SERIA MONOGRAFII NAUKOWYCH UNIWERSYTETU ZIELONOGÓRSKIEGO / 2018 / SCRIPTA HUMANA / Vol. 12

ISSN 2353-1681

From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

Anneliese Heinisch
University of Graz

'OUT HERE … TRASH RISES': REFIGURING WHITE TRASH FEMALE IDENTITIES, HISTORICIZED BODIES AND THE ROLE OF BODILY FRAGMENTATION IN DOROTHY ALLISON'S *BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*

> "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers – stern and wild ones – and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss."
>
> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

> "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing."
>
> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

Abstract: Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) unflinchingly depicts the fate of a young girl, Ruth Anne Boatwright ("Bone"), who is in danger of succumbing to her oppressive environment marked by social stigmatization, extreme poverty, sexual abuse and neglect. It has been indicated that Bone comes to accept her identity as "a dumb and ugly white trash girl 'born to shame and death'" (Bouson 104) and that her "inherited vulnerability" is practically predetermined because she is her mother's daughter (Bailey 274). In fact, she questions and critically examines her own identity by picking apart what is commonly identified as white trash identity on several occasions throughout the novel. Although it is true that Bone faces numerous traumatic experiences and as a result exhibits several signs of "self-loathing" and "self-contempt" (Bouson 104) that go hand in hand with her initial hatred of her dirt-poor background as well as her yielding to rigid social classification, I aim to show how Bone in the end dismantles classification processes and throws back the essentialist labels she is ascribed with. She does this by choosing a path away from conformity. This paper aims to examine the extent to which class and ethnic background influence the continuous identity formation of Ruth Anne Boatwright in *Bastard out of Carolina*. In this context, a discussion of class dynamics in the US provides a backdrop to Bone's identity processes. Furthermore, I intend to show that Bone's identities are ambiguous and shift and exist simultaneously on several levels, with the aim to testify to the insufficiency of essentialist categories and classification. In addition, this examination will show how processes of Bone's identity formation are crucially mapped out on and expressed through her body in a fragmented manner, suggesting that bodily fragmentation functions here as a means for identity formation.
Keywords: white trash, poverty, identity, representations, *Bastard out of Carolina*

Introduction

In an interview with Carolyn Megan in 1992, Dorothy Allison addresses an unfortunate constant that underlies and motivates much of her work: "In this society, people hate the poor, so I thought it would be useful to get inside and let everyone see it" (Megan 78). She exposes an ugly truth regarding the treatment and portrayal of the poor in a US cultural context, one which her writing continuously strives to contest by giving us "an insider's view" of her protagonists' living conditions (McDonald 15). In addition to tellingly illustrating this truth, Allison's groundbreaking debut novel *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) yields several ambivalent portrayals of her 'white trash' female characters that complicate how the protagonists define and perceive themselves and how they are classified by others.

Acknowledging that much has been written on challenging stereotypes (McDonald, Reynolds) and on Bone's empathy with "racial otherness" (Bailey 283) in *Bastard out of Carolina*, I am using one of Allison's observations in her essay "A Question of Class" as a starting point to supplement these findings and open new interstices for examining the female protagonists' identities in her work: "[C]lass, gender […] and prejudice – racial, ethnic, and religious – form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives […] Claiming your identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance to hatred is infinitely complicated, and worse, almost unexplainable" (Allison 1994: 23). This paper is dedicated to analyzing 'complicated' literary representations of white trash female identities, discussing understandings of class, and readings of bodily configurations in *Bastard out of Carolina*, hereinafter abbreviated as *Bastard*. A substantial part of my paper will map out how class dynamics are formed and perceived in the novel, accompanied by a brief overview of select examples of representations of poor whites in American literature. I will primarily focus on the main protagonist Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright and her mother Anney, as discussing other protagonists in this context would go beyond the scope of this project. In the course of these analyses, I will argue that Bone's identity negotiations in light of the labels she is ascribed with profoundly form her sense of self and mirror the effects of social stigmatization suffered by those who are culturally grouped into one of the lowest strata of society. Furthermore, I aim to suggest that critically examining the emergence of fragmented, ruptured, and similarly extraordinary corporeal constellations can significantly contribute to understanding the identities of the protagonists under examination. More precisely, my paper aims to critically respond the following research questions: How do the female protagonists challenge understandings of what is commonly termed 'white trash identity'? How do they handle classification processes and essentialist labels? Can analyzing examples of bodily fragmentation contribute to understanding their identity processes?

White trash stereotypes and essentialism

Allison's novel evokes insights that benefit from how we consider traditions of representations of poor whites as an important backdrop to understanding the multifaceted identity formations that pervade the novel. However, it is necessary for a reconsideration of the origins of the term 'white trash' to precede considerations of what have been termed traditional representations of the white working class in American literature. While the term 'white trash' can first be found in print in 1821 and was used to classify a physically deformed and "diseased breed" that was further characterized as having "ingrained physical defects," the concept became more widespread in the 1850s to describe "oddities with cotton-white hair and waxy pigmentation" who had horrible traits and drank themselves to death (Isenberg 135-6). As we know it today, 'white trash' denotes "social waste" and "detritus" (Wray and Newitz qtd. in Bouson 101) and principally refers to "whites who live in poverty," whereby it "also invokes long-standing stereotypes of poor whites as 'incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid'" (101). As the scenes I discuss in this paper will show, Allison notably recycles stereotypical depictions of the poor by not "gloss[ing] over the ugliness of poverty" (Reynolds 358) but by owning the language that has been used to describe them: "Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us" (Allison 1996: 1). As McDonald has observed, Allison uses some stereotypical elements to defy standard understandings of 'white trash' (18). For instance, several of Bone's uncles exhibit some of the aforementioned traits that are frequently associated with 'trash.' As Reynolds puts it, the novel "reinforces many of the standard images of white trash" while simultaneously "transcend[ing] those images" (Reynolds 359) and presenting several characters who exhibit character traits that cannot be connected to the aforementioned attributes in any way. This circumstance stands in connection with the author's constant endeavor to render a complex, multifaceted, and deliberately "believable" (McDonald 15) portrayal of her characters by not excusing their behavior but by letting us see them "in the material realities of economic oppression" (Dickinson 81). It is noteworthy that it is Bone's stepfather, Glen, who comes from a middle class background who creates an environment of violence and incest – not any of Bone's immediate, dirt-poor relatives, most of whom are furious and determined to protect Bone after her abuse becomes known. Moreover, McDonald is right to point out that Anney and Bone allude to white trash stereotypes in several ways (18), though there are several moments in the novel that illustrate that Bone's mother Anney is extremely hard-working and strives to improve her family's quality of life and perceived 'standing' in society. Instances such as these indicate that essentialist understandings and categorizations exhibit

several shortcomings that dismiss them as tools to comprehensively and productively describe the characters' identity formations. Based on the notion that people or things have "deep, hidden, and unchanging properties" that crucially define them (Prentice and Miller 202), the classic understanding of essentialism is that it is "a belief in true essence – that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (Fuss 1). It is this understanding that Allison finds fault with in feminist theory:

Traditional feminist theory has had a limited understanding of class differences and of how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial. The ideology implies that we are all sisters who should only turn our anger and suspicion on the world outside the lesbian community. […] The difficulty is that I can't ascribe everything […] to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much-denied class structure of our society. (Allison 1994: 15-6)

In *Bastard*, Bone reflects on several events that result from essentialist classification, as becomes apparent in her considerations of how she and her family are treated: "We knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were" (Allison 1992: 82). This treatment also pertains to her stepfather's side of the family: "They served us tea in the backyard, just us – Anney's girls, they called us. […] We sat still, wonderfully behaved, almost afraid to move. […] His people watched us out the windows […] wide-mouthed cousins […] staring like I was some elephant in the zoo" (Allison 1992: 101-2). In addition, she in part succumbs to essentialist notions, for instance at the end of the novel when she identifies with her mother: "I was who I was going to be […] like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (Allison 1992: 309). And we also encounter essentialism in depictions of poor white southerners who are reduced to a core set of properties.

Turning to literature to examine representations of the poor yields troubling insights into a literary tradition of portraying poor whites, particularly the "poor white southerner" who is "deeply ingrained in American literary consciousness" (Reynolds 359). In "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*," Kathleen McDonald maps out the nature of representations of this figure in American literature, stating that these representations can first be found in the 18th century and primarily served comical purposes (16), at a time when "the poor, the waste […] were seen as a permanent breed […] unwanted and unsalvageable," whereby every era had different ways of dissociating "white trash" from the average social norm (Isenberg 1-2). McDonald refers to two strands that are used to justify the 'immorality' of poor southern whites, namely external factors such as diet, climate, and disease, and what has been referred to as the 'bloodline theory' by David Reynolds, a theory arguing that people have a genetic disposition to be, behave or act like white trash (Reynolds

qtd. in McDonald 16). Whereas the first strand is not entirely unproblematic, the second one is truly alarming for it suggests that certain people are born with unchangeable, inherent or essential qualities they cannot escape (McDonald 16). Both Reynolds and McDonald illustrate their claims by referring to the example of the highly successful theatrical adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's novel Tobacco Road (1933) (Reynolds 360-1; McDonald 16-7). As Reynolds states, Caldwell's novel is pervaded by stereotypes, by characters who are utterly poor, lazy, stupid, and promiscuous, and though Caldwell intended to call attention to the economic system that guaranteed those who were desperately poor to stay that way, the play was heavy on humorous portrayals that both attracted and repelled audiences who simply watched, mesmerized (360-61). Reynolds and McDonald are right to stress that these and similar depictions of the poor in literature are highly problematic, as they do not give an "inside" perspective, are one-dimensional, and do not consider social, historical, and economic conditions (McDonald 16-18). I believe that their situating these discussions in their texts indicates that Allison's fiction fills a void in this respect and complicates stereotypical depictions, as my examinations of textual excerpts from *Bastard* will demonstrate.

Representations of class – fluid or fixed?

Class continues to be a hushed category in the US (Isenberg 1; Campbell in Bailey 281) that rests on the mythical "rise of the individual ever-upwards through social and financial strata" (Campbell in Bailey 281), whose existence is even denied (Isenberg 4-5, 7; Allison 1994: 16). It is a category that needs to be addressed in terms of its role in US culture, including literary works that skillfully engage with it in spite or precisely because of the silence that surrounds it. For this reason, I would like to return to the question of defining 'trash' and argue that understanding the layers of Bone's identity and identification processes begins with rethinking static definitions of class in a US context. In Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal, Andrew Lawson discusses the 'lived experience' of class coined by E. P. Thompson that offers a dynamic take on the concept (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 7). Thompson suggests taking an angle on class as "a very loosely defined body of people" sharing "the same categories of interest, social experiences, traditions and value-systems" and "hav[ing] a disposition to behave as a class" (Lawson 7-8). In addition, he stresses that class is something that happens (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 8). As Lawson observes, it is the 'lived experience' of class that according to Thompson causes people to conduct themselves as a class (Lawson 8). In similar terms, it is the experience of exploitation and struggling that causes them to become conscious of their class (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 8). I find it important to reflect on the notion of "lived experience," as it

counters rigid notions of categorizing people into groups and stresses the relevance of experience, thereby suggesting an angle that favors the perspective of the subjects under discussion – members of a given class. As Reynolds states, "[w]hile the list of white-trash characteristics is varied and lengthy, there is no constant element shared by all white trash, not even poverty" (Reynolds 362), to which Allison tellingly bears testimony in her work.

Bastard offers both static and fluid experiences of class, as the (in)visible 'stamp' on Bone's birth certificate, "a badge of shame for both mother and daughter" (Dickinson 78) that manifests itself in the lives and bodies of the female protagonists of *Bastard* exemplifies. The notion of this stamp that brands the characters emerges early on in the story with the birth of the young protagonist. As Bone's father is unknown and Anney is unconscious during her daughter's birth due to a car accident, her birth certificate reads "illegitimate," in response to which the narrator dryly comments: "[…] and there I was – certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (Allison 1992: 3). In her discussion of the use of the word 'bastard' in the novel, Emily Dickinson mentions the term 'symbolic' violence coined by Slavoj Žižek to show that the word "incites and reproduces the relations of social domination by functioning as both a warning and a punishment" (Dickinson 78). In observing the manner in which the young protagonist is rendered 'illegitimate' and she and her mother are treated by society as a result, Dickinson is not the only scholar to draw parallels between Anney and Bone's situation and that of Hester Prynne and Pearl in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (59). As Vincent King puts it, "deprived of her father's name, the only name that the state will recognize as legal, these scarlet letters not only label her 'illegitimate,' but as 'no-good, lazy' – and 'shiftless'" (126). Anney is not only expected to feel shameful because of Bone's missing father but is held responsible for 'marking' her child, as becomes apparent in a conversation with a preacher: "Your shame is between you and God, Sister Anne. No need to let it mark the child" (Allison 1992: 14). The young mother shoots back: "I got no shame […] and I don't need no man to tell me jackshit about my child (14). Both Leigh Gilmore (54) and Peggy Dunn Bailey (276) have remarked on the fact that being officially and legally declared illegitimate propels the story, since Anney's quest to have the dreaded word removed from her daughter's birth certificate may in part have driven her to accept Glen's marriage proposal, as this marriage would make Bone 'legitimate' "[a]ccording to the 1952 Legal Code of South Carolina" (Gilmore 54). Being stamped or labeled this way profoundly affects Ruth Anne and her immediate surroundings (46), except for Bone's grandmother, who is not at all concerned: "An't no stamp on her nobody can see" (Allison 1992: 3). However, the novel shows on several occasions that Anney lives with the immediate consequences of the sentiment that results from the stigmatization of her daughter (Bouson 104; Carter 886) that is justified by her legal definition:

> 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 the birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. No good, lazy, shiftless. She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile […]. (Allison 1992: 3-4)

When Annie asks a lawyer why the officials insist on enforcing the stamp on her daughter's birth certificate, he tells her in a patronizing manner: "Now, honey […] [y]ou've lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are" (Allison 1992: 9), which suggests that class or markers of class are unfixed. If she had been able to afford it in financial terms, the issue would likely have been settled without much ado. It also suggests that enforcing the stamp on her daughter's birth certificate can be read as an attempt to essentialize the two women and reduce them to their 'white trash status' in order to maintain an artificial hierarchy. Not until the end of the novel after Bone is raped by Glen and goes to live at Raylene's place does Anney manage to obtain the cleared version of her daughter's birth certificate: "It was blank, unmarked, unstamped" (Allison 1992: 309). Though Bailey claims that Bone "suggests suffering and subjugation as familial obligation and female destiny" (280), we must also consider the empowering and liberating effect of this act (Patterson qtd. in Bailey 279) that proposes that Bone's birth certificate can be read as a blank slate upon which she can (re)write her own identity.

Reconsidering ethnicity in *Bastard out of Carolina*

Allison's novel exhibits noteworthy identity negotiations that involve various ethnic backgrounds that shape Ruth Anne's identity throughout the story. Though these identifications may appear to foster notions of otherness, I argue that they allow for inciting reflections on race and race relations to emerge in Bone's awareness of her surroundings and herself. Furthermore, these analyses can exemplify how identities "are constructed through, not outside, difference" (Hall 4).

The possibility that the Boatwright family is related to the Cherokee first emerges in a comment Aunt Alma makes to Bone when she tells her about her father: "You just looked at him with your black Indian eyes" […] She grinned at me, reaching out to push my midnight-black hair back off my face" (Allison 1992: 25-26). As a result of a feeling of alienation that is connected to her physical appearance that deviates from that of the rest of her family, Bone becomes fascinated by the myth that she has Cherokee ancestors: "[Y]our great-great-granddaddy, he was a Cherokee […] no one but you got that blue-black hair […] Those dark eyes and that hair when you was born, black as midnight" (Allison 1992: 26-27). Bone responds to this remark as follows: "I looked at him [Earle] carefully, keeping my Cherokee eyes level and my face blank. I could not

have said a word if Great-Great-Granddaddy had been standing there looking back at me with my own black eyes" (27). In response to this scene, J. Brooks Bouson states that Bone's mixed racial heritage functions

> as a sign of her racial impurity as a member of the "dysgenic" white trash. Pointing to the power of culturally sedimented imagery, Bone comes to associate her putative Cherokee heritage not only with the "black-headed" and "man-type" part of herself, but also with her "nasty," "rock-hard," and quick tempered white trash identity (54-55): that is, with her reactive shame rage, the angry part of herself. (107)

Moreover, as Bailey adds, the mention of her Native American great-great-grandfather lets us see the Boatwright family as

> disenfranchised, the descendants of ancestors from whom land, language, and home were stripped, the victims of cultural rape and the inheritors of socially sanctioned violence and loss. Allison presents a young girl, Bone, as the especial inheritor of this legacy." (Bailey 282)

Above all, this scene exemplifies that it is not important whether Bone's rumored Native American lineage is grounded in facts: she succumbs to the idea of identifying with a mythical 'other' in her family and appears to become part Cherokee in the abovementioned scene in which she envisions her grandfather with her "own black eyes" (Allison 1992: 27). As Bone puts it later in the novel: "I kept looking for something special in me […] I am night's own daughter, my great-grandfather's warrior child" (Allison 1992: 207).

Another example in which Bone specifically reflects on how her family treats notions of race involves her Aunt Raylene who "was always telling people that we had a little of the tarbrush on us" (Allison 1992: 53). This contrasts the claim Bone's cousin Butch makes that the Boatwright descendants "all pretty much look alike, like we been rinsed in bleach as we're born […] 'Cept you [Bone], of course, all black-headed and strange" (54). Bone reflects on this and comes to see that "[p]eople were crazy on the subject of color […] and it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it, enough that everyone was a little tender about it" (54). This may in part have been elicited by the description of "extreme whiteness" (Bailey 287) that her cousin shoots back at her at the mention of the possibility of having another ethnic background. Another time, a girl at school claims that Bone was "as dark and wild as any child 'born on the wrong side of the porch,'" which causes Bone to physically fight back, as she interprets the girl's comment as nothing short of indicating that she is a 'bastard' (54-55). Bailey discusses two scenes in the novel that are worth considering in this context (282-3). In the first one, Bone observes a young African-American girl, her cousins' neighbor, and compares her appearance with her own: "I slit my eyes against the bright light. The face in the window narrowed its eyes […] a very pretty boy or a very fierce girl for sure. The cheekbones were as high as mine […] [t]he chocolate

skin was so smooth […] I put my fingers up to my cheeks" (Allison 1992: 84). In the second scene, Bone draws painful parallels between how her friend Shannon speaks disparagingly about a group of African-American singers and how she is treated by others, including her stepfather's family: "My voice was shaking. The way Shannon said "nigger" tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeleine sneering "trash" when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (Allison 1992: 170). According to Bailey, these scenes express Bone's "emphatic response to those who are victimized" (282), but I would extend this observation by claiming that she not only empathizes with them but comes to identify with them.

Bodies "in chunks" and "in pieces": readings of bodily fragmentation

At this point, I would like to initiate a discussion of fragmented bodily configurations in this examination of class and identity dynamics to investigate "how larger social histories impose themselves upon an individual's bodily experience" (Dickinson 75). In doing so, I intend to reflect on how these corporeal images point to the fractured nature of the identities of the female protagonists who are marked by social stigmatization and constantly made to feel that they are "other" than a given social norm. For this purpose, I will consider Patricia Yaeger's observation that literary texts by women writers of the U.S. South offer extraordinary bodily constellations for addressing issues pertaining to the very regulated social framework and southern histories these bodies emerge in (xii-xiii). In particular, I aim to initiate a discussion proposed by Yaeger "about the relation between American history and the body – particularly, what happens to the body within a culture of neglect" (67).

Bone is a prime example of a victim of a culture of neglect. She is ridiculed and suppressed by others due to her dirt-poor background and though her mother loves her, she fails to take measures to protect her daughter from the horrors she knows she is suffering at the hands of her abuser. Upon examining Yaeger's characteristics of 'throwaway bodies' in southern women's literature, we can find striking aspects that pertain to Bone:

> We must pay attention to the difficult figure of the throwaway body – to women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed – who are not symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference – neither important enough to be disavowed nor part of white southern culture's dominant emotional economy. (68)

Bone can most definitely be defined in these terms: The physical harm she endures is not fully registered and acknowledged until the very end of the novel, she is not central to the social framework she lives in and is thus "looked over, looked through" (68).

It is in this sense that we can read Allison's portrayal of Bone as a way of describing individuals who are regarded as disposable and whose trauma remains unnoticed (69).

Understandings of fragmented bodies in *Bastard* may also benefit from a Gothic reading with reference to Bailey's discussion of Ellen Moers's "Female Gothic" in "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*." Bailey calls attention to the notable focus on the body in Moers's analyses of Ann Radcliffe and Emily Brontë's fiction in connection with Moers's mention of the "'auctorial intention of the Gothic' […] 'to get to the body itself'" (Moers qtd. in Bailey 272). Bailey applies this notion to the rape scene at the end of *Bastard*:

> Glen's final, sexually and emotionally brutal attack on Bone is depicted in such unflinching, realistic detail, however, that it "scares," it "gets to the body" of the reader in a way that the other scenes do not, in a way that Moers probably did not have in mind when she wrote those early descriptions of the function of Gothic literature but that Allison, as a Southern writer, explicitly owns as intentional. (279)

This final act of violence is clearly the most prominent and most obvious scene that "gets to the body" of the readers, but we must consider it alongside the more subtle scenes in the novel that exhibit bodily devastation and rupture and 'get to the body' nevertheless. In the novel, fragmented body parts surface in dreams and can be linked to Bone's sexual abuse: "[M]ore and more those hands seemed to move before he could think […] big, impersonal, fast. I could not avoid them […] gorilla hands, monkey paws, paddlefish […] My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over the edge of the mattress" (Allison 1992: 70). Bone's body bears testimony to the abuse and trauma she is suffering and not telling anyone about: "Maybe you're thin-boned […] I remained silent, stubborn, resentful, and collected my bruises as if they were unavoidable. There were lumps at the back of my head […] a rumpled ridge of bone. […] My collarbone fused with a lump the second time it was broken – an accident, Daddy Glen insisted" (111-3). Her sexual and physical abuse also marks her invention of horrific stories that call to the neglect and abuse she is suffering:

> My stories were full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans […] Witches cut off the heads of children and grown-ups."
> "Girl," Cousin Grey told me, "sometimes your face is just scary!"
> "Bone's gotten almost mean-hearted," Aunt Alma told Mama. "Something's got to be done." (Allison 1992: 119)

Aside from addressing the horrors of unspoken sexual abuse, there are a number of scenes in the novel that let us read images of the damaged female body as results of processes of classification and classism, for instance in Bone's reflection on the appearance of the women in her family:

> [W]hy couldn't I be pretty? […] This body, like my aunts' bodies, was born to be worked to death, used up, thrown away. […] Aunt Alma had given me a big paperback edition of Gone with the Wind […] one evening I looked up from Vivien Leigh's pink cheeks to see Mama coming in from work with her hair darkened from sweat and her uniform stained. […] Emma Slattery, I thought. That's who I'd be, that's who we were. Not Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks. I was part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins, fighting with the darkies and stealing ungratefully from our betters, stupid, coarse, born to shame and death. I shook with fear and indignation. (206)

This scene exemplifies not only that representations matter, but that Bone is at this moment tempted to think in essentialist patterns about her own identity. Due to the lack of representations to identify with, she turns to stale depictions of the lower working class. However, it is necessary to remind that identities are "never unified" but "fragmented and fractured" (Hall 4), and that this is by no means a final stage of her identity formation in the novel. More than anything, the aforementioned scene illustrates that identity is connected to "questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (4) and questions of accessibility.

After having lived with different family members in an attempt to evade the abusive environment in her home, Bone spends time at her aunt Raylene's house beyond the city limits of Greenville. At one point, the two women are watching the river that winds itself past Aunt Raylene's porch and Raylene says to her niece: "Trash rises […] [o]ut here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time […] Time and men and trash out on the river. I just like to watch it all go around the bend (Allison 1992: 180). Here, 'trash' not only refers to the physical waste that passes them by but to those classified as trash, including Bone, her aunt, and several members of the Boatwright family. Raylene offers Bone an outlook for how to overcome her physical and sexual abuse and social stigmatization by choosing a path away from conformity. It becomes apparent that "Raylene's metaphor (and her actual work) of making beauty out of trash resonates deeply within Bone" (Horvitz 253), whereby above all the transformative power of the metaphor should be stressed in this context. A more graphic physical example emerges when Bone and one of her cousins fish an enormous set of hooks out of the river and damage part of Raylene's house with it. When she discovers what happened, Raylene angrily takes the hooks away from them, threatening that they were meant for dragging up bodies like theirs "in chunks" and "in pieces" from the bottom of the river (Allison 1992: 186). Her rant inspires further stories and nightmares:

> Aunt Raylene's tale didn't really scare us. When I tried to imagine my flesh in pieces it was like a cartoon, completely unreal, but in the night stringy terrible pieces of meat loomed in my dreams. The hooks got in my dreams too, dripping blood and river mud […] I made up stories about where those hooks had come from, who had lost them, until Patsy Ruth got

> nightmares. She dreamed that she had drowned in the river and the morticians had to sew pieces of her back together to look like somebody. Only they had to sew different people's pieces together just to make up one reasonable body to bury to show her mama. (Allison 1992: 186-87)

With these depictions, Allison joins several southern women writers whose fiction according to Patricia Yaeger is pervaded by partial bodies and images of scattered or fractured whiteness (xiii), by objects that "pass – or do not pass – the boundaries of race and class (61). These textual examples exhibit indicators that the "objects" in this novel, that is, the female protagonists, may have the capacity to transgress class and race boundaries but (can) only do so to a limited extent because they are impeded by certain factors.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined how *Bastard out of Carolina* maps out processes that crucially influence how the protagonists define themselves and their surroundings. As has been shown, the active use of and insistence on the legitimacy of "trash," "bastard," and similarly derogatory terms creates a detrimental environment that threatens to taint Bone and Anney's identity processes, though they also make use of the leeway they have to subvert stereotypical notions that arise as a result. It is noteworthy that the novel actively complicates stereotypes not by omitting them entirely but by showing a more comprehensive picture of the protagonists' situations (McDonald 15). I have proposed that the novel suggests both static and fluid understandings of class, which also requires us to understand how perceptions and notions of class change over time. Furthermore, the analyses of the textual excerpts regarding Bone's reflections on class, ethnicity, and identity contribute to a destabilization of a unified understanding of whiteness and further suggest that Bone identifies with the 'non-white' part of herself. I have also shown that critically examining fragmented, mistreated, and torn bodies in this context can contribute to more comprehensive insights into the characters' identities and the classification processes that impose themselves on them, but they also importantly point to issues of identification and a "culture of neglect" (Yaeger 67) that are crucially expressed in corporeal constellations.

Allison's novel compellingly exceeds an "unsentimental portrayal of profound poverty in the Old South" (Carter 887). By revising and complicating portrayals of the "ungrateful poor" (Allison 1994: 13), *Bastard* opens intriguing interstices for examining identity negotiations in the context of class and ethnicity and influencing factors in a society that is designed to "keep its victims impoverished" (McDonald 17). The novel's epigraph, a quote by James Baldwin, complements the main arguments I have

made, just as it contributes to the overall sentiment of the novel: "People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it simply: by the lives they lead" (Baldwin in Allison 1992). These lines may take a stab at some members of the Boatwright family, such as Bone's uncles, who exhibit violent behavior and are more often drunk than they are sober or Anney, who deserts her daughter after her own blindness to Bone's sexual abuse. But they can also be directed at those in the novel who abuse their power to control and label the poorest and most desperate and decide to perpetuate violence – regardless of their perceived standing in society.

Works cited and consulted

Primary Sources
Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard out of Carolina*. 1992. New York: Plume (1993). Print.

Secondary Sources
Allsion, Dorothy. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. 1995. New York: Plume-Penguin, 1996. 1.
—. *Skin. Talking about Sex, Class & Literature*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994. 13-23.
Bailey, Peggy Dunn. "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and Bastard out of Carolina: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic." *Mississippi Quarterly* 63.1/2, 2010. 272-287. Print.
Bouson, J. Brooks. "'You Nothing But Trash': White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina." *The Southern Literary Journal* 34.1, 2001. 101-107. Print.
Carter, Natalie. "'A Southern Expendable': Cultural Patriarchy, Maternal Abandonment, and Narrativization in Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina." *Women's Studies* 42, 2013. 886-887. Print.
Dickinson, Emily. "'Trash Always Rises': Regionalism and Violence in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*." Peer English 10, 2015. 75-81.
Fuss, Diana. 1989. *Essentially Speaking. Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 1. Print.
Gilmore, Leigh. "Bastard Testimony: Illegitimacy and Incest in Dorothy Allison's Bastard out of Carolina." *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1994. 54. Print.
Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity?" In: Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1st ed. London: Sage, 1996. 4. Print.
Horvitz, Deborah. "Sadism Demands a Story: Oedipus, Feminism, and Sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*." *Contemporary Literature* 39.2, 1998. 253. Print.
Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash. The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. 2016. New York: Penguin, 2017. 1-136. Print.
King, Vincent. "Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison's Bastard out of Carolina." *The Southern Literary Journal* 33.1 (2000): 126. Print.
Lawson, Andrew, ed. *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal*. New York: Routledge (2014). 7-8. Print.

McDonald, Kathleen. "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 26.1/2, 1998. 15-18. Print.
Megan, Carolyn E. "Moving Toward Truth: An Interview with Dorothy Allison." *The Kenyon Review* 16.4, 1994. 78. Print.
Prentice, Deborah A. and Dale T. Miller. "Psychological Essentialism of Human Categories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16.4, 2007: 202-206.
Reynolds, David. "White Trash in Your Face: The Literary Descent of Dorothy Allison." *Appalachian Journal* 20.4, 1993. 202. Print.
Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. University of Chicago Press, 2000. Print.