that they might think she is “too backward or too . . . poor” (90). Glory Marie reminds the girls that should try to get good grades because they “were poor, poor people . . . and worse than that, [they] were females” (101). They were poor females, so poor that, with Bird’s father’s suicide, they qualified for public assistance. With only subsistence for living, Phoebe and Bird could not afford new school clothes, thereby becoming the brunt of jokes about their homemade outfits and their moth-holed sweaters. Their mother, however, saw their clothing dilemma in an entirely different light, warning the girls not to “dress like common trash,”

but to “keep up appearances” (110). Her language indicates that she had an inner standard for detecting trash, one that had to do with the flashy, suggestive dress of some women. She also sees the “bums, winos, and prostitutes” outside the government buildings as “an element” to lock out of their car. She criticizes the urban renewal programs, saying that the government officials should “put some money where their mouths are” (208).

Bird, however, sees the poor people outside the building differently, thinking that “their faces were all veiled with the same mask of hopelessness,” a hopelessness which she wants to avoid by not going inside the welfare office (209). She decides that perhaps the government has written rules for treating poor people:

Poor people stink. They ain’t worth nothing. So treat them like they’re shit on the bottom of your shoes. Stare at them coldly. Huff. Act as if their questions are stupid, even insane. When you hand them their official numbers, make sure your skin don’t come in contact with theirs because God only knows where they’ve been and what they do behind the walls of their tar-paper shacks and tin-can trailers. (211)

Bird’s imaginary manual indicates just how seriously she has taken the attitude of others about her family’s poverty.

She understands that others equate poverty and “trashy” behavior because her family had been the brunt of a landlord’s vicious rules concerning his house when they had lived in the citrus grove before her father died. She describes the place as a “shotgun” house, one of those old country shacks that has a middle breezeway and a

porch on the front. More important than the type of house is the fact that it was a fully furnished rental house that was filthy from all of its former inhabitants. Bird describes the act of washing and drying dishes as difficult to do because of the cockroaches eating off the dirty plates (15). Because Glory Marie was so conscious of Mr. Bailey T. Watson's ownership of all of the furniture, she was constantly warning the girls not to scuff and scratch anything, covering up tables with papers before they ate meals. Bird remembers these meals in the following lines: "So we never ate a meal, not even Thanksgiving or Christmas, where we couldn't also read about the events of the day and look at ads for items we could not afford" (18). She also remembers the "rat with a long tail" that squeezed right through a hole in the bathroom floor (20). Although she remembers the inhumane conditions that the landlord imposed, she also remembered her mother's attempts to keep everything spotless so that they would not be accused of being trash.

Ironically, the house was located just off the Prince of Peace Citrus Highway. Bird could not remember much peace in that house; instead she remembers that "every night" her parents fought, saying, "[T]he twin evils that fueled their anger were moonrise and liquor" (25). She recalls wanting to pretend her "parents did not exist": "No damnations, no dishes crashing against bloodstained walls, no vengeful tears filling up the silence of a broken-off, mid-holler brawl" (26). Bird's parents often acted in ways typical of the white trash image. Bird describes how her father "staggered" into the general store they managed with a gun, ready to shoot himself. His eyes, she recalls, had "that look of madness as if a person's knotted-up, Devil-haunted soul has been forced

into the small space inside the sockets, flashing despair, anger and hurt like a warning light: *Do not enter; do not cross; do not attempt to soothe*" (3). During this incident, Bird daydreams that the ideal solution would be for her mama to comfort her daddy with the words, "Everything is going to be fine. Yes, baby, I love you. Your daughters love you" (3). Instead her mother looks at him and says, "Jesus, Billy, you're behaving like a fool" (3). She does not exude sympathy for this man, but perhaps she cannot—he has often beaten her and she accuses him of staying out all night, drinking and frequenting whorehouses (24). Glory Marie's behavior, the effect of being abused, would be labeled as "trashy" by an outsider.

The violent acts do not end with Billy's attempted suicide or the fights between him and Glory Marie; they extend to the girls. Bird recalls, "Phoebe and I suffered beatings as frequently as some children were showered with hugs" (50). Her mother's canned explanation for each beating was that they were "trying to make decent humans" out of Phoebe and Bird (50). Instead of saying some kind comment to the girls, Glory Marie would be nonchalant about an injury she had caused. For example, after she had pushed Bird's head into a car door, causing a large contusion, her only comment to Bird was the words, "If your head hurts, put some ice on it" (11). In fact, Glory Marie was so gruff and rough that Bird was always fearful that she and Phoebe had "done something to earn a beating" (24). She did not trust her mother's kind words either, saying, "For her, kind comments were nothing more than fireflies trapped in a jar: they were pretty for the short while they lasted. Then they died and you had to throw them out" (50). Bird sees

the change in her mother: “[L]uck crept up on her and made her smile . . . life stole the silver ring of happiness right out of her hands” (50).

Glory Marie had never been unconditionally warm to her daughters, but at one point, she ignores her family almost entirely, beginning her own series of late nights, drinking bouts, and flirtations. Then Billy has her beaten to keep her from “straying so far from home” (68). Bird equates these actions with those of all white trash people, describing them in the following words:

So the men, raging drunk, bullshit each other into believing that bruised fists and broken noses will act as charms, paving their way to heaven.

And we females—girls and women alike—can’t find enough strength in our battered souls to escape, so we birth our boys into legendary scoundrels, characters made better in the crosshairs of half-truths. Yes, smiles break out all around as we cast daddies, brothers, husbands into near-respectable village idiots in the stories we spin over bowls of homegrown, freshly snapped peas, clotheslines draped with bleach-scented, bloodstained damp sheets, sinks filled with suds and supper-crusted dishes. And after all that, we still aren’t decent. (73)

Bird sees no decency, no hope, no peace, no future for any white trash, those whom she imagines or those with whom she lives. After Billy, her daddy, had had her mother beaten, Bird recalls that her mother, her sister Phoebe, and she had “waded through the dark fear that flooded” their house, searching for something sweet that “would stave off

the desperation” they felt coming to them (73). In Bird’s mind, poverty, violence, fear, and hunger are mixed in the white trash “roach-infested shack” (72).

The white-trash picture Fowler creates, however, is no more homogeneous than that of Allison. Fowler, too, shows her characters to be full, round, and dynamic, not just flat and stereotypical. For example, Bird’s mother Glory Marie leads her girls silently through the crowd who had gathered to see if Billy had really killed himself. Bird, copying her mother’s actions, says they pretended they were “women of grace, wearing [their] pride like long black veils” (9). They would not admit by word or action that they were affected by Billy’s behavior. Later, when Glory Marie decides that she must support Billy by visiting him in the jail, Bird observes that “her whole face start[ed] to tremble” and she spoke “in a justifying tone of voice,” demonstrating her feelings for this man who, at other times, incurred only her wrath (11).

Many instances show the true humanity of Glory Marie in response to her poor surroundings. Bird relates that Glory Marie named both her girls after birds, thinking that if they were named after “something with wings,” they would “be able to fly above the shit in [their] lives,” “shit” representing both the physical and emotional underpinnings of their existence (12). After she and the girls move to the trailer in Tampa, Glory Marie tries to bring beauty into their lives by planting “zinnias of various blazing colors” and sewing “curtains out of yellow dotted swiss” and painting “a picture of a vase of flowers. . . . rich in shades of blue” (112). Along with Glory Marie’s “creative” efforts, Bird is mature enough to see that “snaking through both the meanness and the nest-making was a sadness” that Glory Marie could not shake. Bird reports her mother’s

sobbing “nearly every night” (112). Even at the end of Bird’s narrative, when Phoebe and Bird are going to leave with Miss Zora, Glory Marie lovingly prepares their items of clothing for the trip, “lingering over them as if each scrap of cloth contained soul-saving memories” (260). As “mean” and abusive as Glory Marie can be, Fowler shows her behavior to be that of a woman beaten down by her circumstances, a woman who retains love for her daughters and hope for a better life.

Fowler also creates sympathetic characters in Bird’s siblings, Phoebe and Hank. Bird is most concerned with Phoebe’s unwillingness to shed tears, no matter how difficult the situation. Bird’s fascination with tears begins with her mother’s adage that “the Devil steals tears” so that a person spends “eternity crying the stored-up teardrops of a lifetime” (8). Phoebe’s dark, dry eyes were, then, to Bird, “a terrible thing to see” (8). Every crisis of the family, such as Billy’s first attempt at suicide or Glory Marie’s beating, is noted by Phoebe’s “tears piling up in the Devil’s box” (67). Even when Glory Marie beats her so badly that she will have to lie to explain all the cuts and bruises, Phoebe does not cry; instead Bird describes her face as so hard that she could understand “how easily it could be shattered” (124). At that point, Phoebe vows to leave their home as quickly as possible, by finding ways to be absent as much as possible and studying at school and the library and friends’ houses so that she can avoid her mother’s alcoholic rages. Late in the narrative, when the fate of the girls has been decided, Bird wonders if Phoebe is as upset as she is, realizing that “Phoebe had learned long ago how to hide her thoughts. . . . She’d simply buried them deep, deep down so Mama couldn’t use Phoebe’s emotions against her” (253).

If Bird watches Phoebe for tears, she watches Hank for the unnatural qualities of his eyes. When Hank, the college-student brother, visits after Glory Marie has been roughed up by Billy, who is not his father, his “eyes were lit up with something other than life,” according to Bird (62). After Glory Marie has been beaten by Billy’s hired ruffian, Hank stays with the girls, brandishing “his giant smile” and planting kisses on their foreheads, but still Bird is “scared by his haunted eyes” (69). He tries to reassure her, saying that Billy will not harm their mother again and speculating that this cloud has a silver lining: “[T]his family is finally going to get its act together” (70). Because Hank has the ability to absent himself from the family situation, being in college, he does not remain with the family after Billy’s death, but promises to be available. Bird recalls, “In the years to come, I’d realize Hank wouldn’t be there for us in an ordinary sense, but in ways far-flung and wonderful” (83). And, once more, he is there for Glory Marie, Phoebe, and Bird as they celebrate their first Christmas in the trailer. Bird is so happy that she describes the scene as “just my crazy, good-hearted brother and my bossy, beautiful sister and my mama, who for once in her life forgot her anger. . . . Mama, throwing back her head and letting her joy dot the stars” (183-184). Hank is more than stereotypical white trash; he is a complex human being.

Fowler has created a whole family of real human beings who interact in complex ways, sharing both their angers and fears and their joys. Like Allison’s characters, they live lives of desperation. Sometimes that desperation is revealed in what appears to be nothing more than the stereotypical behaviors of a white trash society that does not deserve to be saved. These are not, however, stereotypical white trash characters who

exist in the minds of prejudiced people, but characters who live and breathe in America. They, too, might see the stereotypes in others, but they know themselves to be doing all that they can to survive.

What did you expect? Marry trash and see what comes of you . . . My mama's mama is sitting down the pew from me and my daddy. She has already leaned forward, looked down here and called my daddy a bastard . . . Nobody would say much if she scratched my daddy's eyes out in private. But this is a public place and it agitates people when she starts in on him . . . She calls him a nigger and trash so long and loud she gets hoarse.

(*Ellen Foster* 14, 20-21)

Just as in Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Fowler's *Before Women Had Wings*, the white trash label is applied by others to the characters described in Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*. The difference is that the label is not applied by the community at large to a certain family or group; it is applied by a mother-in-law to her son-in-law and, by extension, to her granddaughter Ellen. Also, from the very beginning of the narrative, the pejorative term "trash" is linked to the even more pejorative term "nigger"; in fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably. At other times, the term "trash," which always includes implicitly the adjective "white," actually denotes a lower social value to Ellen's mama's mama. When explaining to Ellen why she is allowing "one of her girls," an African American servant, to take away all of Ellen's mama's personal items after her death, she wants the message to get to Ellen's daddy "plain and simple." Ellen reports, "[S]he had rather some real niggers have my mama's things than any of us that drink and carry on like trash" (33). Ellen, having trouble understanding her mama's

mama's logic, thinks, "That is hard to figure out because you know I do not drink and I would not even eat in a colored house" (33).

Ellen's quandary prepares the reader for the discrepancy throughout the narrative: the father and his "buddies" and brothers are "trash"; Ellen, derivatively, is "trash" to those in her mama's mama's family, but not to herself; and no one in mama's mama's family is trash because of their social status and income level. Ellen describes these interwoven attributes in her thoughts on her mama's mama at her mama's funeral: "She [mama's mama] has a tidy sum. Every Saturday one of her girls rides her to town to get her hair fixed. She shops and comes home with hats and dresses in boxes. When I go to her house she tells me to walk slow and do not slam the door. She acts like she doesn't know me enough to trust" (20-21). Ellen, of course, is exactly right in her assessment of her mama's mama's attitude: Her grandmother does not trust her because, as the grandmother says, "All I know is when I look in your face I see that bastard and everything he did to my girl" (78). Lumped together with her father in her mama's mama's mind, Ellen becomes the victim of yet further evidence that she is "trash" to her grandmother. After being placed in her grandmother's care by the courts, Ellen is forced to work in the cotton fields with her grandmother's "niggers," the implication being that she, too, is as close to being a "nigger" as possible—she is white trash. Even the head woman in the field, Mavis, tells Ellen, "[W]hat the bosslady is up to is her business but it must be a mighty bad debt you is out here working off" (64).

The "mighty bad debt" signifies Ellen's perceived involvement in her mother's death, but more subtly it represents Ellen's status as offspring of the "bastard." When her

mama's mama is not calling Ellen's father "trash" or "nigger," she is calling him "bastard." Ellen recalls that when her mama's mama reports her daddy's death, she says, "[Y]our bastard of a daddy is dead," and slaps Ellen as if her anger knows no bounds, for the dead or the living (69). Ellen herself worries whether her daddy "did rub off on" her after incidents in which the grandmother wanted her "so hard to be like him" (68). Perhaps that worry is why she distances herself from her father by using the same kinds of terms as her mama's mama when she thinks of her daddy. After he has been sexually suggestive to her after her mama's death, she thinks, "Somebody else calling out sugar blossom britches might sound sweet but it was nasty from him. He could make anything into trash" (44). Later in the narrative, pondering over a statement by Julia, her art teacher, that she wished "to save the world . . . from people like" Ellen's father, Ellen says, "I shuddered to think how God let him and the rest slip through. The day he made my daddy he was not thinking straight. My daddy was a mistake for a person" (48-49). After her father's death, Ellen fantasizes about the "box" in which her daddy has been buried. She wants to make sure the lid is "down hard" and nailed with "the strongest nails" because "[t]ime would make him meaner" (70). Perhaps the only two things that Ellen and her grandmother can agree upon are the goodness of Ellen's mother and the meanness of her father, a meanness summed up in the word "trash."

Because the term "trash" basically specifies one character in Gibbons's narrative, the settings are not as crucial in understanding the plight of Ellen, the protagonist. Her home, which contains a television set and an "E-Z lounger" for her dad, nevertheless is poor enough not to have air conditioning or drapes. Ellen cannot understand why her

mother would not want to stay in the hospital, “[a]ll laid up in the air conditioning,” as opposed to the summer heat of their own home (3). When she is living with her grandmother, Ellen describes the furniture as “chiseled out of wood” with “curly figures on them,” not “just brown or worn out,” implying that she is used to the second kind described, not the first. She also comments on the draperies in which one could wrap herself and “stay warm,” as opposed to the curtains that were “sheets sewed” by her mama in her old house (62).

Ellen does see her house, however, as better than those of the African Americans around her. Ellen’s house, in contrast to those of her daddy’s “colored” drinking buddies, is seen by them to be “a nice house” (37). Ellen herself sees many differences between her house and that of her next door neighbor Starletta: “They [Starletta’s parents] clean this house all the time but it is still dirty. They got dirt and little sticks all between the floorboards. . . . All three of them stay in one room. . . . They do their business outside and when it is cold they do it over in the corner in a pot. . . . And they never have had a television set” (30). Regardless of the poverty of the home, however, Ellen is impressed with the “warm fire where the smoke starts” (29). When living with her grandmother, “[a]fter supper each night it was not raining,” Ellen walked “up the colored path and spied on Mavis and her family.” Her description, that “[I]t looked like slavery times,” had more to do with their actions (“hanging out on the porch picking at each other”) than it did with the poverty of the home, a poverty which is apparent from the fact that Ellen says her mama’s mama “did not pay them doodly-squat.” In fact, Ellen wishes to have a

family like theirs “only . . . white and with a little more money . . . [and] running water” (66-67).

Ellen distinguishes between the physical poverty of her African American friends and their emotional wealth. The same distinction becomes apparent in her new mama’s home, “a clean brick house” where she can take a bath when she “start[s] to carry an odor” and where “folks” tell her “how sweet” she looks (2). The emotional wealth and security she feels in that house is in contrast to her daddy and mama’s home: “Two years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. My stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the grass green and the hedge bushes square. I figure I made out pretty good considering the rest of my family is either dead or crazy” (2). For Ellen, the important aspect of the home is something she found “on that colored path [Mavis’s home] that [she] could not name” but that she describes by actions: “You mark down how they laugh and how they tell the toddler babies, you better watch out fo them steps. They steep!” (93). The care and concern of family members for each other is what defines a home for Ellen, such care and concern which she and her mother never received from her white trash father.

Ellen’s many descriptions of her father confirm the truth of the stereotypical “white trash” term. When her mother comes home from the hospital after open heart surgery, Ellen describes her daddy as going “round the table swearing at all who did him wrong, sitting “up in his E-Z lounger like he is King for a Day,” asking “about supper right off,” and asking “how come weeds are growed up in the yard” (3). Ellen sums up

his actions by saying he is “[m]ore like a mean baby than a grown man” (3). When he comes back home later that evening after getting something to drink, Ellen comments that his actions bother her sick mother until she “[g]rits her teeth every time he calls out damn this or that. The more he drinks the less sense he makes” (6). Ellen even understands the logic of her drunken father when she says, “He has forgotten last night and he is foolish enough to think we have too” (8). Further, she knows that “he rounded up all his beer cans and pitched them under the back porch” to hide them from her mama’s relatives after her death (11). As he hides the cans, symbolically he hides his own “trash” status.

Ellen, in the prejudiced manner she has known since birth, compares her daddy to the “whole pack of colored men” who drink with him, saying he is “worse than them all put together” (37). In her eyes, he is “trash” worse than the “colored men” who ranked lowest in her southern society. This prejudice against African Americans, which is so natural to Ellen and her family, is seen in her Aunt Nadine’s actions of locking the car door when they are driving through “colored town” to get to the church where Ellen’s mother’s funeral is to be held (19). Ellen, herself, shows her prejudice when she takes for granted the fact that Starletta, her African American friend, cannot join the Girl Scouts because “they do not have a colored troop” in her county (27). And even though she considers Starletta her best friend, Ellen admits, “As fond as I am of all three of them [Starletta and her mother and father] I do not think I could drink after them” (29). She is afraid that “what Starletta leaves on the lip of a bottle” will get into her “system and do some damage” (29-30). Similarly, although she is hungry, she will not eat the biscuit that Starletta offers her on Christmas day because “[n]o matter how good it looks . . . it is still

a colored biscuit" (32). Finally Ellen begins to reassess her own attitudes about Starletta's home after sleeping there overnight, saying, "I was surprised because it did not feel like I had slept in a colored house" (39). Ellen is beginning to discriminate between trash, both white and black, and those whose behavior is kind and good.

Similarly, as she equates "meanness" with "trash" when she describes her father, the meanness of people such as her mama's mama and her aunts Betsy and Nadine and her cousin Dora is also "trash" in Ellen's mind. Not only does Ellen describe her grandmother with the words "[m]eanness made her quick like a jungle animal" (68), but also the grandmother's words, directed at Ellen, reveal her mean-spirited attitude of trash:

Why you little bitch. You set up in that house like the world owed you a living. In cahoots with your damn daddy. I know all that went on. You laid up all in that house with your daddy's buddies. I'm surprised you don't have some little nigger baby hanging off your titty. But you left before I could get the both of you at one pop. You and your daddy let her take them pills or more than likely drove her to it. And then you left her to die. And then somebody comes to my house and tells me how they found you all laid up next to her like a little idiot. But hi ho I got you now. You might have run out before that bastard got what was coming to him but I swear you will never stop paying for your part. (78)

The grandmother's use of language indicates her own attitudes about Ellen, Ellen's father, and African Americans and also proves the worth of Ellen's assessment of her.

Aunt Betsy shows her meanness by laughing at Ellen's assumption that she can stay at her house. She never inquires why Ellen might wish to stay. If she had, she would have found out that Ellen's father had been abusing her. This lack of curiosity concerning the well-being of others describes Aunt Nadine as well. Ellen says, "Nadine would probably not need to hear the truth much less see it for herself. That sums her up" (95-96). Right before she is "thrown out" of Nadine and Dora's house, Ellen relates that they "are bumping around in this house lost and foolish over each other" because they have "told each other so many lies about the way the world worked" (114). They, of course, see only the "meanness" in Ellen's words, not the "meanness" of their own actions in rejecting Ellen's gift, in offering her an insultingly small gift in comparison to the wealth of gifts that Dora received from Nadine, and in failing to see that what Ellen really wanted was love and acceptance symbolized by the giving and receiving of gifts. These four women, then, of mama's mama's family are seen to be as much "trash" in their "meanness" as Ellen's father is in his.

The only person in Ellen's immediate and extended family who is not characterized by the term "trash" is her mother. When her mother comes home from the hospital, she "does not say a word about being tired or sore" but prepares a meal in response to the demands of Ellen's father to fix him "something to eat" (4, 3). Insensitive, he then makes a joke about her mother's looking "like this might be her last supper" (4). Ellen's response is to "give him the evil eye," but her mother merely "looks like she could crawl under the table and cry" (4-5). When Ellen banishes her father to the truck for the night because he is so drunk that in his loudness he is disturbing her ill

mother, her mother "whimpers"; Ellen says that "she will wear herself out crying" (6). This woman's spirit has been totally broken by the actions of her husband. She takes most of her heart medication at one time in one final act of will power, refusing Ellen's commands to "vomit them up" and making no move to help Ellen convince her father that she should call for help (9). When Ellen thinks back on her mother's death, she prays to God, "Lord you have to remember how good the first one [Ellen's mother] was and forgive her for leaving your world. My mama did not know what she was doing. She was too sad to think straight. We get like that down here" (93). Ellen's mother is not "trash," but she has been "trashed," becoming refuse because of her tiredness, sickness, and sadness.

Unfortunately, Ellen's grandmother catches Ellen crying over her father's death. Ellen had barely shed a tear over the mother whom she had loved. Ellen's mama's mama says to her, "Go ahead and cry for your damn daddy. . . . Go ahead and cry. Just make sure you cry more than you did for your mama" (69). Ellen thinks to herself, "I had not planned to cry over him when he died. . . . But he was somebody I knew who was dead. I felt the way you feel when they say a star or a old president is dead and you feel sorry for a flash when you remember his face and think about how you could go quick as a wink" (69). As philosophical as Ellen's words sound, she reveals a true sympathy for her "mean" father when she realizes that her grandmother had helped to hasten his death by giving him just enough money to drink up, but not enough to subsist on:

He would waste that little bit of money so in the middle of the wasting he
might forget his life had always been bad and was getting worse all the

time. . . . [H]e was fresh out of hope. . . . He was weak as water. . . . And that is just what you do not need to be if you have dealings with my mama's mama. She would come rolling in a wave over you and leave you there on your behind choking on the thing you had intended to say. And she could keep coming with her flood and stand laughing at you struggling in the waves of your forgetting. That is how she confused my daddy. (76)

Ultimately, then, Ellen's father, who by her own words was "trash," was also a weak, confused human being who could not withstand the onslaught of the "meanness" of another. As he had caused the death of his wife through his own meanness, his death was, indirectly, a result of another's meanness.

Gibbons's attitude toward white trash, then, is somewhat different from Allison's or Fowler's. She shows the stereotypical behavior of white trash, but often she calls it "meanness." What she does quite extensively and deliberately is to show the connections between the social classification of "white trash" and the racial classification of "nigger." She, too, like Allison and Fowler, focuses much attention on the difference between the stereotype and the living, breathing, complex human being who may have stereotypical characteristics, but who also shows true humanity.

All three authors, Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons, have portrayed characters who could be stereotyped as "white trash." Some of them live in the "filthy shacks" of Rafter's sociologists' studies; some fit Murray's term "generally unpleasant"; some are alcoholic. All of them are very poor, and their poverty both limits and skews their choices. If

Provosty and Donovan's "plain-folks" can be interpreted to mean characters which garner sympathy, then all three authors have written of these "plain-folks" as well, and many times the two paradigms of white trash and plain-folks co-exist in one body. At least one critic sees Allison's work this way. Jillian Sandell says that Allison's work, while giving the rather nasty realities of a white trash lifestyle, "refuses the usual distinction between the 'good poor' . . . and the 'bad poor"'; instead she "tempers her portrayal of poverty with the strength and courage of her characters and family members, while also showing their flaws and mistakes" (213). Allison's Daddy Glen is a terribly abusive stepfather, but he is also driven by his need for acceptance from his family. Anney acts as the slut and prostitutes herself, but she does it to earn money to feed her girls something more than ketchup on crackers. As fellow novelist Blanche McCrary Boyd declares, Allison "writes about these people as if they're not monsters—even the stepfather" (qtd. in Jetter 56). Fowler shows Glory Marie to be a violent woman who causes destruction when she is in an alcoholic rage, but at other times she brings beauty to their tin-can trailer, hand-sewing curtains and purchasing a matched set of thrift shop china. Many of Kaye Gibbons's characters, not being white trash, are shown to be spiteful and hateful, but the one true white trash character, Ellen's father, is seen to be a victim as well as a perpetrator.

These authors, perhaps because of their own backgrounds, create characters who cannot be stereotyped. They go well beyond the simple label of white trash in order to show readers what poverty in America really looks like. Allison, recalling the "deep terror of being poor," says that the sense of being poor remains with her (qtd. in Megan

82), just as Fowler says that she believes “the past is always affecting the here and now” (qtd. in Svingen). Allison asserts that because the past of poverty is always with such authors, even when they attain affluence from upward mobility, they “need to start assaulting the monolith of the middle class. It’s not about mobility. It’s about respecting origins, making more room. What’s being denied most is class” (qtd. in Megan 83). *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Before Women Had Wings*, and *Ellen Foster* are works that seek the respect of origins and the acknowledgment of debilitating class structures. As these works are read and accepted as part of the contemporary American canon, borders will be formed over which readers can easily pass, noting characters and settings which perhaps seem as familiar to them as those of neighbors and relatives. Instead of easily labeling others with a term which is restrictive and exclusive, readers will be able to embrace diverse pictures of lower class Americans and possibly will recognize through literature that proactive measures need to be taken to include everyone in the American dream.

If these authors did nothing more than create real settings and characters, their work would be important in today’s contemporary studies. Their works, however, also reveal that the stereotypes cross over economic classes and racial divisions. The “white trash” category includes the middle-class Daddy Glen and the black “buddies” of Ellen’s father. These characters give us information which will expand whiteness studies and, at the same time, reduce the possible ill effects of racism.

Chapter 2: What Makes a Girl Grow Up Too Soon?

It is important that we return to the vexing questions of just who we think we are talking about. Even those of us who would lay claim to some white trash past (say, those of us from impoverished and/or under-educated white families or communities) might find it hard to claim this identity now, due to the considerable social distances we've traveled to reach our various locations within the academy.

(Newitz and Wray, "What Is" 59)

John Hartigan Jr., in his article "Name Calling: Objectifying 'Poor Whites' and 'White Trash' in Detroit," claims that "white trash" exists in the fears and fantasies of those middle- and working-class whites who occupy a place 'just above' the class divide from poor whites, straddling a line they are forever fearful of crossing" (50). Here again is that looming possibility: "white trash" is not so much reality as it is myth, icon, and stereotype, existing in the minds of those who fear that they might be so-labeled. Even though it is a stereotype with all of the accompanying specific markers, it is still treated as a specific reality by almost all. Hartigan himself defines white trash as the "underclass," "the economically disadvantaged," and "the socially isolated," even as he criticizes the use of such terms. These terms which describe "classed forms of Otherness are as intimately involved with confirming a perception of the-poor-as-different, as is 'white trash,'" according to Hartigan (51).

Newitz and Wray, in the statement quoted above, voice their acceptance of such a labeled past based on poverty or lack of education. When they collected essays for their anthology, they acknowledged the label as aptly identifying the contributors. Matt Wray connects the label not just with the impoverished, but also with a segment of the

population which also embraces certain religious practices. About this evangelical, Calvinistic mindset, he says that the “[p]overty and human suffering were explained as natural, enduring, and unchangeable consequences of humanity’s fall from grace. The economic deprivations and hardships of our lives somehow seemed our due, as if it were somehow right that, we, fallen creatures that we were, should suffer for our sinful nature” (207). Constance Penley, taking a less serious stance, perhaps, than Wray’s, describes her childhood not as a time to consider whether it was “right” to suffer and be poor, but rather as a time “to try to selectively detrash ourselves, to figure out just how trashy we were so as to monitor and modify our thinking and behavior” (91). Kathy Kahn, in writing *Hillbilly Women*, never uses the term “white trash”; she prefers to speak of “working-class women.” What she says, however, fits well with the idea that there is a group of people living in America who are denigrated by their poverty and the language used to describe them: “Being a working-class woman means being stepped on, pushed around, degraded, overworked and underpaid. More than that, it means you have little hope that you will do anything more in life than a lot of hard work. If you have talent and ability it goes unrecognized” (20-21). All of these American writers seem to be in agreement about the reality of a class of people who are labeled pejoratively as white trash.

Whether reality or stereotype, being “white trash” is never perceived as desirable by those who suffer under its tyranny of poverty and unacceptability. Tad Friend notes that “it remains a way to pinion someone to his roots, to deny him upward mobility” (26). Sherry Ortner in “Reading America” also speaks of non-upward mobility as a factor in

the psychology of the poor in America. Stating that the dominant classes in America believe both in the ideology of mobility (all can move upward, downward, across in society) and the ideology of individuality (all must pull themselves up by their own boot straps), “explanations for non-mobility not only focus on the failure of individuals (because they are said to be inherently lazy or stupid or whatever), but shift the domain of discourse to arenas that are taken to be ‘locked into’ individuals—gender, race, ethnic origin, and so forth” (171). In other words, not only is poverty the fault of the victim of poverty because an individual should be able to do anything, but that poverty stems from characteristics over which the victim has no control; therefore the individual can do nothing: a catch-22. Robert Botsch’s *We Shall Overcome* (1980), a case study of blue collar workers in the 1970s, reveals the truth of Ortner’s studies. Even though workers thought themselves to be paid what they deserved for their work, they admitted that “some of the very poor may suffer poverty because they lack moral virtue and a willingness to work” (85). They would not label themselves white trash, even though their wages might be low, but they would label others’ poverty as part of the white trash syndrome: unwillingness to work and moral turpitude.

Many of the authors cited here agree that to be called “white trash” is to be denied much. Of course the poverty from which the term originally stems creates deprivation, but the deprivation ranges far afield from not possessing good cars, houses, clothes, or food—it extends to being denied access to certain neighborhoods, schools, churches, clubs, and restaurants because the furnishings, clothes, or styles are not quite right for the middle-American standard. On top of all the deprivation, many poverty stricken take the

blame upon themselves for their poverty, having been convinced by the society at large to do so. As Ortner reports, “Poorer and less successful Americans tend to blame themselves for their failures, and not to recognize the ways in which their chances for success were circumscribed from the outset” (171). Such attitudes double the problem—both victim and accuser agree as to the origin of the problem—the victim is wrong; the victim is “trashy.”

Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Revelation” is the inverse of such a formula. The protagonist Mrs. Turpin spends her time in the waiting room of a doctor’s office being thankful that she is neither “white trash” nor nigger. Furthermore, she has surveyed the room and labeled everyone according to social status, including a whole family of white trash, whom she has identified because of their dress, their unkempt condition, and their “vacant” way of sitting (391). Mrs. Turpin mentally assesses them as “[w]orse than niggers any day” (391), reflecting on her nighttime daydreams with Jesus in which she chooses to be a nigger rather than white trash—“a neat clean Negro woman, herself but black” (392). In this story, O’Connor depicts the white trash stereotypically as opinionated loud mouths that Mrs. Turpin can hate. Cleverly, however, O’Connor portrays Mrs. Turpin in exactly the same fashion, except, of course, that she behaves self-righteously as well. She says, “When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus’” (397). At that point a young woman attacks her, calling her a wart hog from hell (398). Mrs. Turpin ruminates on the accusation, decides it comes from God, and feels both angry and chastened. She, not the white trash person nor

the Negro, has been singled out for judgment. O'Connor has created a scenario in which the usual accuser has become the accused, and, in so doing, has vindicated the one usually accused: the white trash characters do not have to bear the brunt of others' criticism and labels.

Unfortunately, the narrators in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Before Women Had Wings*, and *Ellen Foster* fight with the sense that, being white trash, they are somehow to blame for their plight. They are very young and, therefore, malleable, unlike O'Connor's middle-aged woman who has had her opinions hardened by time and circumstances. At times they are told that they are trash, both by the larger society with which they interact and by the family within which they live. Here again, though, is the difference between fictional characters of the past and these contemporary ones. These characters, young though they are, find inner resources to fight against not only the labels which would be attached to them, but also the reality which would imprison them in a white trash world. Brenda Boudreau, writing about Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, makes a statement which could easily apply to all three young narrators of these stories: "[T]he adolescent protagonist remains determined not to let herself be destroyed completely by the oppressiveness of her environment; although the struggle is played out on her physical body, she becomes an active participant by trying to control her own self-representation" (50). A similar view about the youthful protagonist is held by two other critics who are interested in the autobiographical element of contemporary fiction. Rita Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989) comments that the young first-person narrator in a novel of self-discovery will attain "at least a partial

individual liberation from existing ideological and social constraints toward a degree of self determinism" (124). Joanne S. Frye, in *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience* (1986), indicates that authors' "remembered experiences can readily become a resource for change" with "information from the past recalled to alter a current interpretative schema" (68). The narrative is a means by which the authors, through the vehicle of their narrators, can actively change, or interpret, the past. In order to be active participants, these young narrators, all of whom could be described by the term "girls," have to act as adults. Allison sees such action to be the natural result of those who "grow up in difficult to impossible situations" (qtd. in Klorman). As Renee Curry says, referring to Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, "Each knows her 'I' at an early age, and by offering readers her story, each claims the non-innocent girl 'I'[the adult in a girl's body] as worthy of trust and of love" (104). Such words describe Fowler's Bird and Gibbons's Ellen as well as they describe the first person narrators of Allison, Kincaid, and Chute. These contemporary stories shed the stereotypes by demonstrating that their narrators are, in Carol Gilligan's words, "confronting the responsibility of authoring" their lives (qtd. in Curry 103) and gaining control of their environments.

Mama hadn't done anything wrong. I was the one who had made Daddy Glen mad. I was the one who made everybody crazy . . . It was my fault, all my fault. I had ruined everything.

(Bastard Out of Carolina 250)

No, it did not matter whether I had screamed or not. It had all been the way he wanted it. It had nothing to do with me or anything I had done. It was an animal thing, just him using me.

(*Bastard Out of Carolina* 253)

These two statements, coming, as they do, so closely together in the narrative, clearly indicate Bone's child-adult narration. As a child she emotionally reacts to situations, seeing herself as the one to blame, but as an adult she rationally views situations, understanding that she has nothing to do with the actions of others. Throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina* Bone seesaws between her childish ways and her mature thinking. Bone relates biting off the rubber tip of a hairpin, "peeling the coating off the metal [to] taste the sweet iron tang underneath," before howling to her mother and aunt, "No! No! No! It's my hair and I want it. I want it long and tangled and just the way it is" (29). In the next breath she is bemoaning the fact that she doesn't look like the family and wanting to know whether she looks like her daddy, whom she has never seen. After childishly begging for information that Anney refuses to give, Bone thinks, "It wasn't even that I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn't have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told" (31). The child wants information; the adult knows why she wants it.

Bone is a typical child: loving her uncles, wishing she were a boy so that she could be like them, wanting shoes and clothes that the family cannot afford, and being angry that she and her sister Reese cannot go on the honeymoon with Anney and Glen. She reacts in typical fashion, hiding herself in her Aunt Alma's sewing room and crying herself to sleep (42). Childlike, too, is her wish for a different family. When Anney

takes the girls to visit Mrs. Parsons, Reese's grandmother, Bone notes that she "looked like a granny you'd read about or see in a movie" (55). She compares Mrs. Parsons to her own grandmother:

Mrs. Parsons wore blue gingham aprons and faded black dresses with long sleeves she would roll back to her elbows. My granny wore sleeveless print dresses that showed the sides of her loose white breasts and hitched up on her hips. She kept her thin gray hair curled tight in a permanent wave, tying it back with string when it went limp in the heat. She wore dark red lipstick that invariably smeared down onto her knobby chin, and she was always spitting snuff and cursing. . . . I loved Granny, but I imagined Mrs. Parsons might be a better choice for a grandmother, and sometimes when we went to visit I'd pretend she was mine. (55)

Bone, having internalized society's attitudes about looks and behavior, knows that her grandmother cannot compete with Mrs. Parsons. When Bone wishes for patent-leather shoes instead of penny loafers and when she steals Tootsie Rolls from Woolworth's, she reveals yet another facet of her childish longings to be something other than what she is. At the same time she is aware of her family's economic condition, saying, "I knew to the penny what everything cost," and cataloging rent, groceries, clothes, and shoes that took more money than they ever had (65). Within, Bone already has an adult voice that helps her see reality.

Bone's fantasies reveal the most interesting facets of her childish imagination. Although she will not tell the doctor at the hospital that her injuries are the result of

Daddy Glen's beating, Bone imagines that the doctor will discover Glen's identity through the wind, "the moon, or maybe even God" and he will "slam that car into gear and roar across that lot. The grille [will] stop just inches from Daddy Glen's terrified face" (116). Her fantasy doesn't end with the doctor's confrontation with Glen; she sees that "Daddy Glen would weep tears of blood. Jesus, maybe, would come into his heart. He'd follow us out to Alma's and get on his knees before the whole family. 'I have sinned,' he'd say, and hold his hands out to me, beg my forgiveness and cry my name. Mama would say no. . . . Yes, I would say. Yes, I forgive you" (116). Bone, the child, wants this man not only to ask forgiveness, but also to change his ways.

Another fantasy which engulfs Bone for a time is the desire to be a gospel singer. "More than anything in the world," she decides, "I wanted to be one of the little girls in white fringed vests with silver and gold embroidered crosses—the ones who sang on the revival circuit and taped shows for early-morning television" (141). This fantasy reveals the child's need for a different life: Bone wants to be a gospel singer because she wants "a miracle" in her life; she wants to "be loved by the whole wide world" (141). Furthermore, when Bone meets Shannon Pearl on the school bus, she ignores what others have said about her because she fantasizes that if Shannon were "so ugly on the outside, it was only reasonable that Shannon would turn out to be saintlike when you got to know her. That was the way it would have been in any storybook. . . . A patient and gentle soul had to be hidden behind those pale, sweaty features. . . . She would be the friend I had always needed" (157). Allison uses Bone's fantasy life to reveal the vulnerability of the child who sees herself as unloved.

Bone indulges in a second kind of fantasy which feeds off her anger and which discloses the emotions of an adult. During a Sunday visit to the Waddell family home, Bone becomes so angry that she plucks the buds off the rose bushes and pushes the petals into her underclothes, thinking to herself, as she has heard Aunt Madeline and Uncle James say, "Trash steals" (103). Describing her emotions, Bone says, "I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us" (103). In yet another setting, when a gospel singer insults Bone and Shannon, Shannon's mother becomes a simpering admirer instead of a protector of the girls, raising the ire of both Shannon and Bone. Bone describes their anger, saying, "I felt as if a great fire was burning close to me, using up all the oxygen, making me pant to catch my breath . . . If there was a God, then there would be justice. If there was justice, then Shannon and I would make them all burn" (166). The fantasies are childlike, but the anger is that of an adult who demands justice.

The image of fire for Bone is a strong symbol of her anger, an anger which usually has sexual overtones because of Daddy Glen's treatment. Even before she understands what sex is, she begins to masturbate to the fantasy of being tied up in a burning haystack, "struggling to get free while the fire burned hotter and closer" (63). Later, Bone finds a chain that becomes a fetish for her masturbation, partially because it makes her "shiver and go hot at the same time" and because it feels "as exciting as the burning light" behind her eyes. Here the symbol of burning goes deeper than anger to fear. With the chain she feels "locked away and safe," yet she reports that "[s]omewhere

far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me" (193). Bone's adult reaction is that of distancing herself, the child, from the reality of her abusive situation by creating fantasies of safety and security. When Anney appears to reject her because Bone has allowed the family to discover Glen's abuse, Bone dreams of being a baby, feeling warm and loved. Awaking with her hands between her legs, she describes this masturbation as a "sweet good feeling . . . almost hurting . . . but comforting too" (253). In the next moment, however, reality returns, and she thinks of "fire, purifying, raging, sweeping through Greenville and clearing the earth" (253). The adult Bone whispers, "Fire. Burn it all," and masturbates to the only fantasy that she can imagine protecting her and punishing others (253).

Besides her adult fantasizing, Bone early demonstrates the tendency to reverse roles with her mother. When Anney is concerned with Glen's handling of a financial situation, Bone, discerning that her mother is worried, says to her, "It'll be okay," and listens as Anney tries to justify Glen's boorish behavior (57). Bone, the adult listener, has no need to justify anything. After Glen starts physically abusing her, Bone says, "I was always getting hurt, it seemed, in ways Mama could not understand and I could not explain" (111). She refuses to inform her mother of the true cause of the injuries, and Anney, like a child, cannot see the truth. Even though she would have to know that Glen, the only other adult in the house is the one, as the doctor says, "throwing her [Bone] up against the wall," Anney refuses to acknowledge the identity of Bone's abuser (114). When Bone imagines the abuse beginning again, she thinks to herself, "More terrified of hurting her [Anney] than of anything that might happen to me, I would work as hard as

he [Glen] did to make sure she never knew. . . . It was as if I was her mother now, holding her safe, and she was my child" (118). In knowledge born of adversity, not innocence, not only does Bone vow to protect Anney from the truth, but she colludes with Glen, her attacker, to do so.

Insights are the greatest proof of Bone's precocious maturity. From the beginning of Glen's involvement with the Boatwright family, Bone does not trust him. She is the one, standing apart from the family photo session, who sees his smile as "determined, tight, forceful" and his image "as flat and empty as a sheet of tin in the sun" with "not one clear line of who he really was behind those eyes" (43). The only time his eyes "smile" is the first time he sexually abuses Bone when she is eight. After the incident, she again notes that "the smile was not in his eyes. His eyes had gone dark and empty again" and she began "to shake with fear" (47). Even though she is too young to name his act, she perceives the deception with which Glen will hide his abuse. As she grows older, Bone wishes she were a boy so that she could "run faster, stay away more, or even hit . . . back." She exercises her hands with a small ball, stubbornly wishing her hands to be as strong as Glen's. She says, "Some days I thought I was working that ball so that I could grow to be more like him; other days I knew that wasn't why" (109). She wants to be able to fight back because she knows the abuse will never end. When Anney keeps Bone out of harm's way by placing her at Aunt Ruth's or Aunt Alma's or Aunt Raylene's, Bone has the ability to see clearly that "[n]othing changed and nothing was really fixed, everything was only delayed" (233). When she devises a plan to vandalize Woolworth's, using the trawling chain and hook she found in the river off Aunt

Raylene's property, she determines not to leave the hook at the scene of the crime because "those points were sharp and certain and tangibly dangerous," the way she wants to be (222). Because time will not "fix" anything, Bone understands the need for arming herself, for protecting herself.

Bone's insights extend to others, as well. When visiting her cousins who share an apartment building with an African American family, instead of stereotyping them as "niggers" as her cousin Grey does, she is quite interested in how pretty one of the girls is and wishes the girl would come out of the house to talk to her. She realizes, however, that the girl's "mama had probably told her all about what to expect from trash" (86). She understands the reticence of the black family towards this white family that has no social status with other whites. She can even admit that she can see why Glen was "hateful" to her since "no part of [her] was that worshipful, dreamy-eyed storybook girlchild" (208). She says that seeing herself in Glen's eyes was "like sliding down an endless hole" and seeing herself at the bottom, "dirty, ragged, poor, stupid" (209). Yet she readily counters this picture with a series of her strong attributes: "the girl who worked hard for Aunt Raylene, who got good grades no matter how often [she] changed schools, who ran errands for Mama and took good care of Reese" (209). Bone is even strong enough to recognize and deny Aunt Ruth's impending death, explaining her denial by saying, "I could do nothing else" (229). This child not only takes on adult-size responsibilities of caring for others physically, but she also shields adults as if they were the children who must be protected from the ugly truth of their lives.

Bone can clearly see and explain her own thoughts. When she sees her Aunt Ruth and Uncle Earle hugging each other after they had exchanged harsh words, Bone not only realizes that she could never do that with Reese, but she also acknowledges that when Glen calls her a “cold hearted bitch” he might be accurate (130). She admits, “With all the hatefulness I was trying to hide, it was a wonder I wasn’t uglier than a toad in mud season” (135). Bone even tries to get religion to solve her problems, but she has to admit that “[w]hatever magic Jesus’s grace promised, [she] didn’t feel it” and she goes about for a week “mourning the loss of something [she] had never really had” (152). Bone worries, too, about growing up. She ponders her situation:

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 at the diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up. (178)

Bone has no illusions about a rosy future, either from religion or from adulthood. Nor does she have illusions concerning Anney and Glen’s relationship: “Things come apart so easily when they have been held together with lies. It was that way with Mama and Daddy Glen” (248). She also understands, however, that Anney will not be able to stay away from Glen, even after the truth of his abuse is known. Anney protests to her, “I won’t go back until I know you’re gonna be safe,” to which Bone replies, “I won’t go back. . . . [W]hen you go back to Daddy Glen, I can’t go with you” (276). She never

posits the conditional "if." When the inevitable occurs, Bone says, "I had lost my mama. She was a stranger, and I was so old my insides had turned to dust and stone. . . . The child I had been was gone with the child she had been" (306-307). Even at age twelve Bone is already an adult: "I was already who I was going to be. . . . I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309). Bone, wise beyond her years, has won the battle with reality that most people do not fight till they reach adulthood. She has lost her childhood, but she has gained a future.

That future, unfortunately, comes to Bone in the violence of the "white trash" behavior of others. She, herself, becomes strong because of the abuse she has endured. Although we readers sense that she will continue to be a survivor, we also recognize that she has been shaped by her white trash background. Fortunately her adult-girl character seems strong enough to withstand the guilt inherent in the poverty-stricken societal structures.

Whippings were nobody's business but ours. We can't tell on Mama because nobody else would love us. Bad, bad children. Phoebe screaming. Mama cussing. So bad we nearly killed her. Rough on us for our own good. What a burden we were! Stupid children are always a burden. No wonder our daddy was dead, couldn't stand having rotten daughters. Mama sacrificed so much. So much. She was our only hope.

(Before Women Had Wings 121-122)

I bit back tears and hateful thoughts. And a voice spoke to me—it wasn't mine; maybe it belonged to my guardian angel, or maybe it was the voice of the adult I might become, I don't know. But it said, "Avocet Abigail Jackson, you are not to blame. The past stalks

your mama, won't let her go, is like a stone in her shoe that keeps her conscience and memory forever rubbed raw."

(*Before Women Had Wings* 106)

Bird, the narrator of *Before Women Had Wings*, whose real name is Avocet Abigail Jackson, vacillates between the natural mentality of the six-to-ten-year-old girl and the adult mentality forced upon her by the crises of her dysfunctional family. Bird's language reveals her childishness. When her mother tries to force her into a police car which will carry them to Billy, her suicidal parent, she thinks, "If people saw me speeding by in a copmobile, they would think I was going to jail" (6). Her father does end up in jail that day, and Bird has typical questions about his experience: "Was he in that jail cell all alone, or had they thrown him in with a bunch of robbers and murderers? Was he wearing one of those striped prison outfits? Was he safe?" (10). The next minute her child's mind has moved on to other fantasies, first pretending to be Tampa's patron pirate Jose Gaspar, "swiping a Spanish bayonet leaf through the sweltering air and fencing with a make-believe swashbuckling foe," and then pretending to be Moses, using a "long knobby stick" to command, "Part, you moccasin-infested water" (15). When life is so very difficult because of the violent fights between her parents, Bird compares her behavior to that of her sister Phoebe's: "She was monitoring Mama and Daddy, making sure they didn't kill each other. But me, I just wanted to pretend my parents did not exist" (26). Pretending is important for Bird's ability to be a child, as is her need to "lose" herself in "Phoebe's hopscotching tales" (26). She uses Phoebe's stories to block out the sounds of the fights.

Just as Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina* possessed a strong fantasy life, so does Bird in *Before Women Had Wings*. One of her enduring fantasies is being Jesus's girlfriend. She lies on her bed and looks at the Woolworth's picture of Jesus, creating a complete scenario of the special relationship she has with him:

He was skinny, but I bet He was strong. I loved His silky, long brown hair. . . . That lamb he cuddled was proof to me that He was a sweet, gentle Savior. And His eyes! They looked out upon the whole world with a loving, wise light, and I knew that they saw me in particular. He watched everything I did, knew my deepest thoughts. Even saw my unclean deeds when I touched myself in that place Mama said was named Filthy. In my daydreams, Jesus and I would walk off into a blazing sunset, holding hands. . . . There we were, Him with his Prell-perfect hair, and me sporting a good figure. In my heart of hearts, Jesus was my first boyfriend. And I was dead certain He loved me special. . . . (27)

Not only does Bird imagine that she has a special relationship with Jesus, but she also imputes to him the responsibility for events she does not understand. Worried over her mother's frequent disappearances from home, she questions, "Was Jesus paying me back for those times Mama had beat me and I wished her dead?" (55). After Billy, her father, has her mother Glory Marie beaten, Bird wonders "if Jesus had hurt" her mother "for a reason" (71). She also relies on Jesus for guidance. The day after Billy dies, Bird grabs the crucifix from off the wall, using it as a kind of charm to ward off death and the devil. When her mother yanks it away from her and screams, "This is not a toy, goddamn it!"

Bird's response is to ask Jesus, "So now what?"(79). The child wants her special boyfriend to help her in every irrational circumstance of life, providing answers and solutions.

Even as Bird wishes Jesus to solve her problems, she childishly thinks the worst of any situation that she does not understand. For example, when she reflects on the attack by the "coal-eyed boy" in the orange grove, Bird decides that she "had been kissed by the Devil himself" (49). She thinks, "Maybe that kiss had sealed my fate. Maybe like Mama sometimes said, I *was* the Devil's child, an easy mark for the spells he cast all around" (49). Later Bird is afraid to get close to her mother for fear "her anger and sadness would rub off" on her, making it "even tougher to get rid of the cold wind that swirled" in her veins (69). She believes that she is "destined to cause noise and trouble" (243). Even when Miss Zora speaks with Glory Marie about arrangements for the girls, Bird assumes that her mother is "saying all kinds of mean things" about her (254). In her child's eyes, she has no hope that she is not the main problem to be solved.

Bird does, however, recognize that her whole family is problematic, so she often daydreams of some "perfect" family. After being beaten, Bird would wonder "if there were children in the world who, at that very moment, were being doted on by fat grandmamas. Or little girls whose hair was being brushed out of their eyes as their honey-tempered mamas whispered, 'You're such a good child'" (50). She daydreams that she is the daughter of Jack, the policeman, who brings home honey buns for her to eat (52). While she is riding with Hank in his MG, she dreams that they would end up in a big city and "lead a trouble-free life. Mama and Daddy would. . . . behave like TV parents" (65).

After Glory Marie beats Phoebe for her friendship with Mr. Ippolito's son, Bird daydreams that a TV station noticed their plight, a rich family bought them "a nice house," and her mama "got a good job" and "didn't feel moved to beat her children" (126). Before Thanksgiving, Bird daydreams of a perfect family that included her friend Miss Zora and her brother Hank in "a big house together—one that didn't have any roaches or spiders" (138). In all of her dreams of a perfect family, the "perfect" is always represented by a healthy mother. When her mother had disappeared more than once in what Bird calls her "nod at freedom," Bird thought to herself, "[W]hen Mama was out of the house, we lost all sense of direction" (53). In her Thanksgiving daydream, Bird thinks, "[U]nder Miss Zora's influence, Mama would blossom" (138). When she and Phoebe are packed to leave with Miss Zora, Bird is still dreaming of that perfect family. She "tried to think of a way to change the course of this terrible event"; she prays, "Please, dear Jesus, bless my mama with an immediate healing" (263). The child who is Bird wants to daydream and pray a solution into existence.

Some of Bird's most unusual fantasies have to do with her namesakes, birds. When her mother leaves home and she wishes so desperately for her to come back, she awakens after a night in which she felt she herself was disappearing to find that she cannot speak. She remembers the blackbird that had sat on the live oak outside her bedroom window and decides that the blackbird had stolen her voice. When she goes outside to find the bird, she says she "heard her, cackling up a storm, spending [Bird's] whole lifetime supply of words as if speeches and phrases were free" (56). When her mother has recovered from being beaten, and Billy has gone into hiding, Bird dreams of

the blackbird once again, hearing her own words fly “out of her gleaming night-colored throat” and wondering “if they were falling toward heaven or hell” (74). She is fearful that her words “are swirling into some unknown dark place” she will never be able to reach” (74-75). When her mother tells her of her father’s death, Bird relates that she “could barely hear her [mother] for the blackbird cackling” and her own “words came out as meaningless, garbled noises” (76). Her dreams of the blackbird become more intense: not only does the blackbird “steal” more of her words, but, according to Bird, “She lit on my windowsill and then flew into the room, lifted me by my shoulders, and carried me out of my house, far above the treetops. . . . and I saw the earth the way angels must see it: a ball of light, blue and clear, where nothing is still or certain” (83). Not until Hank shoots the blackbird does Bird retrieve her ability to speak, but when she does, her first words indicate her depth of unhappiness in their white trash house in the grove: “I want to go away from here. Please Mama, take me away!” (85). Just as her fantasies create a perfect family with a perfect mother, these dreams of the blackbird create a fantasy where her mother will be protector and savior.

Seeing her mother as protector and savior rises out of Bird’s need for her mother, a need that she articulates in very adult terms:

I needed Mama. I needed to hear her careful laugh when I said funny or silly things. I needed to have a bowl of cereal waiting for me on the kitchen table every morning of my life. I needed for her to worry over me when I had a fever, and to kiss my forehead before I went to bed, and to

every now and again murmur those rare words, "Bird, you're my little buttercup." (55)

Having such a need does not, however, keep Bird from recognizing that she must protect herself from her mother who more often beats than caresses. When her mother forces her into the police car, Bird buries her face in her sister's lap, thinking, "It was a good way to sit—Mama couldn't hit me full in the face" (7). Another aspect of protecting herself is lying to others about the injuries she receives at home. For example, she tells her first grade teacher that a woodpecker had pecked her in order to keep secret the fact that her mother "had seen fit to take a high heel" to her face (20). After Glory Marie and the girls have moved to Tampa, Bird describes her mother as a volcano: "You never know when she's going to blow"; therefore, the girls and the Ippolito boys who are decorating a Christmas tree "all walked lightly for fear [they] might set her off" (175). Instead of asking to go to midnight mass, a request which she knew would "sour her good mood," Bird remains quiet, thinking to herself, "You're lucky you got the tree" (176). Later, after being severely beaten by her mother, she braces herself for yet another blow when her mother comes back from a long drive and a talk with Miss Zora. She can barely understand when her mother kisses her instead. In the aftermath of the beating and the talk and the kiss and Glory Marie's decision to send the girls away with Miss Zora, Bird relates, "[M]y heart filled with sad amazement—without a doubt, there was a time when I was not afraid of my mama. Or her hands" (263). Bird has had to awaken to adult sensibilities because of the abuse of her mother.

Bird's mature outlook manifests itself in her ability to parent her mother, even when her mother is most unlovable. The "voice," which had whispered to her that she, Avocet Abigail Jackson, was not to blame for her mother's anger or behavior, also tells Bird to go to her mother in the middle of the night when Glory Marie was sobbing and to tell her, "Everything is going to be okay, Mama. I promise. Life is going to get better" (112). Later she attributes to the voice another command to go to Glory Marie when she is working off a "drunk." Bird recalls the "drunken ramblings" as forcing her, Bird, "to act like the mama—comforting her, making her drinks, urging her to eat" (213). Bird is able to understand her mother's need: "It was as if all the beatings she'd ever suffered and all the ones she'd dished out were conspiring against her, forcing her bones off their hinges, causing her to shake and rattle as if she were nothing but a creaking skeleton of a mother" (257). Not only could Bird understand her own need for a mother, but also she intuits her mother's need for a mother and fulfills that need.

Another sign of Bird's maturity is her ability to recognize and verbalize her anger. When her mother chides her for dreaming too much and for being a "little fool," Bird felt that she had "no earthly idea how to avoid being a Baptist or a fool," thinking that these were roles that "had been woven into [her] soul at birth" (31). She recognizes that her "pain was exceeded only by fury," wanting "God to rot in hell for making [her] a dreamer" (31). After her mother's severe injuries at the hand of her father, Bird in her childishness thinks, "Maybe Jesus has other plans for us," but in her adult mind she is angry: "Mama being made to suffer in order to purify my family seemed like a dirty deal to me" (70). Her anger is so directed toward this God manifested in Jesus that she rejects

the idea of forgiveness as “too complicated” and draws a picture of God based on her idea of the simplicity of a “wrathful God”: “A circle, a planet, dark and dense. Yes, a black hole. Not a speck of light. Sucks you in. Never lets you out” (226-227). Her anger reaches a climax when she attempts to run away from home following the worst beating her mother has ever given her. She curses, “Goddamn it! Bitter is the girl who is forsaken. . . . Bitter is the girl who is tired of being a little fool” (233). Her injured body is that of a girl of ten years, but her wounded mind is that of an adult who grapples with the senselessness of her life.

This adult mind yields insights that a young girl would not ordinarily perceive. Instead of her earlier daydreams about guardian angels coming out of nowhere to solve her problems (2), at Christmas time Bird realizes “the goodness in common people” (177). Now her guardian angels are L.J. who gives her family a Christmas tree and Miss Zora who is, for her, “a house of peace” (177). Also, she realizes, despite her fear to the contrary, that “talking about Daddy was painful but maybe good for Glory Marie” (187). Through the talks of the family that Christmas, Bird discovers that she is not the “only one in the family who felt responsible for” her father’s death. She is able to see that her mother accused her of killing him “to take the sting out of her [Glory Marie’s] own guilty feelings” (190). Bird becomes aware, too, that her mother pits the two daughters against each other. She thinks, “[T]here wouldn’t ever be any winners in a game based on mean-heartedness” (229). Later she is able to bond with Phoebe and Miss Zora on the horrific night of her beating by dancing to radio music and suggesting a slumber party. As they lie on the floor together she sees that they are “trying to find comfort in a world

bent on spinning out of control" (251). The adult mind within Bird's girl-body recognizes the chaos of their lives. When she sees her mother and Miss Zora making plans as if they are old friends, in her childish way she thinks to herself, "Adults were confusing," yet she is quite aware of the significance of the action of her mother in making these plans. She thinks, "Mama's life was sad and mean and it had been for years. But still, wasn't Mama doing something great, something huge? Wasn't it a miracle, in and of itself, that she decided our grief and violence needed to end? . . . It would not be easy for any of us, I realized, this stepping out of my family's barbed-wire circle" (265). Bird has grown up quickly because of her mother's violence. She speaks the wisdom of a person who has experienced deep pain.

Like Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bird's maturity stems from her encounters with stereotypical "white trash" behavior. The violence of such behavior forces Bird to reflect on her situation in ways beyond the scope of a child's life. Even though Bird, too, at times has the anger of a stereotypical white trash character, she has a strength of personality which causes her to rise above the stereotype. Instead of accepting the guilt of poverty, she recognizes hope for both her family and herself.

When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy.

The way I liked best was letting go a poisonous spider in his bed. It would bite him and he'd be dead and swollen up and I would shudder to find him so. . . . But I did not kill my daddy. He drank his own self to death the year after the County moved me

out. . . All I did was wish him dead real hard every now and then. And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive.

(*Ellen Foster* 1)

Thus begins Ellen Foster's narrative of her tenth and eleventh years, years of sudden and abrupt changes that cause her to waver on the dividing line between childhood and adulthood. Often Ellen's language reveals the child in her. When she tries to explain her mother's illness, she mixes it with her mother's ill-fated marriage, saying that, although no one had made her mother marry her father, she had had "romantic fever" as a child, thus giving her a bad heart (3). She miscalls the shoes that her teacher Julia purchases for her to wear to court as black "patting" leather (55). Describing her new mama's house and rules, Ellen relates, "Nobody barks, farts, or feeds the dogs under the table here. When everybody is done eating my new mama puts the dishes in a thing, shuts the door, cuts it on, and Wa-La they are clean" (4). And although she does not know the word "dishwasher" nor the word "vacuum cleaner" to describe "a thing to suck it [dirt] all up" (30), she does understand the rules of a child's world where it is important "to wait your go" in order to ride the pony or eat the first biscuit (13). She is also child enough to describe her birthday cake as tasting the way "you might expect pink to be" (51) and to wish to call a baby girl "Euglena" after her favorite microscope slide (103).

A very poignant way in which Ellen reveals her child-like personality is in her description of her mother's death. In these words, she shows her need to be the child taken care of by the mother: "I always want to lay here. And she moves her arm up and I push my head down by her side. And I will crawl in and make room for myself. My heart can be the one that beats. And hers has stopped" (10). Innocently she says she can

have her “while she sleeps but just is not breathing” (10). Addressing her mother directly, Ellen says, “You can rest with me until somebody comes to get you. We will not say anything. We can rest” (11). Even her idea of her mother’s burial is rather fanciful, as she thinks, “Close the cover. Close it down. Your mama has flown. She would not wait to see them close the cover down. . . . Do not do that with everybody looking. Folks do not want to see a body disappear before their very eyes. . . . Is she in there? It is all done with lights said the magician. Where is she? Not in the box. You cannot rest in a box” (21-22). The thought that she should have done more to prevent her mother’s death is so traumatic that Ellen actually creates the voice of the magician to speak to her about the coffin which cannot really hold a person.

The magician is just one of Ellen’s fantasies. She has several other, more violent, fantasies which have to do with getting rid of her father. She imagines that he will drive off into a ditch and freeze to death, that she will set the house on fire and he will die, or that she will shoot him with a pistol in front of the school (33, 36, 54). She also fantasizes about her mama’s mama, once wishing that she could turn her “buddy Starletta loose” to break all of her grandmother’s collectibles, and again wishing that she could let the “colored” family that she had heard “eats off records” to come and eat off her grandmother’s “four sets of dish plates” (62). Her calmer, more wishful imagination creates families, clothes them, and gives them all kinds of household goods when she plays “catalog,” explaining that although the catalog is old, her “family” “had no way of knowing they were not in style” (26). Perhaps her most important fantasy is the one in which she dreams of her “new mama” seeing her in her new dress, a dress to “catch

somebody's eye with" (98). Thinking that she "could pass for a princess in that dress," Ellen says, "I look like I am worth something today and she [her new mama] will notice the dress first and then me inside it and say to herself I sure would like to have a little girl like her" (98). All of her fantasies, whether violent or peaceful, are tools by which Ellen sees ways to change her situation and create a new family for herself.

Another interesting aspect of Ellen's child-like behavior is how she is always keeping score with the unseen in her life. For example, when her grandmother gets sick, Ellen immediately decides that she "will look after this one good" and not let "a soul push" her around (77). Her words indicate her responsible feelings about her handling of her mother's overdose and her father's bullying of that situation. Childishly she thinks, "I will let her sleep but I'll wake her up if she starts to die. I hope she can give me some warning. That is what I should have done with the first one" (77). When her grandmother does die, as Ellen says, "[I]n spite of me," Ellen tries giving CPR to her grandmother and reports, "She did not live but at least I did not slip into a dream beside her" (79-80). She has in some measure made up for sleeping beside her own dead mama. Then Ellen tallies the score for her dead grandmother: "[T]he score is two to one now. I might have my mama's soul to worry over but you've got my daddy's and your own. The score is two to one but I win" (80). She also tries to even the score with the unseen Jesus. Before the undertakers and the two aunts arrive, Ellen has time to put a hat on her grandmother's head and artificial flowers all around her to make her "pretty as a picture" (91). Then she talks to Jesus:

Take this one I got prettied up and mark it down by my name to balance against the one I held back from you before. . . . And be sure I get the credit for it and if you can please show me some way that you and me are even now. I do not think I want to go through this again. I know I told her she had her soul to worry over but I lied to her out of spite. I am the one who worries about souls and I do not want to now no Lord I just want to worry about my own self now and the living I got to do. (92)

Although Ellen prays to Jesus to even the score so that she can worry about her "own self," that worrying contains an element of evening scores. When she shows up at her new mama's door on Christmas day, having been thrown out of her aunt's house, Ellen requests refuge both logically and eloquently, crowning her request by showing her new mama the \$166 that she has collected for her upkeep. Her words show her need for things to be "even": "But I want to pay you that money so we can keep this all on the up in up. That way you and me will be even. You get the money and I stay here until I graduate from high school" (119). The most touching example of Ellen's innate sense of fairness or evenness, however, can be seen in Ellen's determination to have Starletta visit her at her new mama's. At first Ellen thinks that she wants to give Starletta gifts and to receive something in return, but then she realizes that she just wants the presence of Starletta. She says, "I want her just to enjoy herself and let me give her without the talking all she has coming her way. Lord I do owe her. And all I want in return is to wake up on Monday knowing the two of us are even. Lord then we will all be straight" (100). Ellen, who has not received justice in her young life, is primarily concerned with

giving justice to others, including her mean grandmother, who has given reason for unjust treatment of herself, and her African American friend, who suffers from the unjust treatment of a society prejudiced for no reason.

This sense of justice indicates a level of maturity in Ellen, even if it is expressed in immature language. Her maturity also appears in her expressions of anger about the situations within which she must live. When she is still living at home with her mother and father, she is able to voice her anger about her father's drunkenness in powerful symbols of storm: "[O]h how I have my rage and desire for the lightning to come and strike a vengeance on him" (7). Again, when her father restrains her from helping her mother, Ellen says, "All the time I knew he was evil and I did not have the proof" (9). Bitterly humorous, Ellen speaks of her father's "work outfits," dreaming of what he could say if he were an "Esso man": "Can I help you ma'am? Check your tires? Change your oil? Throw a knife at you?" (11). Bitter, too, are her words after her mother's death: "Still king. Now quiet. She finally shut him up" (12). Ellen's words of anger about her father's behavior are strong and adult, revealing not a child with an ideal "daddy" image, even though she calls her father "daddy," but an adult with an image of a cruel person.

Ellen's insights go far beyond those concerning her father. When the undertaker is solicitous of Ellen after her mother's death and comes to the house twice to "say he cares," Ellen says she "would like him better if he said it is my job to care." She knows that he makes "more money" than she will ever see "just to care" (15). Honesty, not superficiality, matters to Ellen. She also is able to view the superficiality of her Aunt Nadine's interest in the undertaker; Ellen knows that Aunt Nadine's interest stems from

his status as a prospective customer of her “Convenience Secret of the Century food slicer” (17). Furthermore, Ellen can see the faulty logic when the preacher says he did not know her mama but “feels like he knew her well because he has met” the family and they “are all so nice.” Ellen’s thoughts are that “[i]t does not bother him that what he said does not make good sense” (20). Ellen also feels anger at the greed of the “white women from town” who buy quilts from Starletta’s mama only to “turn around and sell them again for a pretty penny” (30). Adult foibles are transparent to Ellen, who sees with adult eyes.

Ellen also demonstrates her maturity in her wisdom concerning money matters. When her mother has spilled her heart medicine all over the table, Ellen’s first impulse is to gather them up because “[t]hey cost money” (9). After her mother dies, Ellen and her father become dependent upon the money which her Uncles Rudolph and Ellis give them. Even though Ellen is only ten years old, she is the one who apportions the money, thinking to herself, “You got the lights, gas to heat and cook, food, and extras” (25). She even takes charge of getting the electricity turned on after her father has ignored a bill for too long. She buys herself frozen dinners, fresh fish, and candy bars, buying the latter by the box because “[i]t is better to buy in bulk” (26). Ellen also makes sure that she gets receipts for all that she buys “in case something falls apart” because manufacturers “ought to build things to last” (97). When her daddy comes to the school, waving his money and yelling for her to come back, Ellen yells “for him to put his dollars on the ground and go back home” because “[t]here was no sense in him leaving with the money” (54). By the time she goes to live with her mama’s mama, Ellen has decided that

she wants all of her early possessions to fit in one box because all she “really cared about accumulating was money” (61). She “saved a bundle just in case . . . [she] needed some cash,” as she felt she did when she went to bargain for a home with her new mama (117).

Ellen’s rather adult views go beyond her sense in money matters to other kinds of situations. After her mother dies and she is left in a house with a father who is often absent, Ellen entertains herself in various ways, one of which was completing Girl Scout badges. The only problem is that her father is not around to supervise and authorize the completion of the work; therefore, Ellen signs her daddy’s initials, saying, “I wanted the badges more than I needed to be honest” (27). Most children of ten could not articulate their motivation in such succinct fashion. Also, she is aware of her ambivalent feelings toward her grandmother, responding to her grandmother’s demand to take better care of her than she did her mother with the confession, “I promise loud I will so we might not hear the other one who says kill her” (79). After her father dies, she is able to see her own mistake in thinking that her grandmother would be happy in his death, saying, “She was the kind of woman you cannot even die to suit” (71). Living with her Aunt Nadine and Cousin Dora gives Ellen additional insights. When she imagines that the two of them sit around talking about Dora’s “dead daddy” being in heaven “strumming on a harp with the angels,” she thinks to herself, “Chickenshit is what I would say. She might as well have said sugar Dora your daddy isn’t dead. Why he’s just up at the North Pole working away on scooters and train sets like a good elf should. Why he’s Santa’s favorite helper! But they get some comfort out of the made up stories. And if that helps them get along maybe I should not poke fun” (96). Later, when she is trying to convince Dora that Santa

Claus might not bring her everything she wants and Dora is denying such a possibility, Ellen thinks, "And I stood there feeling wise that I knew what could be true and what all could happen even when you least expect it. One day somebody's going to teach that Dora a lesson" (107). Of course, Dora is not the one to learn a lesson that Christmas. Instead, Ellen learns yet another lesson in self-reliance; nevertheless, her insights into the thoughts and actions of those around her indicate wisdom beyond her years.

Ellen's wisdom, like Bone's and Bird's, comes from the crucible of violence and cruelty. Instead of reacting in childlike fear to her father's sexual and physical violence and her grandmother and aunts' emotional abuse, Ellen behaves maturely. She is yet another character who has gone beyond the self-inflicted guilt of the poverty stricken to the self-imposed discipline of the self-reliant.

Bone, Bird, and Ellen, in their childishness, first accept the label which is placed upon them by others. Knowing they are "trash," they chafe under the label while fantasizing about a different kind of life: Bone with her visions of purifying fire, Bird with her daydreams of fancy homes, Ellen with her magician who can make problems disappear. In each case, however, the young narrators soon learn, perhaps through the very adversities that they encounter, to apprehend the reality of their poverty, their abuse, and their abandonment by those who should be caring for them. These young girls, in that way, are like Mrs. Turpin in O'Connor's story: they accept the truth of the revealed situation and they envision the future, just as Mrs. Turpin sees judgment day with those like her bringing up the rear, behind the white trash and the "niggers" in the march to the

heavenly city. The difference between these girls and Mrs. Turpin, of course, is that they envision a future in which they are empowered, a future in which they can change what might have been. Instead of the tragic revelation of a woman too old to do much more than recognize the error of her ways, theirs is the revelation of youth who will not accept the labels of others, but who will make their own. Joanne Frye's statement about the liberating aspects of the first person narrative for the female character is applicable to each of these girl-narrators: "As her own narrator, she can explicitly examine the destructive power of the femininity text into which she is supposed to be growing and then redefine the premises of representation in order to elude its power. Her narrating 'I' itself becomes her ability to grow up in full complexity" (77-78). In these white trash texts of young girls who have to grow up too soon, the independence of the narrating voice allows the characters to "grow up in full complexity." These fictional characters, then, can move with fluidity, not necessarily fulfilling the "upwardly-mobile" actions, but instead creating their own spaces, categories, borders. In response, readers can also move within these new spaces and categories, trespassing old barriers where new borders appear.

Renny Christopher, writing of the importance of these kinds of texts for university readers, both middle-class and working-class, says that "[f]or middle-class students, they afford an opportunity to see that middle-class values are not neutral or universal. . . . For working-class students, they afford an opportunity to talk about the merits and costs of upward mobility" (53). Jennifer Campbell agrees with Christopher in her assessment that bringing such literature into the classroom has that two-pronged goal, middle-class

awareness of an “other” and working-class recognition of self. At the same time, Campbell voices concerns about political ramifications in the university setting, the very avenue through which many working-class, lower-class, white trash people lose their roots to become the upwardly-mobile middle class (117). This, of course, is exactly what Newitz and Wray are saying in the statement which opens this chapter. They seem to recognize that this group of people (white trash, working-class) might lose their sensitivity to their own backgrounds. Campbell appears to worry that “[m]iddle-class discourse is the (implied) center of meaning, the standard, the normal, while working-class discourse is the (implied) other, the deviant, the flawed” (119). But with new pieces of literature which validate the working-class experience, both the “center” and the “other” will begin to overlap. If, indeed, such works as Allison’s, Fowler’s, and Gibbons’s gain a lasting place in the canon, Campbell’s concern will be moot: another barrier between the lower-class and the middle-class will be replaced by a permeable border where literature from various classes of people will be recognized as equally valuable. In fact, with the continued investigation of scholars into whiteness studies, these pieces of literature might also be the means of reducing the stigmas of both classes and races.

Chapter 3: How Many Ways Can You Spell “Abuse”?

As Marx pointed out long ago, asymmetrical class relations and class exploitation, as well as the maintenance of a large reserve army of the unemployed, are structural aspects of any functioning capitalist order. A critique of capitalist social relations enables us to understand “white trash” in a twofold fashion. It is a way of naming actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and it is a set of myths and stereotypes which justify their continued marginalization.

(Newitz and Wray “What Is” 60)

Why does white trash—stereotype or reality in the form of poor whites—exist in America? Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, as quoted above, would argue that the real culprit in the creation of a white trash reality is the capitalist environment. Capitalism flourishes only when the work force is at the mercy of supply/demand economics. Workers are expendable, coming and going from the workplace at the will of owners who also decide the relative value of the worker’s worth. When minority workers began to be protected by civil rights laws in the 1950s and 1960s, poor white trash, not being designated a minority, not only were not protected, but also were often hurt by the influx of minority workers which the new affirmative action laws required. At the time, the lower working-class, or white trash, workers seemed to be the biggest bigots, refusing to work side by side with African Americans. In *The New South 1945-1980*, Numan Bartley says that what seemed like bigotry on the part of the poor white workers was in reality a reaction to their powerlessness: “[T]hey became increasingly frustrated, angry, and alienated” (278). Because minority workers were taking their jobs, they violently rejected these workers who were much like they were. In addition, Bartley notes an

abundance of female-headed households that lived on the edge of poverty (451), indicating that not only were the forces of capitalism and politics hurting these workers, but that social domestic problems were hurting them as well.

Economically, situations have not improved for poor whites during the intervening forty years. In fact, Doug Henwood, in his article "Trash-o-nomics," reminds us that because there are more whites than there are minorities, the absolute number of poverty-stricken whites is more than that of minority groups, even though the percentage of poor whites might be less when compared to the total white population (183). Allen Berube in his article "Sunset Trailer Park" says that he remembers all too well that the "white working class families who owned or lived in houses could raise their own class standing within the white community by showing how they were better off than the white residents of trailer parks" (18). Berube is concerned with the fact that "[t]he whole country looks more like a trailer park every day" (38). Writing in 1995 and citing a declining economy, lack of job security, impermanency of housing, and transience of workers, Berube worries about the "painful realities" which are hidden by the middle-class's "campy" preferences for items which had once been true signs of poverty (37). Because the middle class has appropriated certain styles of clothing, certain kinds of music, and certain forms of language which have traditionally been associated with white trash, no one really worries about any person who sports such styles. The assumption is that these people are merely middle-class people "playing" at being white trash, and the implication is that there are no "real" white trash people to worry about. Concerned, too, with the proliferation of white trash topics and subjects on today's television talk shows,

Berube says that poor whites “act out the real dramas of their lives as trashy stereotypes, reassuring viewers that it’s someone else who’s really on the bottom” (37).

Such dramatization is the poor people’s way of trying to escape their environment, but it only ends, as Tad Friend says, with the denial of upward mobility (26). The more poor people “play act” at their reality, the less they can convince anyone that they really need help to rise out of the depths of their poverty. In addition, Henwood says that “these days a white household should consider itself lucky if its income is only stagnant, rather than in outright decline”(178). Middle-class America basks in the relative security of an upward spiraling stock market; the poor, the disadvantaged, the white trash, and the lower-class African Americans have no job security, no savings, no stocks and bonds, and no packaged benefits. The gap between the “haves” and the “have nots,” between the affluent and the underclass, is widening daily in America, with no sign that anything can either bridge or minimize it.

For these poor Americans there is no “American dream.” The men cannot move up the corporate ladder; the women cannot hit the glass ceiling; the children of white trash cannot even receive minority scholarships. Roxanne A. Dunbar, writing of a group of white trash workers whom she names “land-poor losers” of the mid-Southern plains, says that these poor whites are “potentially dangerous to the ruling class” because they are proof of the lie of the American dream (76-77). Giavanna Munafo, writing of this idea in her article on Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*, says that “the authority of the former [the “rich”] results in part from projecting such destabilizing threats [as “economic hardship, emotional excess, and substance abuse”] onto the economic and racial others against

whom it defines itself" (48). In other words, the wealthy must deny the existence of conditions that would belie the American dream. For them, poverty does not exist; it is totally ignored. Nevertheless, that American dream which says that white people can attain whatever heights to which they aspire will never become reality for those who have no means to parlay their poverty into wealth. All they can do, Dunbar says, is to feel the "great shame" which is their poverty. Such shame is a testimony to the "'failure' within a system that purports to favor them" since they are white (76). That shame, based on circumstances beyond their control, is ineradicable without money to change their lives.

The old adage that it takes money to make money certainly describes the problem of lower-class American workers. Never earning enough to get ahead, they often fall behind, relying on credit, paying partial amounts on bills, and missing due dates on rent and utilities. Not only do such circumstances cause embarrassment and shame, but they also cause that anger and frustration about which Bartley wrote in reference to mid-century American workers. Now at the beginning of a new century, the nature of American society has caused that shame, frustration, and anger to turn into a very visible violence, a violence which can become part of the *modus operandi* of any poor person in America, including white trash. Literature, reflecting or refracting the society within which it is born, shows the strong emotions and fierce behaviors of its people, including violence born of poverty and extreme circumstances. Two mid-twentieth-century stories which reveal violence among the nation's poor are "Barn Burning" by William Faulkner and "The Growing Season" by Erskine Caldwell.

Abner Snopes, the father in “Barn Burning,” is, without doubt, one of the most despicable characters ever created by Faulkner. He is also the epitome of the white trash stereotype: he takes without giving, harms without healing, and curses without mercy. In this story he twice-ruins a rug in General DeSpain’s home: first, by dragging his muddy feet across it, and second, by having his lethargic daughters scrub it with lye. When DeSpain demands recompense in the form of charges against the crop, Snopes retaliates by suing him. Losing the suit, he reverts to his trademark to show his disdain for those who have more money than he: burning their barns. Faulkner continually reminds the reader of the ruthlessness of this character with words such as “breathless and frozen ferocity” and “cold, dead voice” (426). Sarty, his son, is still innocent enough as a child to think that the DeSpains would be “safe from” his father because their “lives are part of . . . peace and dignity . . . beyond his touch.” The narrator, however, reveals that a “ravenging and jealous rage walked in the ironlike black coat” of Snopes (420-421). His barn burning violence rises out of his jealousy for what others own.

Erskine Caldwell’s “The Growing Season” relates the story of Jesse English, a sharecropper who tries to work twelve acres of cotton with nothing but a mule. By noon Jesse is completely discouraged with the process and lashes out in fury against Fiddler, a new-born animal chained to a chinaberry tree. Jesse leads Fiddler down to a gully where he pushes him into the water and shoots him, screaming, “Stop that kicking and squealing, and die, damn you. . . . Die! Damn you, die!” (215). When Fiddler does not immediately die, Jesse returns with an axe and chops the animal to death. The primary cause of Jesse’s extreme violence is the heat: everything is wilting and ill from it. But the

underlying cause is Jesse's poverty: he has no one to help him to save the crop which is his only livelihood. The anger and frustration boil over into irrational violence.

Both Snopes and English are white trash who turn to violence to alleviate the pain of their poverty. The difference between Faulkner's and Caldwell's men and the violent men and women in the books of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons is the contemporaneity of the latter. The new stories cannot be dismissed as mere fictive devices which disturb the psyche for no more than the time it takes to read them: these authors present the abusers in their stories of white trash without any softening distance. The abuse is described graphically, as if the television camera from the news program has caught it all. At the same time, the graphic detail is not parceled out gratuitously.

Of Allison's work Jeff Giles says there is "not one gratuitous shock"; instead, recalling that Ted Turner refused to air the film version on TNT, Giles mentions that the "frankness" of the story "worried some people" (66). That worry, however, was about the starkness of the abuse, not about the prurient nature of the sexual incident. Lynda Hart agrees with Giles's assessment, saying that Allison herself reports that she softened the violent sexual abuse in *Bastard Out of Carolina* because she did not want to be pushed into "enormous detail" (12). From another source come these words about the "toned down" violence of Allison's life: "I have the haunting sense that *Bastard Out of Carolina* euphemized the abuse in Allison's childhood" (4). These words of Roasaria Champagne compare the novel compared to Allison's memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Similarly, in an interview with Bob Summers concerning the popularity of *Ellen Foster*, Kaye Gibbons states emphatically that she "didn't want the publicity

hook to be [her] miserable childhood" (60). Thus, Gibbons implies that she, too, muted real-life abuse when transforming her life into fiction. Fowler, when speaking of the transformation of her past into the novel *Before Women Had Wings*, says that the "key . . . is turning it into a positive instead of a negative" (qtd. in Svingen 4). Again, the implication is that real abuse was mitigated, or made positive, in order to turn it into palatable fiction. These three have sanitized their childhoods by creating fictional characters and settings. Anyone reading *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Before Women Had Wings*, and *Ellen Foster* without knowing of the three authors' backgrounds of abuse would not recognize that the abuse has been "sanitized." To the unaware reader, the stories show graphic abuse. Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons will not let their readers forget that sexual and physical abuse is a reality in today's America, a reality which needs to be confronted and dismantled.

"Bone knows I'd never mean to hurt her. Bone knows I love her. . . . What did I know? What did I believe? I looked at his hands. No, he never meant to hurt me, not really, I told myself, but more and more those hands seemed to move before he could think. His hands were big, impersonal, and fast. I could not avoid them. . . . My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over the edge of the mattress, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes.

(Bastard Out of Carolina 70)

Although Daddy Glen's hands are large, he is a small person who carries the stigma of youth: Earle thinks of him as a "short stubborn boy" (10) and Anney, herself,

first thinks of him as a “boy . . . with his dark blue eyes and bushy brown hair” (13). Bone, besides noticing his large hands for which gloves must be bought in tall men’s specialty shops, describes his boy-size feet for which boots could only be found in the boys’ department at Sears (34). Contrasting his hands that “hung like baseball mitts” to his “slender, small-boned frame,” Bone states that the hands were “startling, incongruous, constantly in motion, and the only evidence of just how strong he was” (35). Needing to be accepted as an adult, to show his strength as an equal to other men, Glen uses those hands in destructive ways.

That Glen’s hands were destructive should have been no surprise to anyone. When first meeting him, Anney had “imagined” that “[h]e’d make a good daddy . . . a steady man,” but later she realizes that he lacks Lyle’s [her first husband who had died] pleasant disposition (15). She changes her thoughts to “maybe he’d make a good daddy” (15). Bone, narrating the event of Anney and Glen’s courtship, notes that Glen “didn’t drink, didn’t mess around, didn’t even talk dirty, but the air around him seemed to hum with vibration and his hands were enormous” (35). When Anney tries to convince her sisters of Glen’s gentleness, the “aunts would nod, but not with much conviction” (35). Granny says, “[T]hat boy’s got something wrong with him. He’s always looking at me out the sides of his eyes like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone. And you know Anney’s the bone he wants” (37). Uncle Earle thinks that Glen “never fought in friendly style. He either gave you that slow grin or went all out and tried to kill you” (38). The great aunts Maybelle and Marvella do not trust Glen, either, saying that he loves Anney “like a gambler loves a fast racehorse or a desperate man loves whiskey.”

That kind of love eats a man up" (41). Uncle Nevil is afraid that Glen would "turn like whiskey in a bad barrel" (45). Unfortunately, the relatives do not share their misgivings with Anney, nor does she heed her own doubts that he would make a good father. Instead she marries him and abandons Bone to all the abuse his anger could create.

Unfortunately for Bone, her family is rather proud of the fact that the "[m]an can't keep his temper," as Granny says (100). Bone understands that "[t]he berserker rage that would come on him was just a shade off the power of the Boatwrights' famous binges" (100). For this white trash family whose men think nothing of creating havoc, this angry middle-class young man proves that he can "hold his own" against those who might put him down. Bone, however, says she sees "two separate movie images" of his temper: "Daddy Glen screaming at me, his neck bright red with rage, and the other, impossible vision just by it, Daddy Glen at *his* daddy's house with his head hanging down and his mouth so soft spit shone on the lower lip" (100). This young girl cannot name the low-esteem that Glen feels, but she describes the problems of the youngest of three boys in a family where all the men are expected to do great things. Not only does Glen not measure up, but also he is laughed at by his older brothers "for his hot temper, bad memory, and general uselessness" (12). Although Bone does not report Glen's daddy's words, Glen's demeanor indicates that the attitude of his father reiterates that of the brothers': hot-headed, stubborn, useless. Later Bone overhears her mama admit that Glen's family background is a problem: "Anybody can see how Glen got bent, what his daddy's done to him. I an't never seen a boy wanted his daddy's love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get out from under his daddy's meanness"

(132). Unfortunately for Bone, Glen is like so many others who have been abused in some way: he becomes an abuser.

Glen's low esteem manifests itself as a need to be in charge of situations concerning Anney and the girls. When Glen decides that Reese should receive a share from her grandmother's land, he tries to bully the Parsons' family because, as he says, "I know their type" (57). Anney is concerned that he is perhaps being rude, but she explains to Bone that he "needs to take care of this," even if it is at the expense of hurting "that old woman" Grandma Parsons (57). This incident is a clear indication of Anney's inability to resist Glen's actions because of some mistaken notion that he must practice being strong and controlling. At one point, when Anney has accepted money from her brother Earle, Glen screams at her "that she had shamed him," saying, "I'm a grown man. I don't need your damn brother to pay my way" (68). Instead of forgetting the incident, Glen continues to brood "for weeks," angrily saying, "Nothing I do goes right. I put my hand in a honey jar and it comes out shit!" (69). He rebuffs Anney's attempt to mollify him by screaming, "Don't give me that mama shit. Just shut up" (69). While Reese sobs and Bone jumps to her feet, preparing to protect her mother, Anney whispers the words, "It's all right, honey. I understand" (69). Anney accepts his behavior instead of trying to stop it. The first time that Anney catches Glen beating Bone with a belt, his excuse to her is that "[s]omeone's got to love her enough to care how she turns out" (107). Even though Anney appears to withstand this reasoning, when she is alone with Bone, she can only ask what Bone had done. Bone thinks to herself that all she had done was to run in the house. For that she had been called a bitch, slammed into a wall, and beaten with the

belt. She hears, however, a different story as she listens through the walls to the explanation Glen gives Anney: "She told me she hated me, told me I would never be her daddy. . . . And—oh, God, Anney! They laid me off today. Just put me out without a care. And what am I going to do to feed these girls now?" (107). His anger is a direct result, not of Bone's misbehavior, but of his economic fears.

Often Glen's rage has to do with the lack of money, a situation which leads to his inability to be in control. Bone had recognized this relationship between lack of money and lack of control when Glen and Anney's infant son had to be buried in the Boatwright cemetery plot because Glen did not have the money to buy a gravesite. Bone says that "that seemed to be the thing that finally broke his grief and turned it to rage" (49). Connections between Glen's inability to control situations and his violence are not often as explicitly shown as in this instance, but the issues of esteem issues are an underlying factor in his acts of violence towards Bone.

Glen's violence occurs so frequently that Bone creates fantasies "more violent and more complicated" as he beats her "with the same two or three belts" (112). She says that in the fantasy she was "able to defy Daddy Glen," but "[t]here was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery" (113). Anney, who in one breath questions Bone with the words, "How could you do that," in the next begs, "[B]e more careful" (112). It is not till after a second broken collarbone and a broken coccyx that Anney can admit Glen's part in Bone's injuries. He, of course, always has the ready answer that "[s]he's always getting into something" (112). Even after a separation from Glen and the consequent reunion of

the family, Glen's violence continues to escalate until Anney admits, "For so long, I've just hoped and prayed, dreamed and pretended. I've hung on, just hung on" (247). Bone responds, "I made him mad. I did" (247). In the face of continued violence, Anney denies reality for as long as possible and Bone complies with the lie that keeps the family together.

That lie is not just one of denying physical violence, for when Bone questions Daddy Glen's assurance of love, she has already experienced her first sexual abuse at his hand. While waiting for Anney to give birth to their son, Glen pulls eight-year-old Bone onto his lap where they are seated in the car and proceeds to masturbate, using her body as the instrument of his desire. She relates both his actions—"He began to rock me then, between his stomach and his wrist, his fingers fumbling at his britches"—and his words—"He started talking again, telling me Mama was going to be all right, that he loved me, that we were all going to be so happy" (46). Bone sees his "sex" as "a mystery, scary and hard" to which she responds by sobbing "once" (47). His eyes, from which she had seen a smile "as plain as the one on his mouth" during the attack, become "dark and empty" (47). Often Bone watches Glen's eyes and hands for signs of the abuse that will surely come her way again and again.

Nor is Bone the only one who sees Glen's hands as weapons. Her Uncle Earle says that the "[b]oy uses those hands of his like pickaxes" (61). The uncles and boy cousins continue with humorous boastings of Glen's anger: "He gets crazy when he's angry. Use his dick if he can't reach you with his arms, and that'll cripple you fast enough. . . . Man's got a horse dick" (61-62). Bone, listening to them, thinks, "[I]t wasn't

Daddy Glen's sex that made me nervous. It was those hands . . . [N]o matter how hard I tried, I never moved fast enough for him" (62). Usually, then, Bone was more afraid of Glen's recurring physical abuse than of his sexual abuse, which she had trouble labeling. She questions whether sex is what he had been doing to her in the parking lot of the hospital (63), just as she does his later actions:

And he did love me, He told me so over and over again, holding my body tight to his, his hands shaking as they moved restlessly, endlessly, over my belly, ass, and thighs. . . . It wasn't sex, not like a man and woman pushing their bodies into each other, but then, it was something like sex, something powerful and frightening that he wanted badly and I did not understand at all. (108)

Worse than all of the questioning of his actions and the fear and shame she felt was the fact that "it was the only time his hands were gentle" (109). But even that fact changes with Glen's increasing violence. When he beats her, Bone notes "the feel of his sex" against her. She wonders if he had kept beating her "until he came in his trousers" (253). Sex and violence no longer are separate acts; Bone senses that violence activates powerful sexual feelings in Glen.

Glen's rape of Bone demonstrates this dangerous connection between sex and violence. Before the attack, Bone sees in Glen's eyes pain and hatred, "the thing that made them burn" (283). As he touches her, however, his angry words change to a moan and he kisses her. Glen's behavior echoes earlier episodes when he has caressed Bone, telling her that she drives him "crazy" (109). Then as Bone uses a butter knife to try to

ward him off, he turns violent, cursing and kicking her, saying, "I'll shut you up. I'll teach you" (284). The rage behind the attack manifests itself in his words to Bone: "You'll never mouth off to me again. You'll keep your mouth shut. You'll do as you're told. You'll tell Anney what I want you to tell her" (285). Glen also uses the all-too typical phrase used by both abusers and "objective bystanders": "You've always wanted it. Don't tell me you don't" (285). Bone's first concern, then, after the attack is to make sure her mother knows the truth: "I had to tell her that I had fought him, that I had never wanted him to touch me, never" (287). Where sex and violence mix, victims always have the fear that others will not understand their innocence in the sexual part of the act.

Glen's actions are typical of a man who has more than one problem. He could be poverty-stricken and still have pride in himself and his abilities or he could have a decent job and still deal with issues of self-esteem. But to have no steady job and low self-esteem pushes him into his aggressive behaviors in which his great physical strength becomes his only safeguard against the onslaught of failure. He seems similar to Abner Snopes or Jesse English: all three turn to violence when they feel helpless and out of control. Then, too, Glen seems much like the real life examples from Numan Bartley's sociological study: Glen, like the men Bartley describes, is "increasingly frustrated, angry, and alienated." Unfortunately, his violence erupts in the innocence of Bone's childhood.

Mama was a pretty woman. . . . She had black hair and black eyes. . . . Phoebe looked like Mama's child with all that darkness—skin and hair and eyes and all—but even

shared looks didn't make the two of them close. No, she wasn't a woman you could get close to on a regular basis.

(*Before Women Had Wings* 4)

Bird is always able to separate the loveliness of her mother's physical body from the ugliness of her actions and attitudes. Bird observes Glory Marie's "lovely hands" (5), her "nice" dress for the store—"no miniskirts, no sunglasses the color of limes" (6), and her "comfortable, newly scrubbed" look in the clothes and makeup she wears to visit Billy, her husband and Bird's father, in jail (11). Her lovely appearance and her love for her children are "obscured by a mean streak that showed itself at random" (13). That mean streak manifests itself in an "ugly glare" defined by Bird as "her faintly wrinkled skin tightening as if anger were a drawstring attached to her angles and bones" (29), but it immediately changes when Glory Marie's "face softened and her black eyes went misty" and she hugged Bird "so hard it hurt" (30). The dichotomy of love, demonstrated by loveliness, and anger, demonstrated by ugly actions, is a constant in Glory Marie's and Billy's lives. Every time that one or the other beats one of the girls, the accompanying words are "[t]his hurts your daddy and me a helluva lot more than it hurts you" (36) and "[w]e're trying to make decent humans out of you" (50).

On the day of Phoebe's confirmation, Bird wanders off into the grove. Her mother tells her, "[B]ecause you can't keep your fat ass where it belongs, she's [Phoebe's] getting her behind ripped raw" (36). Immediately afterwards, Glory Marie surprises Phoebe with a white silk and lace dress that "screamed, 'Virgin,'" according to Bird (38), and mother and daughter walk into the church together "as if the afternoon had never happened" (43). That same evening, after Bird, too, has received a whipping with

a belt for her wanderings, Billy tells Bird, "Sunshine, you shouldn't be scared of nothing. 'Cause I'll always be here for you, Bird. I ain't gonna let nobody hurt you. Ever. I know I spank you now and again, but that's for your own good. You know that" (47). The two parents have no concept that whippings, violence, and foul language aimed at their children are not congruous with love and protection.

Their behavior towards their children is, however, no different from their behavior towards each other. Their white trash background, full of violence and abuse and dysfunction, causes them to compartmentalize their own lives. Bird notes that her father "lived for" Glory Marie's approval as much as Phoebe and she did. And when Glory Marie leaves the home for a while, "sowing her oats," Bird thinks that "he was seeing not his two doll-babies but two walking, talking worries" (53). He cannot hold the two visions together: he sees the girls as daughters to be loved and cherished when home life goes well; he sees the girls as just another worry when it does not. Glory Marie is afflicted with the same kind of compartmentalization. After her father has Glory Marie beaten, Bird says that her mother is "less attractive and more scared": "My slim, trim, smart-talking mama was gone, and in her place was someone whose beat-up features reflected a bruised and swollen heart" that manifests itself in a "hateful spin" of words and attitudes (111).

The most immediate cause for the violence described in Bird's narrative is Billy himself. He is the one who uses the belt to whip the girls at any sign of misbehavior or defiant language. He, too, is the irresponsible one, according to Glory Marie's words: "What you're good for is staying out with your friends all night, drinking, and hanging

with whores" (24). Besides his undesirable behavior, Billy tends toward suicidal thoughts because of Glory Marie's "harsh ways and his many sins" (1). In her anger over Billy's attempted suicide, Glory Marie swears at six-year-old Bird, shakes her, bangs her head against the car door, and calls her "bitch" (7). When Glory Marie returns from the hospital after being beaten so severely by Billy's hired man, Bird does not run to greet her; instead she asks the question, "What if the beating had made her more short-tempered? What if she blamed Daddy's meanness on me?" (71). After Billy's death, Glory Marie begins a litany of his endless sins and shortcomings, being less and less able to forgive "somebody who had a monster inside them." Bird notes, "As Mama became less able to forgive my daddy, her anger grew like wildfire and began to burn us all" (105). The violence in the home directly derives from Billy.

Underlying Billy's direct causation, however, are causes more endemic to the white trash background of these characters. Bird describes her family as "tiny chickens suffocating at the bottom of the heap. Bewildered folks—the sort moneyed people make fun of and never give jobs to. Dumb-assed crackers who drink till dawn in a sorry attempt to forget about all the things they will never have, never become" (73). Bird delineates the two-pronged problem of many Americans commonly called "white trash": poverty and alcoholism, the second more than likely caused by the first. The problem of poverty runs throughout this narrative as a causal factor in Glory Marie's abusive behavior. When Bird tapes her Christmas list to the refrigerator, not only does her mother respond with the words "I'm not going to be able to meet the rent if I have to buy you presents," but she delivers the words in the tone of one who "resented" the children

who might want a gift and who are the cause for rental bills (161). Even after the family begins to receive their government aid checks regularly, and the poverty is somewhat assuaged, Glory Marie's drinking problem continues unabated. Bird remembers, "She hit the bottle with a regularity never before seen. And that liquor, it fed her anger. Behind Mr. Ippolito's back, she railed against him for being a fool and a bad businessman. She railed against Phoebe for being a whore and an ungrateful daughter. She railed against me for being a lazy-assed liar" (212). The violence is compounded by the alcoholism which is, in turn, compounded by the poverty.

Glory Marie verbalizes yet another cause of her problems and, thus, her violence, when she tells Bird that "men *make* the shit in this world" (13). In a drunken stupor she later relates her background of "rapes, beatings . . . even a shooting." She claims that "her life was wasted"; "[s]he should have left men alone, finished college, learned how to take care of herself" (213). After the tremendous beating she gives Bird, she elaborates further on the theme of violent men:

I drink too much, I know. I should not hit either one of you, ever. I know that, too. But I can't stop myself. I want to do right, but something snaps. I turn into my father and then into my husband, and I do to you what they did to me. . . . See, I think I beat you because I was beat. I yell and call you names because that's how it's been for me my whole damn life, people hurling filthy names at me. (258)

Glory Marie spells out the vicious cycle, first as the abused and then as the abuser.

Abuse in this narrative is seen to be more than just the generational cycle; it is also pervasive. Wherever Bird looks, she observes violence or abuse in some form. She notes that Phoebe “talked like Mama” by calling Bird’s silence a “dumb game” and “irritating” (60). As her mother’s violence strengthens, so does Phoebe’s own anger; after Glory Marie has called Phoebe a liar and has slapped her, “Phoebe slapped her back” (205). When Hank tells her not to worry about Mr. Macon who had beaten up their mother because “he’d handled matters in his own way,” Bird knows what he means because she “saw the bruises on Hank’s hand” (68). This brother, who can be so gentle with her sister and her, learned such violence from his mother who had once “broke a broom across” his back (194). Bird even irrationally sees violence where there is none, conflating her “harsh” teacher Mrs. Ritley with her “screaming mama” and being afraid of Mr. Ippolito, the motel owner, “just because he was a man” (102-103). Violence, whether imaginary or real, stalks Bird.

The violence, at first, is sometimes deflected from Bird because she is the younger of the two sisters. She recalls, “Daddy never beat me as hard as he did Phoebe” (37). Often, however, Glory Marie treats the two the same, commanding them to keep their “fat asses at home” and asking how she had managed “to raise such lousy children” (108-109). And although Bird manages to escape the “good-for-nothing whore” label that her mother gives to Phoebe, she is accused by her mother of having “hellish behavior . . . that killed” her father (109-110). When Glory Marie turns her fury on Phoebe for flirting with L. J., she actually protects Bird by telling her to leave or she would “be next.” She leaves fearfully because her mother had “pounded Phoebe so hard”

that she had hit her head and “blood gushed as her brow split open” (121). She reports that “Mama hammered the hair brush and her fists into Phoebe’s mouth, arms, chest, legs” (121). When she returns, she catalogs Phoebe’s injuries: a “nasty” cut, a bruise, swollen eyes, bloody bottom lip, and skin “scratched—head to toe—from those bristles” (123). After such a beating, Phoebe finds reasons to stay away from home, and Bird realizes that she will “suffer the full brunt” of Glory Marie’s anger (124). Someone has to be the recipient of the anger brought on by her past abuse, the violence of men, and the alcoholism that masks her hurt.

Although Bird adjusts to being the prime target of her mother’s anger, she pleads with Hank to stay with them at Christmas time. Her mother had found the gift Bird had made for Miss Zora and had cut it to shreds, meanwhile threatening Bird with the words, “I’m not going to punish you while your brother is here. So for the next four days I want you to stew, you useless lying bitch” (192). When Hank, not understanding her plight, tries to reassure Bird that her “daddy’s fate” won’t be his, she changes the emphasis to her mother with the words, “But Mama’s mean to us, Hank. Sometimes real mean” (194). He only reiterates that he is “not going to be Billy Jackson,” thus leaving Bird to feel “more alone than ever” (195). When her mother repeats the threat against her, Bone reports, “I felt my insides shiver, realized my mama could hurt me in ways I wasn’t able to imagine” (196).

The first of those ways is her mother’s framing her for the theft of a twenty-dollar bill from Mr. Ippolito’s cash register. Glory Marie had stuffed the money into the pocket of a sweater which she forced Bird to put on and conveniently found the money in that

pocket while she was ostensibly buttoning the sweater for Bird. Her mother compounds the abuse by accusing her of stealing the money for Miss Zora and calling Bird a “lying bitch” and a “goddamn fool” before forcing her to confess the deed to Mr. Ippolito (200). Afterwards, Bird says that her mother “busted into the bedroom, looking triumphant, as though she’d had a good time,” and saying, “Don’t ever lie to me again, Bird. I always get even” (202). Not only has Glory Marie not protected her daughter as a mother could be expected to do, but she actually has created a situation in which Bird will receive punishment from both her mother and an outside source, all the while reveling in that punishment.

When the ultimate in violent physical abuse occurs, however, Glory Marie has no specific action to blame; she simply says to Bird, “You’ve had this one coming for a long time, little girl” (230). The culmination of many years of poverty, abuse, and alcoholism, Glory Marie’s violence is especially harsh, as she beats Bird with the buckle end of a belt until “[t]he air grew misty with blood” and her back was mere “strings of flesh” (231-232). All the while her mother is heaping words of abuse upon Bird, calling her “a lying sack of shit” and saying, “It’s no wonder your father is dead. He couldn’t stand the rotten likes of you. He’d be alive today if it weren’t for you” (231). When she is not being abusive, Glory Marie can remember that her violence is part of that vicious cycle brought on by poverty, alcoholism, and the men in her life, but during the times of abuse she speaks out of her “hard fear”: “[I]f I’m not tough with you, then you’ll become like me—a person without a future” (258). Bird’s future is in the hands of the abused abuser who can only repeat the violence of the past.

Although Glory Marie's violence at first appears to be different from Daddy Glen's in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, it really stems from the same roots: poverty and lack of self-esteem. The cycle of abuse from father to past lovers to husband Billy all stem from poverty and the alcohol which makes these men forget that poverty for a short time. Glory Marie is, indeed, caught in a cycle which, in her most honest moments, she understands, but over which she seems to have no control. The white trash cycle, stereotypical but also very real for a segment of America's population, is portrayed vividly by the Jackson family in *Before Women Had Wings*.

My daddy says he will kill me if I try to leave this house . . . He would kill me and my mama both with a knife. He looks at the two of us and rubs her pocketbook, patient, like he sits and waits for folks to die all the time.

My heart can be the one that beats.

And hers has stopped.

Damn him to the bottom of hell damn him. What to do now when the spinning starts people will come and they will want to know why and I cannot tell them why . . . I do not have to tell him so let him sit and wonder at the quiet in here.

Guilty and held down in his chair by God and fear of a sweet dead woman.

(*Ellen Foster* 9-10)

Gibbons's narrator Ellen Foster is only ten years old when her father commits murder in her presence. He is a murderer, not actively, but passively. After Ellen's mother has taken almost all of her heart medication at one sitting, Ellen pleads first with her mother to vomit up the medication and then with her father to be allowed to call for help. In response he uses the threat of killing both of them with a knife, a threat that has

no significance since all he has to do is to wait. Throughout the narrative Ellen carries the burden of knowledge that her mother's death could have been prevented. With that burden she carries the guilt brought on by her own inaction in the light of her father's assurance to her that "[a]ll she needs is some sleep. . . . Take her back there and see if she don't sleep it off." In Ellen's words, "[H]e gave me a guarantee the pills would not hurt her bad" (9). Afterwards, Ellen is left with questions: "My daddy wonders if I plan to tell somebody the whole story. I do not know if there is a written down rule against what he did but if it is not a crime it must be a sin. It is one way or the other. And he wants to know if I'm telling" (15).

Ellen, in fact, does not tell, but the guilt that she feels haunts her throughout her narrative, linking her to her father in an especially abusive way. He has abused her by forcing her to collude in his decision to allow her mother to die. His motivation is never clear; possibly he wants to rid himself of the medical bills. Ellen at least surmises that his thoughts in seeing her mama's mama leave the funeral early might be these: "She [Ellen's mama's mama] is gone. Good. I do not have to pay for her girl [Ellen's mama]" (21). Ellen will never be free of this knowledge by which her father has tied her to him. When her mama's mama asks her point blank, "Ellen you helped him didn't you," Ellen's thoughts show her still struggling to assess blame:

Why did she say that to me I thought Lord did I do the wrong thing? But he said she would just sleep and if that didn't make me quiet then the knife by his hand would. And yes it is easy to see him now in the fog of his not knowing she could be dead soon. It is like when you are sick and you

.

know all the things you ever ate or just wanted to eat are churning in you now and you will be sick to relieve yourself but the relief is a dream you let yourself believe because you know churning is all there is to you. (72)

Ellen sees clearly her father's alcoholic "fogginess" of that day her mother died, but she feels no relief from the "churning" her own clear knowledge of that day brings.

Ellen's father does not stop with the psychological abuse rendered by the death of her mother. The next step for this man who Ellen says "is just too sorry to talk back to" is neglect. Once Ellen's mother is gone, Ellen's father stays away from the home more often than not, forgetting to pay bills, thus causing the electricity to be turned off, and providing no food, so that Ellen must get off the school bus at a grocery in order to purchase her own food, catching a ride home with whoever is available (24-25). Even on Christmas Eve her father fails to come home. Of course, Ellen believes "[i]t is much better if he is gone" (33), preferring his absence and neglect to his presence and abuse, an abuse which turns sexual on New Year's Eve. When he brings home his drinking buddies, one begins to tell him his girl "is just about ripe." He continues with the words, "You got to git em when they is still soff when you mashum" (37). Being alone in the house with these drunk men, Ellen's fear is palpable:

You pray to God they forget about you and the sweet young things that are soff when you mashum and how good one feels when she is pressed up by you. You get out before one can wake up from being passed out on your floor. You get out before they start to dream about the honey pie and the

sugar plums. Step over the sleeping arms and legs of dark men in shadows on your floor. (37)

The problem, however, is not the “dark men,” but her own father, who “touches his hands harder on” her and calls her by her mother’s name. As Ellen struggles to get free and to wake him to the fact that she is not her mother, “[h]e puts the evil back into his self” and she runs to the safety of Starletta’s house (38). The sexual abuse has begun.

Ellen tries to find a new home with her Aunt Betsy after that first sexual encounter with her father, but Aunt Betsy wants only a weekend visitor, not a full-time daughter. Returning home, Ellen works out a plan: “I will just have to lock myself up. . . . If I have to stay here I can lock myself up. Push the chair up to the door and keep something in there to hit with just in case” (43). All too casually, she reports the truth: “I forgot sometimes and he got to me but I got him away from me pretty soon. . . . He might grab and swat but that is all he can do if you are quick. It would have been OK if he had left me alone to begin with but he got confused. Sometimes he would come stand outside my closet door just to tease me. Talking to me all about my mama’s little ninnies” (43).

Ellen is so used to her father’s sexual advances that she responds quite openly to a teacher’s question about a bruise, reporting that her “daddy put the squeeze on” her. Her teacher’s audible shock surprises Ellen, who recounts the incident: “I told her I was used to it so do not get in a uproar over it. You live with something long enough and you get used to it” (44). Ellen has trained herself to be a rational, non-emotional child whose familiarity with abuse is so strong that she cannot respond to it as others do. Her father’s last abusive act is the most outrageous of all: he drives to her school, reeling his truck

into the flower bed and screaming for the whole school to hear "Get the hell out here" (54). He does not stop, however, with the generic command. He waves some cash in his hands, telling Ellen "to come back he would pay for it" and "undoing his britches" (54). Her only response is to tell him to "put his dollars on the ground and go back home" because "[t]here was no sense in him leaving with the money" (54). Absent emotionally, Ellen thinks only of the fact that she needs the money.

Unfortunately for Ellen, the end of her father's abuse, through the intervention of the county court system, means only that the abuse of her grandmother begins. Her grandmother, or mama's mama, as Ellen calls her, has already shown her tendency to neglect Ellen. After Ellen's mother's death, when she could have used some love and care from her grandmother, her grandmother has avoided her, not even inviting Ellen for "her usual big turkey dinner" on Christmas Eve (27). In the courtroom, when Ellen's future is being decided, Ellen thinks that her mama's mama's eyes are saying, "Ha ha I got you now" (56). And when Ellen moves in with her, the active abuse begins. It begins with words, such as "I'll break your little hand if you touch that vase!" (62). Ellen says her words were "not joking but serious" to make her "think of how a broke hand might feel" (62). Her grandmother puts her in the cotton fields to work with her "niggers" because "she could not bear to look" at Ellen's face "day in and day out" (65). Ellen reflects that her mama and daddy had "hired colored people" to do her part of the "slave labor," thus indicating her own opinion of the work in the fields that she was asked to do (63). She calls living in her grandmother's home a "torture chamber" and her grandmother "the damn witch" because "she was so mean" (63, 61). Ellen soon figures

out that her grandmother sees Ellen as a substitute for her daddy, whom the grandmother hates. Ellen says, “[E] ach day I was not exactly him but just enough of his eyes or nose to tease her oh she boiled violent inside. It must have been hard for her to keep in mind that I was a girl Ellen and not a man she wanted to be alive by her so she could kill but wanted him alive too so she could work her power on him” (68). Ellen acknowledges that her mama’s mama’s power was so strong that “without saying one word she could make [Ellen’s] bones shake” (68).

Ellen sees her grandmother’s hatred reach out to others in her father’s family after he dies. When her Uncle Rudolph comes to bring Ellen the flag which had lain on her daddy’s casket, her grandmother, after calling the flag “trash,” threatens Rudolph: “[I]f you don’t think I can ruin you too then just hide and watch me! You just remember whose name that dead bastard’s farm is in and while you’re at it take a drive to the courthouse and check the name on your own damn deed. Then come back here and tell me who is running the show” (71). From this speech Ellen intuits both the poverty she and her father had endured because her grandmother had controlled the monthly allowances and the increasingly debilitating poverty her grandmother had caused for her father after her own departure from the home (74-76).

Ellen’s grandmother’s cruelty increases when she becomes ill. The grandmother fires her “colored household help because she swore they were an infernal conspiracy and were stealing out from her nose” (71). Then she tells the doctor to “unload all the silverware and jewelry he’d stole” (72). She wants no one around her but Ellen whom she is continually warning, “[Y]ou best take better care of me than you did of your

mama" (73). Even as she deteriorates, the grandmother reminds Ellen, "You just remember you are mine now" in order to ensure that Ellen "will never stop paying" for her part in her mama's death (79,78). Ellen's response to her grandmother's threats is a decision to spend the rest of her life "making up for" her mama's death and by making sure that her grandmother does not die while she is "in charge" (77). Even after her grandmother dies "in spite" of Ellen's care, Ellen is quite aware of her "meanness." In her talk to Jesus about letting her grandmother into heaven, Ellen says, "I do not trust this newly dead one and when you look at her face you in your wisdom and seeing will know that her smile is a trick for you. But please take her anyway. . . . You might look at her and say old Ellen might have prettied her up but she still is too mean to be here" (92). Ellen has no delusions concerning her grandmother's essential nature, in life or death.

Ellen's abuse does not end with her grandmother's death; it is continued by her Aunt Nadine and Cousin Dora. From the beginning, Ellen decides that she must behave as if their home is a hotel, thinking, "[T]his would not be home. . . . I will stay for a while until I find the next place maybe with God's help but more than likely without it" (94). She knows that she will more than likely be accused of misbehaviors which will instead be her cousin's "because that is how these two folks operate" (95). When she decides to stay in her room most of the time, she surmises that they were "pleased as punch" (96). The big problem arises when Ellen begins to be hopeful that her aunt will plan "some surprises for her on Christmas" and "Dora will get the spirit from her mama and they will both like me after all" (104-105). Instead, they reject her homemade picture of cats and Ellen says, "I wanted to . . . forget I had tried to appeal to somebody and look at them

now making fun of me" (109). The situation escalates as Nadine calls Ellen "ungrateful little bitch" who needs "the hell beat out" of her (113). Ellen recounts the climactic moment: "She just said for me to get out. To find my evil little self some hole to crawl in. That she didn't want me to begin with. That Betsy didn't want me either. That all she and Dora wanted to do was to live there alone and she would be damned if she would tolerate me or my little superior self another day" (114). The words themselves are abusive enough; the result of the words is even more abusive: Ellen, a child of eleven, is thrown out of the home on Christmas day to fend for herself, being "fresh out of folks" to take her in (116). All of the family members who should be the protectors of a motherless child become abusers.

Poverty is not the issue in the abuse Ellen suffers at the hands of her grandmother and aunts. More than likely, Ellen would label their behavior as "meanness." Readers might label it sheer selfishness. On the other hand, Ellen's father's abuse, although it qualifies as "meanness," stems from poverty and its accompanying alcoholism, much like the violence of Glory Marie and Billy in *Before Women Had Wings*. Ellen's father, being unsuccessful at work, drinks himself into such a state of forgetfulness that he cannot differentiate between Ellen and her mother, nor does he seem to care that he cannot. His sexual abuse seems very much like Glen's in *Bastard Out of Carolina*: he uses sex to feel control over his situation.

Ellen's story is the only one of the three works of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons in which not all of the abusive people are poor, but in all three narratives poverty foments

problems which lead to violence. Bone's stepfather is poor and overwhelmed with his inability to match his brothers' economic status. Bird's mother's poverty is aggravated by her widowhood: she has no one to share either bread-winning or child-rearing responsibilities. Ellen's father has become enamored of his poverty-stricken condition since it gives him an excuse to do nothing but eat, drink, and sleep. The frustration of these individuals causes them to be violent, hurting the children whom they should protect. They lash out in their powerlessness, even as Abner Snopes and Jesse English did in theirs, and even as the poor in our country do today. By exposing the root of the problem for the abusive characters in these works, Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons create empathy not only for these characters, but also for the real white trash who are the models for the characters. Amber Hollibaugh has reported that Allison "doesn't create heroines but gambles instead that her readers need truth" ("House" 15). The violence of the abuser indeed shows a harsh truth. Jillian Sandell also comments on Allison's picture of abuse, saying that "Bone's silence, and the eroticization of Glen's violence, are seen to be an understandable, if ultimately unhealthy, coping strategy" (221). About *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Kate Brandt has said, that "although the book depicts emotional and physical violence, poverty, carelessness, and failure, it also powerfully describes the strength, humor, love, and will to survive that links these family members" (12). The same could be said of Fowler's and Gibbons's books. The family members are truly human creations, a combination of good and evil. Never excusing the characters' behavior, but always accounting for it, these women help readers to cross borders into areas which are

not comfortable or attractive, but which are areas that need to be addressed in this country if violence is to be arrested.

Such explicit investigation into the causes of violence will yield understanding on the part of readers who have accepted such violence as mere stereotypical behavior. These graphic, yet “sanitized,” versions of American life lived in the abusive homes of the poor white change stereotypes into reality. This imaginative fiction goes beyond story-telling to truth-telling, creating yet another avenue into the examination of behaviors which may or may not be exclusive to whites. Thus, imaginative fiction will create new segments of exploration for proponents of whiteness studies.

Chapter 4: Who Will “Rescue the Perishing”?

Essentially, for some, the category “white trash” brings into focus the way whites are interpreted to be the victims of racism and minoritization as much or in the same ways as their fellow multicultural U. S. citizens. Whether “white trash” is used to signal a breaking or a joining with the tenets of multiculturalism, it is principally a way of explaining white identity through narratives of victimhood.

(Newitz and Wray “What Is” 61)

Recently the problem for true victims of poverty has been compounded by the popularity of the victim status in America. Since victim status “often grants you a special and even sanctified identity,” say Newitz and Wray, some people want to claim the white trash label (“What Is” 61). Wray and Newitz contend that some whites do a “version of victim chic, where glamorously marginalized white folks attempt to emulate what they perceive to be the privileged authenticity of victimized multicultural groups” (5). In such an instance, the victims are not victims at all and only do harm to those poor white trash who are the true victims of the system. A scholar like Charles Murray, of course, condemns the use of the victim status, bemoaning its creation by the government. He says that the government treats the poor as a “homogeneous group of victims” (181). He wants to do away with welfare and Aid to Families with Dependent Children in order to cut the victim’s cycle of helplessness. Because of high illegitimacy rates, Murray predicts that a white underclass will emerge to take the place of the ““white trash’ concentrated on a few streets on the outskirts of town” (“Coming”). He is not concerned with helping white trash; he does want to make sure that the emerging white underclass is stopped.

"The victimization of America is remarkably egalitarian," writes Charles J. Sykes in his 1992 *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (11). In some ways Sykes shares Murray's critical views of the current victim culture in America when he says that "[t]he new culture reflects a readiness not merely to feel sorry for oneself but to wield one's resentments as weapons of social advantage and to regard deficiencies as entitlements to society's deference. Even the privileged have found that being oppressed has its advantages" (12). The way that Sykes's view informs the study of white trash, however, is in his recognition of the problem our country has with real victims: the challenge of the politics of victimization is to those who *do* care about genuine victims and who recognize that victimism reaps its advantage at the direct expense of those most deserving of compassion and support. The need to start making careful distinctions between the legitimate objects of compassion and the products of the victimist culture is urgent (18-19). Sykes's view is a very necessary one because between critics such as Murray, who have no sympathy for white trash, and the general public, who want to appropriate popular white trash images or claim victim status, the real poor white trash would seem to have no hope for improving their situations. Murray would contain them; the middle-class would use them; no one would see their need and help them.

The failure of others to help the victim is seen in many of the early twentieth century Southern writers. In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the whole family is white trash, but Darl is the victim within the family. Not only does no one help Darl as he struggles to remain sane in the ten-day ordeal of trying to bury his mother, but the rest of the family colludes to have him "put away" in Jackson at the state mental hospital.

Lonnie, the main character in Erskine Caldwell's "Kneel to the Rising Sun," is victimized by Arch, the man for whom he sharecrops. Lonnie is so paralyzed by his fears that he will not ask for the necessities of life, food enough for his family and him. Clem, an African American, tries to help him, but Lonnie is so fearful of Arch's wrath that he will not accept Clem's help, and instead aids Arch in finding and killing Clem, thus losing the only possible ally he had. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor, both villain and victim could be considered white trash. In fact, it is difficult to sort out villain and victim between Mrs. Lucynell Crater and Mr. Shiflett. She schemes to get Mr. Shiflett as son-in-law, and he schemes to get a car and some money. The true victim is Mrs. Crater's daughter, also named Lucynell, who is mentally deficient. She, being the pawn in the schemes of the other two, is left abandoned with no one to care for her. These three narratives are typical of those of mid-twentieth-century southern writers. In most instances no one helps the victim: either victims help themselves or they are doomed. And, in most cases, the victims do not ask for help, being unable or unwilling to do so.

In contemporary fictions such as Allison's, Fowler's and Gibbons's we find authors solving their white trash protagonists' problems with the introduction of a savior figure. Protagonists do not die, fail, or become worthless, nor do they save themselves. They are aided by characters who themselves are part of the unwashed, undeserving, unmentionable others of American society. The very narrative structure is a model for real life: people must be helped, not criticized, not shuttled aside, not ignored, not used and thrown away. Of course, America has the normal structures for helping those who

are rather undesirable: governmental agencies, social services, and religious organizations. Such structures allow distance in real life, just as the twentieth-century modernist drawings of white trash allowed distance from the fictional characters. In Allison's, Fowler's, and Gibbons's novels, however, some "other" person than the "regularly expected" savior steps in to bring aid. No distance is allowed; none is needed. When one "other" recognizes another "other" in need of help, no barriers or sense of distance interferes. One is not afraid that the other will contaminate. Although the two "others" might be rejected by society for different reasons, they have been defined by the same "other" boundaries. When "others" merge, the boundaries, which were separate, become one, binding them together inside the same "other." Such is the case for Bone, Bird, and Ellen.

"She an't never gonna be safe with him."

(*Bastard Out of Carolina* 132)

"Be quiet, Bone. An't nobody gonna hurt you. I swear to you, an't nobody ever gonna hurt you again."

(*Bastard Out of Carolina* 245).

It is Aunt Ruth who speaks convincingly of the fact that Bone will never be safe around Glen. And it is Aunt Raylene who pronounces the words that no one will ever hurt Bone again. Around the aunts, Bone and her sister Reese feel safe and happy. Bone notes that Reese and she did not mind where they lived as long as they could go to their aunts' houses where "it was alive . . . warm, always humming with voices and laughter and children running around" (80). The "something icy in Daddy Glen's houses . . .

"melted out" of them when they were at the aunts' (80). Even though the aunts had husbands, Bone considers the houses to be theirs, seeing the houses as warm and alive, as opposed to her own house which she identifies as Glen's, not Anney's, seeing it as icy and dead. Only once does Bone see her own house as "warm and safe": Anney had smiled at her (196).

From the beginning of the narrative, then, women are associated with warmth and safety, while men are linked sometimes to coldness and danger and sometimes to petty behaviors. After one particular session when the women have been laughing over Uncle Wade's phrase, "[a] man has needs," Bone decides she likes "being one of the women with [her] aunts, liked feeling a part of something nasty and strong and separate from [her] big rough boy-cousins and the whole world of spitting, growling, overbearing males" (91). Not only do these aunts possess something strong and separate from men, but another set of aunts, Aunt Marvella and Aunt Maybelle, claim to possess "women's magic" (44). Even though they disapprove of Anney's marriage to Glen, they create a love knot of hair and rabbits' blood as a charm to put beneath the marriage bed mattress. Later Glen depends on their words to confirm that his unborn baby will be a boy (44). His acceptance of their claim speaks to the power of women as something magical.

The one woman in the narrative who does not seem to have the magical power is Anney. When Glen and Anney's baby dies, Raylene tells Bone to "be happy for her . . . so she can heal her heart," implying that she has no power to heal herself (49). When Glen, in his grief-turned-to-rage, moves Anney and the girls away from the rest of

the family, Anney does not fight the decision to move; she merely says, "It'll be all right" (50). She gave up autonomy when she married Glen, who fulfilled for her the desire for "someone strong to love her like she loved her girls" (10). When Glen loses jobs, lacks money, and gets fired for his temper, Anney responds, "Oh, Glen. Baby, it'll be all right. We'll do what we have to do" (64). "What we have to do" inevitably means their moving from one house to another, the girls' changing schools, and Anney's working longer hours to make up the lack. Nor will Anney hear what Granny or Aunt Alma has to say about Glen; she accepts Glen's judgment that her family is trash (110). Whenever Glen beats Bone, Anney comforts her by washing her face, but the comfort is negated by her words "not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad" (110). She cannot accept the fact that Glen beats Bone because of a problem within Glen, not a problem within Bone.

After Bone has told her mother that she will not return home to live with Glen, Anney still does not understand the magnitude of the problem. She promises Bone, "I won't go back until I know you're gonna be safe" (276), even though her sister Ruth had told her much earlier that Bone would never be safe with Glen. Finally, at the scene of the rape, Anney cannot resist comforting Glen when he pleads with her. Meanwhile Bone is left "to lie bleeding while she [Anney] held him and cried" (291). She tries to explain her position to Bone, saying, "I just loved him so I couldn't see him that way. I couldn't believe. I couldn't imagine" (306). She can't explain anymore than she can stay with Bone. Anney abandons her, choosing to stay with Glen as he runs away from the consequences of the rape.

Aunt Raylene is the person who steps into Anney's place. Aunt Raylene, different from the other aunts in that she had never married nor had children and had the most stable home situation, has rented the same house by the river bank "most of her adult life" (79). Her home is different, too, because it is set apart from others "out past the city limits . . . on a little rise of land" (178). The location of the house symbolically represents this aunt whom Bone thinks is "the only person any of us would ever meet who was completely satisfied with her own company" (179). Bone surmises, however, that Raylene's early life when she had run away with a carnival fellow had perhaps not been too happy or romantic, since Raylene has "a way of looking sad and thoughtful" (179). When Bone goes to stay with Raylene in one of the many attempts to stay out of Glen's way, Raylene jokes with her, saying, "Trash rises" (180). Literally, of course, she spoke of the trash which had been dumped in the river and which rose as it rounded the bend where her house was located. Part of Raylene's money came from digging the trash out from where it snagged in the big tree roots at the river's edge, cleaning it up, and selling it on weekends. The tone of Raylene's words make clear that "out here where no one can mess with it," trash of the human kind can rise too (180). She encourages Bone with powerful words:

I am so tired of people whining about what might happen to them, never taking no chances or doing anything new. I'm glad you an't gonna be like that, Bone. I'm counting on you to get out there and do things, girl. Make people nervous and make your old aunt glad. (182)

Aunt Raylene not only anticipates a good future for Bone, but she is willing to help protect that future. When she finds out that Bone has been beaten badly by Glen before Aunt Ruth's funeral, she is the one who calls in the uncles. It is she who plants the suggestion in their minds: "I'd kill him" (245). At the same time it is Raylene who confronts Anney, getting her to admit that she is ashamed that she could not stop Glen. And it is Raylene who will not allow Bone to take the blame for the beating (247).

Besides protecting Bone and Bone's future, she also must set Bone straight when Bone pours out venomous words about the trash she thinks they all are:

How am I supposed to know anything about love, anyway? How am I supposed to know anything at all? I'm just another ignorant Boatwright, you know. Another piece of trash barely knows enough to wipe her ass or spit away from the wind. Just like you and Mama and Alma and everybody. Hell. Hellfire. We an't like nobody else in the world. (258)

Raylene's answer makes plain that she has no category for trash: "People are just the same. Everybody just does the best they can. . . . I've always believed everybody does what they have to do in this life" (258-259). Her lesson of equality continues when Bone expresses her hatred for the children from Bushy Creek Baptist Church because she thinks they look at her as if she were "something nasty" (262). Raylene's evenhanded response is that Bone can't know what they are like, what kind of families they have, what they are scared of, or what they might be thinking: "[C]ould be they're jealous of you, hungry for what you got, afraid of what you would do if they ever stepped in the yard . . . You're making up stories about those people. Make up a story where you have

to live in their house, be one of their family, and pass by this road. Look at it from the other side for a while" (262). Then she cautions Bone about the thinking she is doing: "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. You better think hard, Ruth Anne, about what you want and who you're mad at" (263). Raylene takes upon herself the educating of this child whose mother is too blinded for love of a man to see what her daughter needs.

Raylene takes the place of Anney again when Bone is in the emergency room after being raped by Glen. Bone had been asking for her mama, turning eagerly to see her when the doors of the room opened, but she reaches out just as eagerly when she sees that the one who enters is Aunt Raylene. She sees her as "reassuringly familiar" with arms "so strong, so safe" (297-298). Once again Raylene protects Bone by not allowing the sheriff to question her. She says to him, "Right now she needs to feel safe and loved, not alone and terrified," and to Bone she says, "My girl. Oh, my poor little girl, you just lay still. We'll get you home. Don't you worry. Don't you worry about nothing. I'll get you home and safe" (298). Raylene, by calling Bone her "girl," has taken over Anney's place in Bone's life. Anney had never been able to protect her, but Raylene had vowed once before that she would not let Bone be hurt again, and this time she is taking Bone to her own home on the river to keep her safe.

Aunt Raylene sets about the task of helping Bone understand her future, a future without Anney in it. She uses her own life as an example of what Anney has done wrong. She speaks of being "crazy with love, too crazy to judge" her own actions (300).

She had forced the woman she loved to choose between her and the woman's baby. The woman had stayed with her baby; Raylene had lost her. She compares, for Bone, her actions to those of Anney: "We do terrible things to the ones we love sometimes. . . . I know your mama loves you. . . . She loves you more than her life, and she an't never gonna forgive herself for what she's done to you, what she allowed to happen" (301). Raylene, then, knows the truth of the words she had spoken earlier about all people being alike. Her irresponsible act in leaving her lesbian lover was no different in its motivation than Anney's selfish act in abandoning Bone.

Raylene, having learned to accept herself with her flaws, can accept and explain the flaws of others. She, who is "outside" of society by being lesbian, by not being married, by not being a mother, by living alone and digging trash out of the river, can reach out to Bone, who has been pushed "outside" her family by the acts of a violent stepfather and an unthinking mother. Her acceptance of Bone then makes an "inside" apart from the rest of the family. Bone belongs to Raylene in a way that she could not belong to Anney, because Raylene puts the protection of the child first, just as her lover had done so long ago. Although not understanding her mother's actions, including the fact that her mother would not leave town with Glen until after she had given Bone a new birth certificate unmarked with the cruel words "illegitimate," Bone accepts herself and accepts Raylene's care, "trusting her arm and her love" (309).

Raylene, herself the outsider in her family and society, becomes the person who can embrace another who feels herself to be on the outside. Because Raylene acts as Bone's savior, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is more hopeful than a mid-twentieth-century

story of abuse. It is also an example of behavior that can alleviate the problems of white trash in America. The saviors will rise out of the very quagmire which engulfs the victims. Raylene, who has been a victim, becomes the savior. In the real world the victims must arise as just such saviors who know what it feels like to be victimized and who will be willing to do something to help other victims.

She held out her arms, and even though I wasn't a little bitty child anymore, I found myself compelled to sit in her lap and rest my head on her shoulder. Miss Zora was a bag-of-bones woman, but when I lay against her, she grew soft and fat, as if she sported the wide lap of the grandmamma I'd dreamed of having.

(*Before Women Had Wings* 135)

That grandmama of whom Bird dreamed was Grandma Sky, her mother's mother and a woman about whom she knew nothing but her name. In her imagination, however, Bird thinks that she "had a wide, soft lap and welcoming arms, all of which she put to good use holding and spoiling me" (28). When Miss Zora holds out her arms, saying those welcoming words, "Come here, baby, come here" (135), Bird naturally endows her with the soft, fat lap she had imagined so often. Even before that moment Bird has decided that this woman whom she had first thought to be a ghost or, at the very least, "a spooky colored woman with special powers" (118) was a "kind lady" who "almost glowed" (128). In their first encounter Miss Zora totally captivates Bird with her interest in Bird's given name Avocet and in her "good humor" that "settled like powder into the crevices and lines of her leathery skin" (129). As they become acquainted, talking about the bird bones which Miss Zora has scattered about her yard like "stardust" (130), Bird

decides that the beauty of Miss Zora's words "and the serious glint lighting her eyes [make] me want to curl up in her lap and hear more" (130). Bird has found someone innocently grandmotherly with no hint of maternal violence.

Until that encounter with Miss Zora, Bird has actively searched for something or someone to save her from the violence and abuse of her home life. Besides the "pretend" grandmother, Bird had long depended on Jesus to help her. She prayed diligently for Him to keep her mother from hitting her. She finally admits, however, that Jesus had "jilted" her back in the grove (169). She thinks, "Troubles didn't grow like weeds in the souls of girls who are loved by Him"; therefore, with all her apparent troubles, He must not love her (169). She had also tried to trust in guardian angels, but she calls her guardian angel "an elusive helper" and curses the angel "straight to hell" when she realizes that the angel had not come to help when her father attempted suicide (2, 7). Her brother Hank was also a candidate to be a savior, because he had told her he would "shelter" her "from all harm" and because he had taken good care of the girls when their mother was hospitalized (58, 69). Bird needs Hank "to stick around and make sure that in this game of devils and saints, the hateful did not win" (71), but she knows he "had things to do, places to go" because "[h]e was running from his own demons" (83). The best he will be able to do for Bird, she thinks, is to provide good memories: "At least somewhere on this earth, wherever my brother makes friends for the night, I will be a perfect child, my mama a sinless woman" (83). Finally Bird imagines life like an *I Love Lucy* episode for her mother and her sister and herself, minus the "daddy," for she decides that they would be "better off" just as females (88). Bird has run the gamut of

imaginary and fallible human saviors when she decides that perhaps the three females alone are the best they can be for themselves.

Each of these three females, led as they are by the fears and whims of the alcoholic Glory Marie, needs a strong, competent person outside of herself to be her salvation. Miss Zora becomes that person for them. First, for Bird, Miss Zora becomes a haven from the terrors of the tiny trailer where her mother's anger rules. When Bird first sees the older woman, she has an almost mystical experience: “[T]he air turned salty and faintly familiar, like an old memory that's fuzzy around the edges but clear and potent enough to push aside the qualms of the here and now” (97). From then on Bird looks for Miss Zora expectantly and eagerly hears Mr. Ippolito's words: “She different, like powerful. Can give you the evil eye if you're not careful. She stay, she pay her rent, she keep the place safe. . . . [S]he good for my business. And a good woman” (118). When she agrees to enter Miss Zora's house for tea and homemade spice cake that Miss Zora calls “Calm Cake,” Bird feels that she is “slipping free of a ball and chain”(133, 131). As Miss Zora talks to her with words such as “Trust yourself, little girl,” Bird falls asleep (135). She wakes under a bluebird throw, looking at a bowl of strawberries placed just for her, reads a note from Miss Zora about the “lovely visit,” and thinks, “Miss Zora's cottage seemed so clean and safe” (136-137). All of those things Bird labels “simple magic,” but she is impressed, too, by Miss Zora's many abilities and many social causes: baking biscuits, singing “We Shall Overcome,” volunteering at a soup kitchen, knitting afghans for homeless men, and writing letters to Washington about Vietnam, the environment, and civil rights (137).

As the violence at home increases, and Glory Marie forbids Bird to see Miss Zora, Bird wakes one morning after dreaming of “visions of spring” in which Miss Zora starred “as though she were a conductor of some fancy symphony” (216). Bird decides that she will visit Miss Zora again, “no matter what” (216). In her words, Miss Zora’s cottage once again “became my haven, my safe place” (216). Later, after Bird receives the beating which shreds her back, she has a nightmare in which her mother “turns into a ghoul” with razor blade fingers (252). As Miss Zora comforts her with the words, “There, there, baby, everything is okay,” Bird says, “Her words carried me beyond the bad dream” to a place of “windblown lullabies,” the warmth of the “buttery light” of the moon, and the “hundred gauzy wings” of a “choir of dragonflies” (252). Miss Zora means safety in a natural environment.

Miss Zora, herself, is not without trouble in her past. As Bird questions her about her former life in the Everglades, which Miss Zora calls a “magical place. . . . a place of new beginnings, a place where life starts over again every day” (156), Zora relates the story of a husband who died tragically in a crop-dusting airplane accident and of a son who died of pneumonia because the white doctor would not come to treat him. More revealingly, she tells the story of her daughter who says she will not recognize her as mother until she “behave[s] civilized” (159). Ten years of no communication between the mother and daughter explains the “wrinkles on her coffee-colored skin,” thinks Bird (160). These sorrows, perhaps, lie at the heart of Miss Zora’s compassion for all living creatures. When Bird says the homeless man is lucky to have Miss Zora knit him an afghan, Miss Zora answers that “[w]e all ought to take care of one another” (137). She

tells Bird that she is the keeper of the birds' bones outside her cottage to make sure "as they journey through God's many skies, their wings will be sheathed in gold" (130). Whether human or animal, Miss Zora cares for creatures and believes in "the old ways," such as "divining" and "cast[ing] spells" (164). Her explanation to Bird is that "Mother Earth, she has powers. To heal, you see" (164-165). In connecting with the natural world, as evidenced by her "virtually store-bought-free" cottage (162), Miss Zora has found her own powers of healing, has, indeed, become a "wounded healer" for those wounded ones around her.

Only after Bird's severe beating does Miss Zora become important to Phoebe and Glory Marie, as well as Bird, and even then it is at Bird's instigation. When Bird shows her sister her back shredded by the belt buckle, she asks Phoebe to get Miss Zora. As Miss Zora treats the wounds with a homemade salve, she involves Phoebe in the process, asking her to cut the bandages and to boil water for tea. After Bird is treated and settled, Miss Zora "nosed into Phoebe's business" about her plans and soon has her dancing to the radio music (247). Bird reports that as Phoebe "reluctantly" followed Miss Zora's lead, "a smile tripped over" her sister's face and even though she took "her dancing lesson as seriously as she took the rest of her life . . . she was having fun" (249). Miss Zora wins Phoebe's confidence, creating the foundation for the ultimate rescue of Phoebe and Bird from their mother's alcoholic rages.

That rescue begins with Miss Zora's words to Glory Marie, "I'm here to talk to you. To let you know I'm your friend, and to say I think you need help" (252). From that beginning, Miss Zora convinces Glory Marie that not only does she need help, but

also she needs to be alone to concentrate on her own healing. Glory Marie verbalizes to Bird the argument that Miss Zora has used: "Listen, child, listen to me! For once in your life, listen! I can't get well—I can't stop drinking or being too rough on you girls, I can't find a way to stop hating myself—unless I am alone for a while. I need to concentrate solely on myself. This is the hardest thing I have ever done. But—this is the God's-honest truth—I'm doing it because I love you" (259).

Zora's plan, according to Glory Marie, is to take the girls to south Florida, where she has "people" and "roots," to do "anything" to help them get through the "bad time," and to raise the girls "for as long as needed" (259). At the end of her recitation of the plan, Bird recalls, "The three of us huddled, cried, tried to push away the evil that had soured our family's blood for generations" (260). Miss Zora strengthens Glory Marie's resolve with words to bolster her confidence: "I am proud of you. This is a strong act, baby. We all might just find our way to a peaceful and happy place because you're being so brave" (266). This woman, different from the mother and girls because of her racial background, thought strange by those who did not understand her powerful sense of connectedness to the natural world, and rejected by her own daughter as being uncivilized, has become the sole source of salvation to these who need healing and a healer, not just in the physical sense, but also in the emotional sense. Her intervention creates hope in Bird's mind. As Phoebe and Bird and Miss Zora leave Glory Marie behind at the trailer, Bird ruminates about her mother:

Maybe she would get the help she needed. Or maybe she would sit in that trailer and drink herself to death. Or maybe she would soar. . . . I knew

she loved me. And I knew she wasn't completely shattered. Somewhere inside her a tendril of strength remained, or else she never could have unlatched that ancient cage door, she never could have stared at the dark wall of her life and said, "Enough." (268)

With the reassurance that her mother has some strength left, Bird can look to the future with Miss Zora. When she looks into Miss Zora's "calm brown eyes and [sees] no hint of violence, no spirit that [is] mean," she says the words "Let's go" (268), thus beginning a new life with the person who has become safety for her.

Miss Zora, just like Aunt Raylene in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is not the savior-figure that societal experts would choose first. She is old; she is of a different race from Bird and her family, and she has some questionable beliefs. But she also has love and wisdom. The contemporary story provides a lesson for American society: "saviors" do not necessarily come from government agencies, nor do they all act in politically correct ways. The best saviors, perhaps, are those like Miss Zora, who has suffered and, thus, understands the suffering of another.

I had waited so long to believe somebody that I just listened and believed. And then she hugged me. She leaned over me and pulled me up next to her and it was just like I wanted it to be. That is when she squatted down in front of me and asked me my name. I told her Ellen then she said Ellen I bet you never thought old Santa Claus would bring you a new mama for Christmas.

(*Ellen Foster* 119)

Before Ellen ever gets to the point of getting a new mama who gives her something to believe in, Ellen has had sparse help from people around her, and no help from those in her own family. The very first people who befriend Ellen are those whom her family would consider beneath them, because those friends are African American. Ellen's one friend is her next-door neighbor Starletta, an African American girl who lives with her mother and father in a one-room shack that lacks running water or bathroom facilities. Yet it is this family that first helps Ellen when her father is so neglectful after her mother's death. When the weather gets cold, Starletta's daddy gets the "heat man" to turn on the gas and takes Ellen to get a coat (26). Starletta's daddy also takes Ellen to town when she needs to buy her Girl Scout uniform and accessories, even though his own "colored" daughter is not allowed to join the Scouts. Later he takes her to the store the day before Christmas so that she can shop for gifts (27). Ellen, in describing him, inadvertently reveals one important trait: "He is the only colored man that does not buy liquor" from her daddy (30).

On Christmas day, Starletta's daddy invites Ellen to eat with them before they give her a gift. The gift, a sweater, "does not look colored at all," according to Ellen (32). Her speech and thoughts reveal how touched she is by this family who cares for her when her family will not: "I think I would like to put it on now if that is OK I can slip it over my shirt and wear it I say and I think I need to cry a little" (32). When she tells them she must go home, Starletta's daddy's words indicate his own thoughts about Ellen's daddy's treatment of her: "If he's there when you get home you come on back here if you want to. Come on back here" (32). The repetition of the invitation indicates

his insistence that Ellen return to their home, a home where she can be safe from her daddy's presence. When she does return to Starletta's on New Year's Eve after she has been abused by her father for the first time, Starletta's mother immediately wants to know what is "wrong" and puts her to bed with her (39). This African American family perceives that Ellen is not safe in her father's presence; her grandmother, aunts, and cousin never think enough about Ellen to conceive that her daddy might be abusing her.

When school authorities first discover the abusive nature of Ellen's relationship with her father, her teacher rejects the idea that Ellen can stay with Starletta's family, the only people she knows who will take her in. The art teacher volunteers to take her to her home for a while. When the teachers and principal tell Ellen that they have decided what to do with her, she thinks, "It is about time. . . . Yes Lord it is about time"(45). Her thoughts reveal her desperate situation in a way that belie her usually calm words and actions.

Her desperation melts away at the home of her art teacher Julia and her husband Roy. They give Ellen a room of her own and include her in their activities, such as going to movies, drawing, acting out stories, and gardening. Julia tells her that "it was good [she] loosened up. . . . let it all hang out. . . . go with the flow" (47). Ellen's response is that she "had no idea people could live like that" (47). Julia builds Ellen's self-esteem by telling her, "[Y]ou are so NEAT!" (47). On Ellen's birthday, Julia plans a "celebration" with Starletta and, in her own words, "went all out" on presents for Ellen (51). Julia and Roy create the sense of family for Ellen in ways she had never known before. And they protect Ellen: at the end of the birthday party they do not let her go in the car to take

Starletta home for fear Ellen might see her father and be frightened (52). When her father does come to the school for her, Julia is the one to pull Ellen close and to say the words, “[L]et’s go home” (55). For Ellen, Roy and Julia’s house had become “home”; therefore they have the unhappy task of telling Ellen, “[T]he court believes you should be with your family now” (55). Even though they want to keep her and Ellen thinks that the three of them “could pass for a family on the street,” they cannot protect her from the court system and her grandmother’s wishes.

For a long time, then, Ellen is without any protection. She has homes to stay in, first with her grandmother and then with her Aunt Nadine, but she has no one to care for her or to protect her from the abusive language and attitudes of these relatives who want to blame her or get rid of her. When Ellen finally gets to a place of protection, she does so by relying on her own wits. At Aunt Nadine’s house she realizes that she will stay for a while until she “finds the next place maybe with God’s help but more than likely without it” (94). She describes her thought process:

I decided that one of my mistakes had always been lack of planning. But not anymore. . . . I decided that if I quit wasting time I could be happy as anybody else in the future and right now with one year ending and a new one starting up I thought now was the time to get old Ellen squared away for a fresh start. . . . That is why I think I am somebody now because I said by damn this is how it is going to be and before I knew it I had a new mama. (95)

Through her own will power she searches for and finds a woman whom Dora describes as the lady who “would take in anything from orphans to stray cats” (99). When Ellen shows up at the foster family’s house on Christmas Day, the woman who is to become her new mama says the words that assure her she is in the right place: “I can’t promise you anything but if you need a place as badly as it appears then we would welcome you here” (119). A hug, answers to Ellen’s hurried questions about her new mama’s health, drinking habits, and temperament, a room, and some food make Ellen say to herself, “I would not move ever from [here]” (120). Thus begins a stability which brings Ellen back to her status as beloved child-feeler, rather than abused adult-thinker.

Ellen’s new mama, who is the head of a foster home for girls, shows love and care for all of her wards. She sews curtains and pillow tops for each of the girls’ rooms. She interests them in group activities, such as the creation of terrariums. She lets them take turns riding the pony Dolphin each Saturday. She allows them to become kitchen helpers, showing the older girls how to cook.

More importantly, her new mama takes the time to meet each girl’s emotional needs. Ellen narrates her new mama’s compassion: “You don’t need to see through the walls here to know when my new mama is alone with one of her girls telling them about how to be strong or rubbing their backs” (121). For Ellen the private times occur when her new mama takes both her hands and assures her that if the two of them relax and breathe together, Ellen “can slow down shaking,” the visible sign that Ellen is thinking about her troubled past (121). Her new mama encourages her to cry about her past, guaranteeing that she will soon forget her mama’s mama’s voice telling her to cry so she

could slap her (121). The physical touch of Ellen's new mama is always tender, as evidenced by Ellen's description of her hair washing: "It is the best when she washes my hair. . . . I put my head into the water and it is warm over my whole body even on the places the water does not flow. She rubs and I feel her long fingers on my head and pray that it takes a long time for me to be clean" (36). Ellen finally receives physical caresses from a mother's loving hands.

"I stay starved," says Ellen, when she is describing how she hurriedly takes off her church clothes so that she can eat Sunday dinner at her new mama's house (58). Food plays a large role in how comfortable Ellen is in her new surroundings. At her own house she had to prepare food when her mother was ill; after her mother died, she had to buy herself TV dinners; at her grandmother's she had had to eat "a plate of something [left for her] on the stove" (66). At her new mama's, however, food is in abundance. Ellen describes egg sandwiches with "mayonnaise on both sides" (2), biscuits with "fried meat and jelly" (15), chicken that "melts in the mouth" (43), and "corn cut off the cob the same day [they] eat it" (4). When Ellen is tallying all the reasons for liking life at her new mama's, she says, "I can count on food to eat that I do not always have to fix or be guilty eating" (81). She compares her breakfast "to the one featured on the side of the cereal box and it all matches. Toast. Egg. Juice and milk. Cereal. That much usually holds [her] until lunch. . . . Remembering [her] lunchbox is automatic" (81-2).

The girl who had been starved not only for food, but also for love, receives both at her new mama's. Ellen notes that the best reason for liking her new life is her new mama saying "good morning" to her "like she means it" (81). When Ellen comes home from

school every day she looks around the kitchen for someone to squeeze, and each day her new mama is there, a fact that "tops off" Ellen's days "just right" (86). Her new mama even understands that Ellen needs to be squeezed "extra hard" on Tuesday because that is the day that Ellen meets with the psychiatrist who has been assigned to help Ellen deal with her past (86). The most important example, however, of her new mama's love and understanding is her welcome of Starletta as Ellen's best friend. When her new mama says that Starletta can come for the weekend, Ellen rejoices: "Have you ever felt like you could cry because you know you just heard the most important thing anybody in the world could have spoke at that second. . . All that mattered in my world at that second was my new mama and sound of yes in my ears oh yes Starletta is welcome here" (99). In accepting Starletta, Ellen's African American friend who would not have been seen as an equal by Ellen's own family, she is also totally accepting Ellen, who herself was rejected by her own family.

Finally, Ellen's new mama has given her a future. As Ellen considers the girl who had occupied her room in her new mama's house before her, she thinks, "I wonder what the girl is doing now and I bet . . . she is not a crook no I bet she is somebody decent because she had somebody decent to love her good" (121). And because of her new mama, Ellen can be hopeful:

Now I can turn out to be different too. . . Since my first day here all I felt is luck coming my way. . . [A]t least I am somewhere friendly and nothing new bad has happened to me since I got here. . . Nobody has died or blamed me for anything worse than overwatering the

terrarium. . . . Every day I try to feel a little better about all that went on when I was little. (121)

The abuse for Ellen is in the past; “nothing new bad” will happen at her new mama’s.

Unlike the saviors in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Before Women Had Wings*, the savior in *Ellen Foster* does work through a governmental agency. Her behavior towards Ellen and the other children, however, exhibits no hint of a detached bureaucracy. Ellen’s new mama is as warm and tender as a real mother could be. The same compassion that motivates Aunt Raylene and Miss Zora motivates her. Again, she is an example of the kind of “insider” approach that needs to be practiced in American society if we are to see an end to the tragedies of the underprivileged, including those called “white trash.”

Hopeful. The word describes the end of each of these three narratives, unlike the Southern modernists’ narratives that end on a hopeless note. Those earlier writers might have called their narrative “hopeful” because their people “endured,” as Faulkner says in *The Sound and the Fury*, but the narratives offer no saviors, no one to “rescue the perishing.” Perhaps the writers could not do so and be true to life as it was when they were writing. The time had not arrived for the acceptance of “others” either in real life or in the literary canon. And it is only in these “others” that salvation occurs in these contemporary narratives. The world at large—acceptable society—takes no thought for the plight of young, poor children, white or black, but those who have been rejected, who have been behind barriers, who have been boxed out are willing to enlarge their borders

to embrace those who are unable to save themselves. In doing so, they elevate the victims and themselves from victim status to a freedom to experience life however they wish. Such are the saviors in the work of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons. These authors' acts of creating such narratives indicate the commitment to tell the truth through fiction in order to change their worlds. In fact, Allison speaks directly to the subject of telling the truth, as opposed to what the "academy" might do:

The academy may lie, but literature tries to tell the truth. The academy is the market—university courses in contemporary literature that never get past Faulkner, reviewers who pepper their opinions with the ideas of the great men, and editors who think something is good because it says the same thing everyone has always said. Literature is the lie that tells the truth, that shows us human beings in pain and makes us love them and does so in a spirit of honest revelation. ("Exile's" 16)

The lie that tells the truth: such is the fiction of Allison and Fowler and Gibbons.

Linda Tate, in her study *A Southern Weave of Women*, applauds the use of traditional, realistic narrative as a tool for contemporary Southern women "to rewrite the terms of their existence and to seize interpretive and expressive control of their lives" (176). What Tate says applies to these three authors in these narratives. Taking materials from their own pasts, they have created new stories and provided saviors for girls who are much like the girls they once were. By providing a way out for their protagonists, they have created a different ending to the stories of abuse and violence in their white trash worlds and have created hopeful spaces for the real life counterparts of these

protagonists. As "others" of any stripe and color open their borders to the disenfranchised, spaces inside the acceptable world, both in literature and in the social life of America, will be enlarged.

Conclusion: Whom Do We Add Now?

[White trash] has learned to talk about itself by hearing, reading, and seeing members of oppressed minority groups talk about themselves and their identities. . . . Calling themselves white trash is one way whites can identify as both racially marked and oppressed; and it is also a way to begin excavating a uniquely white version of what [Cornel] West calls 'a culture and community that has struggled against [racial] abuse. '"

(Newitz and Wray "What Is" 62)

Even if it is true that the multicultural movement has spurred the materialistic middle-class American society to appropriate white trash images, the statement of Newitz and Wray makes clear that white trash is being recognized. G. Albert Ruesga, in a review of Wray and Newitz's anthology, not only praises the even-handedness of the presentation of the "misery of white poverty," but recognizes that, through the writing, the various contributors have discovered a "source of power and transcendence" in writing about their white trash backgrounds ("White Savages"). They have "excavated" their backgrounds to bring healing to themselves and others by dredging up the realities of life lived among the poorest whites in America. Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons are three who have added their healing excavations.

"People come to her to be healed," says Carole DeSanti, Allison's editor at Dutton (qtd. in Jetter 57). Perhaps, in some sense, healing can only come for others if the author has first experienced that healing in her own life. Allison seems to bear witness to such truth. Truth, which she says was "terribly dangerous" for someone growing up in a "poor and violent family" ("Conversation-Allison"), has managed to

bring Allison redemption. In a conversation with Gail Cooke about her second novel *Cavedweller*, which Cooke says is more “hopeful” than the earlier *Bastard Out of Carolina* with its “unrelenting cycle of poverty and oppression,” Allison reports that “you can create redemption for yourself” (“Rednecks”). The redemption apparently comes from writing the truth of her background. She says that she writes about “families in trouble” because that is her “territory” (Sherwin). Redemption comes, too, through forgiveness. Her writing has allowed her to forgive her mother for not being able to save her “on one particular day” when she had saved her “on five others” (Sherwin). Allison says of her life: “I’m supposed to be deeply broken, incapable of emotion, but I survived” (Sherwin). Allison’s writing has brought healing to herself and to others.

Fowler, too, testifies to the healing nature of her writing. In explaining what writing is for her, Fowler says, “It’s a form of survival. . . . The writing gives me balance” (Kanner 50). Just like Allison, Fowler links healing with forgiveness. As Kanner relates in an interview with Fowler, “The healing power of storytelling is something [Fowler] knows well. . . . It is a way of mourning the past, of forgiving” (51). “Women grow wings, metaphorically speaking, and rise above anger into the radiance of forgiveness” is reviewer Donna Seaman’s interpretation of Fowler’s novel *Before Women Had Wings* (1674). In her own words, Fowler writes “to reaffirm the past” (Kanner 51). In an interview online with Rebecca Bain for Davis-Kidd Booksellers, Fowler assured Bain that she had “no regrets” about writing her very autobiographical book *Before Women Had Wings*. She says, ‘Not only did it provide me with personal growth, it helped me turn a past that was sad and tragic into a usable past, be even a triumphant

past" ("Conversation-Fowler"). As in Allison's case, others seek healing through Fowler's words. Fowler conveys the information that "[d]uring publicity tours for the book, readers pour out their own stories of abuse" and have found ways to leave abusive situations (Svingen).

Gibbons, though she initially tried to distance herself from the autobiographical nature of her book, decided that she must also acknowledge the truthfulness of her story and its power to help her get beyond her past. In an interview with Bob Summers of *Publishers Weekly*, she recounts her final rejection of dissembling: "I had intended to lie [about the connection between her own life and Ellen Foster's], but I couldn't; I decided then and there to tell the truth. Besides I was pretty much out of made-up ways my mother could have died" (61). Still, Gibbons maintains that she did not write the story as an "emotional catharsis," even though she told Summer that she knew "in a spiritual, inward way" that the book "was going to make a difference" to her family and her (60). Besides the fact that her mother committed suicide and her father died of his alcoholism, Gibbons herself has struggled with manic-depressive illness since young adulthood. Jeanne R. Nostrandt has written this fine description of how Gibbons's writing has actually been aided by her illness and in turn has aided in the control of the illness:

An illness that must have hindered her life in many aspects, she uses as a tool for her craft. . . . The uniqueness of her life—its successes and its failures—has given her a special vision for sights unseen. Gibbons looks directly into the dark corner that most see only peripherally and reveals that vision on the pages of her novels. (158)

Gibbons is not as open as either Allison or Fowler about the healing that comes either to herself or to her readers through her writing, but others are able to voice what she herself is reluctant to do. Ralph C. Wood, writing in the rather traditional journal *The Christian Century*, not only calls her work “spiritually bracing,” but also comments that her “narratives strike deeper than concepts because they reveal how character and motive prompt action; how, in fact, they prompt lives” (842, 846). For Wood, then, the very narrative brings life to others. Gibbons herself has said that she writes novels “to set order to what memories [her] mind has allowed [her] and to create something of lasting value in all those gaps [she] seem[s] to have” (Mason 159). Through her novels, she, too, finds positive meaning in her past.

Part of the healing nature of writing comes from the power of being recognized, even if it is in some negative form. Writing of several pejorative terms such as “white trash,” “hillbilly,” and “cracker,” John Hartigan Jr. reminds us that “they all entail a mode of name calling that whites rely upon in order to distinguish between those that match the class decorums of a certain racial identity (whiteness) and those who, through physical, emotional, or economic markings, fail to measure up” (53). He goes on to say that “we must remember that the “namer” and the “named” are locked in an unending struggle where there is no neutral ground” (53). In the case of Allison, Fowler, Gibbons, and other authors like them, the named becomes the namer, thus short-circuiting the “unending struggle” and bringing relief through the openness of confession, confession not of the “glamorously marginalized” whites who want a piece of the multicultural action, but of the person who has suffered the enormity of poverty and of rejection and of

being nobody. "Sometimes it is strategic to be named something terrible rather than to have no name at all" intone Newitz and Wray ("What Is" 58). Alison, Fowler, and Gibbons would agree: naming themselves "white trash," the name that is always given, not claimed or earned, gives them the power of the "namers," those who can change the name at will. Instead of continuing with the name "white trash," the protagonists in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Before Women Had Wings*, and *Ellen Foster* will henceforth be known by the label "survivor." They have broken out of the stereotypical lifestyle which has imprisoned their families and them. And as they have named themselves survivors, they have also named others around them to be survivors of poverty and prejudice as well.

An interesting aspect of these three authors finding healing through naming themselves and others is the ability that they have had to adapt their extremely strong, graphic narratives to the medium of film. The naming that had been done rather surreptitiously on the printed page, accessed by readers who wanted to confront the realities of white trash in America, became much more public when the three books were made into TV movies with a viewing audience of several million and the potential for many millions more with the public release of both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Ellen Foster*. *Bastard Out of Carolina* was produced by BMG Independents for the Showtime TV network in 1996, with Angelica Huston directing. Allison was not involved in the screen writing, nor was Kaye Gibbons involved in the writing of the screenplay for the Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation of her book *Ellen Foster*. Director John Erman produced the film in 1997, the same year that *Before Women Had Wings* was produced in

a cooperative effort of ABC and Oprah Winfrey Presents with Lloyd Kramer directing. Connie May Fowler wrote the screenplay of her adaptation and ended the presentation with an appeal to viewers to do something to stop domestic abuse in America (Weightman). Similarly, Kaye Gibbons appeared at the end of the Hallmark presentation to appeal to viewers to support the foster care program of various states.

Fowler, in a statement about *Before Women Had Wings*, has voiced a truth that applies to all three films:

I don't think it glossed over anything. It was really an incredibly honest and at times even brutal look at the ugly face of domestic violence and child abuse. Because it is a movie with time constraints, and on television, which created structural complaints, we couldn't just replicate the book. . . . And the result of that exploration into what wouldn't work well is that it moved me closer and closer to the heart of the story. (qtd. in "Live")

What would not "work well" for the venue of film was the "exploration" of sub-plots that gave the characters in the novel more depth. Fowler said she had to give up the materials about Bird's fascination with religion. The same is true of the films from Allison's and Gibbons's novels. The film version of *Bastard Out of Carolina* leaves out not only Bone's flirtation with fundamentalist religion and gospel singing, but also the sub-plot concerning her sexual experimentation. Hallmark's *Ellen Foster* totally disregards the importance of Ellen's discovery of her own racial prejudice and her growth in racial acceptance. All three films, therefore, are much more straightforward in their

presentation of the main thrust of the novels: the story of the violent poor in America and the need to do something about both the violence and the poverty in order to save the next generation of Americans from facing such conditions. These films show the brutal truth of the white trash world in America, not in condemnation, but in an honest portrayal that pleads for action on the part of other Americans.

An interesting corollary to the popularity of these novels through the medium of film is the acceptance of Gibbons and Allison by the academic community. Fowler's work has yet to be noticed by academics, being relatively new, but it will not be long before critics begin to explore the lyric quality of her prose. The publishing world is already commenting on that prose, as well as her style, which gains its lyricism from a quality akin to magic realism, especially in her debut novel *Sugar Cage* (1992). Now she has followed up *River of Dreams* (1994) and *Before Women Had Wings* (1996) with *Remembering Blue* (1999). Gibbons, who gained popularity with both lay readers and academics with *Ellen Foster* (1987), has maintained her audiences through five more novels: *A Virtuous Woman* (1989), *A Cure for Dreams* (1991), *Charms for the Easy Life* (1993), *Sights Unseen* (1995), and *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* (1998). Although some literary critics deal with race issues in *Ellen Foster*, others deal with woman and the spiritual quest, the relationships of mothers and daughters, and the roles of family. Allison, although she has published only two novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998), has kept both critics and writers of dissertations busy as they deal with her multiple themes of lesbianism, sexual abuse, incest, autobiography, and white trash theory in her writing.

Three recent dissertations specifically address Allison's issues of class. While Kelly L. Thomas (1998) uses Allison's and others' works for her own debunking of the current white trash mania among the middle class, she also seriously considers the importance of creating a "white trash consciousness" which will be "a politically efficacious means of coming to terms with class hierarchies and dominant notions of whiteness as uniformly unmarked" (174). Robert Brian Rebein (1995) compares Allison to other Southern writers who write in a style which Rebein calls "Hick Chic" (chapter 1). He believes that writers such as Allison are "downwardly mobile when it comes to the kinds of characters they choose to populate their fiction" (75). Such a trend, according to Rebein, is good because the literature covers "forgotten regions" and explores "marginal characters left largely untouched, or treated only as stereotypes, in previous American settings" (207). Matthew Wendell Guinn (1998) says something similar in the introduction to his paper, which explores post-Renaissance Southern fiction: "In a manner similar to [Richard] Wright's, these writers seek to puncture the ideology which constructs the region as a cultural Eden, a sort of literary Solid South, without admitting the voices of those excluded from literary participation by the accident of race or social class" (5). Guinn pays Allison high praise, saying that "[h]er interrogations of the region's precarious class ideology have laid the groundwork for subsequent literary engagements with the region's social structure, as more white writers of humble means continue to contribute to the region's letters" (70). As time passes, Allison is recognized consistently as one who writes about class issues. Because of Gibbons's and Fowler's

attention to class as well, more than likely their work, too, will begin to be examined in the same manner as Allison's work.

In addition to the works of Allison, Fowler, and Gibbons, other writers are quickly adding their white trash, working-class, lower-class, poverty-stricken voices to the body of narratives which will help to change the demographics of the American literary canon. Many of these contemporary authors write somewhat autobiographically, placing their narratives in working-class settings and creating characters who are mirrors of the real-life people of their lower-class, white trash backgrounds. An insightful comment by Jill Ker Conway about the kinds of writing being done in the field of autobiography seems apropos to the work of these authors as well:

If postmodernism means anything, it's the abandonment of the idea everyone over fifty was raised on—of linear development or universal progress. . . . Along with the changed sense of time and the abandonment of a central cultural point of view has come a new kind of narrative authority for the young, for ethnic subcultures, for those of different sexual persuasions, for the handicapped, for victims of abuse—in short for anyone whose questions about life fall outside the central narrative of worldly success, or of moral and spiritual growth, or of power and its exercise—once the main themes for autobiographical writing. (151-152)

Although Conway is speaking of the art of writing autobiography in a postmodern world, the changes in fictional narrative forms are the same: from the position of power to the

position of weakness; from the voice of the privileged white male to the voice of all the unprivileged voices.

The barriers of power and privilege do appear to be coming down; in their place are permeable borders between the diverse elements Conway mentions above. White trash literature and working-class literature now showcase a variety of styles and settings. Recuperating historical images of white trash folks has become one significant trend of current writers. Bret Lott's *Jewel* (1999) focuses on a poor family of the South of the 1940s that struggles to accept the burden of a Down syndrome child. The family members consider themselves wealthy compared to the African American workers they hire, but when they move to California, they find that they are not only poorer than almost anyone else, including their African American neighbors, but also that they have the status of "white trash." Robert Morgan's *Gap Creek* (2000) begins with the description of a southern mountain family of the early 1900s that faces the loss of father and only son in the space of two years. The women have to take over. One daughter Julia manages to find the love of a man while she herself is working like a man. She then faces struggles of abuse, poverty, and the death of her first infant. The novel starkly portrays those who have so little money that they wait as long as possible before consulting a doctor and who have so little money that they meagerly eat what little they can afford. Denise Giardina's *The Unquiet Earth* (1994) portrays the Appalachian coal mines of West Virginia. Spanning the time from the 1930s depression era to the 1980s corporate takeovers, Giardina's novel tells the story of Jackie, whose mother marries management and whose father organizes the miners into unions to strike against the

management. Jackie has to decide how she will live her life among these miners who are so poverty stricken that they literally owe their souls “to the company store.” Historical novels such as these portray the familial solidarity of poor white families while not failing to expose the strife that poverty can sometimes bring to the home.

Contemporary portraits of white trash are seen in a novel such as Billie Letts’s *Where the Heart Is* (1995). Some might not categorize this novel with the darkly painted novels of Allison or Fowler, since it is quite humorous. Nor is it in the vein of the understated humor of Gibbons. But neither is it a broadly painted caricature of American working-class people. While Letts tends to stereotype the physical images of her characters, she allows her people to speak in the true voices of the underprivileged and the disenfranchised. Set in Oklahoma, *Where the Heart Is* contains Tennessee white trash, Native Americans off the reservation, Okies who live in trailers, and African Americans who interact with all the others. A very different setting is used for Jeffrey Foley’s book *White Trash* (1999). A self-published book, Foley’s novel covers the adventures of Leah Carter, white, pregnant, unwed, and “trashy,” and Jack Delaney, middle-class and judgmental. The book traces four days in their lives as Leah tries to rise above her background and Jack tries to deal with problems associated with Leah’s past. A first novel, *White Trash* is a rather rough attempt to portray a lower-class urban setting where violence rules. *Comfort and Joy* (1999), Jim Grimsley’s newest book, chronicles the love affair of Dan Crell, who has a white trash background, and Ford McKinney, who hails from the best of the old Southern aristocracy. Although it is, as the author says, a love story of two young men, it is also a revealing glimpse of the continuing struggle

between white classes. In this instance, Dan's white trash family is much more accepting of "otherness" in the form of wealth and homosexuality than is Ford's wealthy family, which can't accept either the homosexuality or the poverty of Dan.

As these and other contemporary writers join in excavating their backgrounds and recuperating histories until this time unknown and unsolicited by the public, the voices are becoming ever richer and more diverse. M. M. Bakhtin defined the novel as a dialogic genre where many voices can be heard at one time, sometimes presenting conflicting narrative views (261-263). For Bakhtin, the dialogic character of the novel was what made it so much greater than other genres. With the breaking down of barriers within the canon, the diversity of voices from novel to novel is expanding the idea of dialogism. More voices and more variety indicate more connections between narratives, writers, readers, and critics.

White trash people are being recognized because they are beginning to speak for themselves. As white trash join the ranks of the multicultural movement in the United States, adding their unique voices to thousands of other unique voices with unique stories, whiteness will change. "The truth will out," and deconstruction will occur. These contemporary narratives seem, perhaps, to be less experimental and less deconstructive than those narratives of the 1970s and 1980s. This new form of deconstruction is not necessarily seen in the style of the narrative, but rather in the underlying meaning of the narrative. Jay Clayton's *The Pleasures of Babel* (1993) calls the new narrative style a "flexible ad hoc arrangement" which, "[f]ar from seeming a secure prop of the establishment. . . . is often viewed by novelists today as an oppositional technique

because of its association with unauthorized forms of knowledge, what Foucault has called ‘subjugated’ and Morrison ‘discredited’ knowledge” (94-95). These contemporary white trash works seem to be just such oppositional works, excavating “unauthorized forms of knowledge.”

In the best sense of the term, deconstruction is about acceptance of all others—not a rejection of the original privileged element and a privileging of the originally rejected element, but the interconnectedness of all elements. The works of Dorothy Allison, Connie May Fowler, and Kaye Gibbons, along with the works of others who formerly could have been called “white trash,” will join with the works of Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans to form a canon whose borders are ever expanding to include the writings of any American who seeks to have a voice.

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