TAINTED BY (WHITE) TRASH: CLASS, RESPECTABILITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF WASTE IN DOROTHY ALLISON AND BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

CORROMPIDO POR LA BASURA (BLANCA): CLASE, RESPETABILIDAD Y EL LENGUAJE DE LOS DESECHOS EN DOROTHY ALLISON Y BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

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Abstract

This article addresses the depiction of class, whiteness, dirt and respectability in the short stories "Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee", by Dorothy Allison, and "Boar Taint", by Bonnie Jo Campbell, from the perspective of waste studies and whiteness studies. Characters in these stories erect discursive barriers between themselves and others, deemed 'white trash' — a pervasive stigmatype connected to the working poor experience in the US. By enforcing hierarchies that conflate cleanliness and respectability, these characters seek to prove their adherence to unmarked forms of whiteness while resisting assimilation into the white trash category. The negotiation of (intra-)class divisions, especially between middle and working classes, exposes the malleability of social hierarchies predicated on relationships of waste. In the end, the protagonists' rejection of white respectability re-signifies their association with waste and leads them to find pride and community in their working-class occupations, without necessarily embracing a purported white trash identity.

Keywords: white trash, waste studies, whiteness, respectability, working class.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la descripción de las relaciones de clase, la blanquitud (*whiteness*), la suciedad y la respetabilidad en los cuentos "Meanest Woman Ever

Left Tennessee", de Dorothy Allison y "Boar Taint", de Bonnie Jo Campbell, desde la perspectiva de los *waste studies* y los estudios de blanquitud. Los personajes en estas historias erigen barreras discursivas entre ellos mismos y otros a quienes consideran "basura blanca" — un "estigmatipo" dominante conectado a la experiencia de la clase trabajadora pobre en los Estados Unidos. Al imponer jerarquías que fusionan higiene y respetabilidad, estos personajes tratan de demostrar su adherencia a formas no marcadas de blanquitud mientras resisten ser asimilados a la categoría "basura blanca". La negociación de divisiones de clase, especialmente entre las clases media y trabajadora, revela la maleabilidad de las categorías sociales basadas en relaciones de desecho. Al final, el rechazo de las protagonistas a la respetabilidad blanca confiere un nuevo significado a su asociación con la "basura" y las lleva a considerar sus ocupaciones de clase trabajadora con orgullo, sin por ello abrazar necesariamente una supuesta identidad como "basura blanca".

Palabras clave: basura blanca, *waste studies*, blanquitud, respetabilidad, clase trabajadora.

1. Introduction

Dorothy Allison's exploration of poor white experiences in *Trash: Stories* (1988) has received limited attention when compared to her oft-mentioned novels *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998). Even less attention has been given to Bonnie Jo Campbell's *American Salvage* (2009), a collection of short stories set in post-industrial Michigan at the turn of the millennium and populated by characters whose lives are likened to the remnants of a disintegrating social order: "It's as though there was some kind of apocalypse and nobody noticed, and now a large number of folks are living off the debris that's left behind" (Campbell in Kothari 2008). Despite noticeable differences in their respective backgrounds, themes and preoccupations, both authors often focus on the lives of those left behind — more specifically, on the experiences of the white American underclass and the stigma they carry.

In this article, I scrutinise contemporary iterations of the white trash trope in Allison's "Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee" and Campbell's "Boar Taint" from the perspective of waste theory and whiteness studies. My analysis seeks to shed light on the rhetorical strategies mobilised by those characters who are perceived as being 'white trash'. I am thus interested in examining how the class hierarchies used in these stories draw from the language of waste to establish poor whites as both polluted and polluting, continuing a long tradition of presenting the white underclass as inherently tainted. To that end, the article includes a

succinct overview of the origins and evolution of the term 'white trash', followed by an analysis of how some characters in Allison's and Campbell's stories demonstrate allegiance to white respectability by invoking discursive divisions based on notions of cleanliness and dirt. However, these stories also feature other characters who reject the conflation of respectability and (racial) purity, and strive to reappropriate the term 'trash' in order to vindicate class dignity and physical labor. I contend that the protagonists in these stories reshuffle the principles of respectability, purposefully downplaying the negative connections between working-class occupations, dirt and the poor white stigmatype, without necessarily embracing a purported white trash identity.

2. Poor Whites through the Lens of Waste Studies

Dirt, waste and trash are "essentially disorder" or "matter out of place", in Mary Douglas's famous definition (2001: 2, 36). Waste exists as "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (36). However, the very existence of waste is what constitutes any "dominant system of order" in the first place, given that the system can only be maintained on the condition that it expels any elements perceived as potential "threats against that order" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022: 150). Defined relationally as the absence, lack or negation of another entity, waste is therefore "contextual, place-based, situated, and historically specific" (149). Considering that "some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" (Douglas 2001: 3), one of the most productive areas of inquiry to branch from waste studies examines how certain social dynamics are mapped according to models and relations of wasting.

Exploring how these models are incorporated into the construction of social hierarchies has helped shed light on their inner mechanisms and subsistence, as well as on the discursive strategies used to negotiate the boundaries between pollution and cleanliness. Susan Morrison argues that one of the ways in which humans separate themselves from those deemed inferior is by incorporating the language of waste into the "rhetoric of othering" in order to make undesirable individuals "cognate to waste", thereby constructing "unprivileged races, religions, and ethnicities as unclean or inhuman" (2015: 97). This rhetorical application stems from the threatening dimension of waste as an abject presence that ought to be expelled "in the interest of maintaining a boundary between what is connected to the self and what isn't" (Hawkins 2006: 24). The compulsion to separate oneself from polluted elements originates in the perception that "things deemed dirty, spoiled, or noxious carry polluting effects, by touching" (Zimring 2015: 1).

Transferred to the social plane, this fear of pollution translates into "*projective* disgust" as one imaginarily anticipates contamination (Morrison 2015: 102, emphasis in original). It is often not enough to jettison tainted individuals from a system (or push them to the margins) to preserve it; non-tainted individuals are driven to reinforce these symbolic boundaries rhetorically to maintain their distance.

When labelling and categorising tainted individuals, few expressions are blunter than 'white trash'. The term, whose origins date back to the rural American South in the first half of the nineteenth century (Isenberg 2017: 135; see also Harkins 2004, Wray 2006), designates members of the white underclass who bear "certain socially stigmatized traits or characteristics" (Hartigan 1997: 50). White trash conjoins "an ethnoracial signifier" and "a signifier of abject class status" to name "a kind of disturbing liminality […], a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other" (Wray 2006: 2-3). Whereas 'white' is generally used to code 'wealth', its coupling with the insult 'trash' to denote 'economic waste' leads to an atypical denomination, given that "whiteness is so rarely connected to poverty in the US imaginary" (Newitz and Wray 1997: 8). Even though its origins are connected to the social organisation of the plantation economy, the term white trash has long crossed geographical limits to emerge as a repository of every reprehensible trait from which other whites want to distance themselves — including associations with chronic and extreme poverty, illiteracy, laziness, genetic inferiority (often manifested in scrawny or sickly constitutions), criminality, perversion, sexual degeneracy and debased appetites, to name a few.

Throughout US history a plethora of stigmatypes, including 'cracker', 'hillbilly', 'redneck' or 'clay-eater', have been attached to whites on the fringes of whiteness who display any traits mentioned above. The term refers to "stigmatizing boundary terms that simultaneously denote and enact cultural and cognitive divides between in-groups and outgroups, between acceptable and unacceptable identities, between proper and improper behaviors" (Wray 2006: 23). An important aspect of stigmatypes is that they function like relations of waste, that is to say, shaping categories by recourse to absence or negation. In this case, white trash functions both as "a rhetorical identity" and "a category of pollution through which white middle- and working-class Americans evaluate the behaviors and opinions of other whites of similar or lower class status" (Hartigan 2005: 113). From this perspective, the use of 'trash' is indicative of "self-conscious anxiety among whites over threats of pollution that threaten the basis for belonging within whiteness" (99). As a negative identity whose main attribute is the lack of adherence to unmarked, hegemonic forms of whiteness, white trash is "a means of inscribing social distance", especially for 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" (Hartigan 1997: 50). An imperfect or failed performance of whiteness may result in being labeled trash and hence socially marked as Other — a white Other.

What makes poor whites unassimilable into normative whiteness is their transgression of racial decorum. Whiteness is associated with domination and hegemony (Hartigan 2005: 2) but depends on remaining invisible to preserve its claims of universality, as Dyer argues: "Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen" (2017: 45). The breach of white decorum positions poor whites as "an embarrassing and symbolically messy group which has to be distinguished from the pure white middle class" (Grué 2014: 39). Functioning as a "contrastive strategy or rhetorical boundary construction", the category "white trash" unambiguously separates white individuals from "a certain form of racial detritus", that is, "whites who, through their poverty and ungainliness, fit insecurely within the body of whiteness as a hegemonic order of political power and social privilege" (Hartigan 2005: 114). Whenever the boundaries of racial decorum are found to be precarious, the language of waste is mobilised to demarcate what, or who, adheres to the standards that regulate unmarked whiteness.

Even though poverty is a significant attribute of white trash as a category, it is not what makes or breaks where the line is drawn.[1] Not all poor whites are white trash. Yet ever since the term was first introduced, it has been used inconsistently; sometimes, a person's character or morality could place them in the category, overriding economic factors, and sometimes individuals meet both criteria.[2] Insofar as the attributes assigned to white trash depend on how whiteness perceives itself, the term has changed over time. Representations of poor whites (especially in Southern literature) can be understood as "barometers of the cultural anxieties gripping middle-class white people" in different periods (Hubbs 2022: 7). Nonetheless, there are several traits, including a series of physical, intellectual and moral shortcomings, that are commonly associated with white trash — in opposition to other whites who, as Dorothy Allison argues, were categorised as "the good poor — hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable":

> I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes. […] We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. (Allison 2018: vii)

The separation between the 'good poor' from the 'bad poor' is nonetheless malleable and has evolved throughout time. In colonial times, the overlap between the language of class and the language of race still assigned "symbolic properties,

characteristics, and traits" indistinctly to "poor whites, Indians, and blacks" alike (Wray 2006: 22-23).[3] Around the mid-nineteenth century, mounting racial tensions and concerns about the stability of the existing social order, especially in Southern states, led to a shift not only in terminology but also in the conceptualisation of poor whites "as somehow less than white, their yellowish skin and diseased and decrepit children marking them as a strange breed apart" (Isenberg 2017: xxvii).[4] For many upper- and middle-class commentators, the degradation of poor whites translated into a distorted version of whiteness that challenged their perceived racial affiliation. Chronic poverty, malnutrition and other ills stemming from the socioeconomic condition of poor whites were increasingly understood to be consequences of some intrinsic degeneracy.

Overall, race became increasingly codified in terms of purity and cleanliness as the nineteenth century progressed, which ties in with Mary Douglas's observation that waste categories are used to buttress social hierarchies "wherever the [social] lines are precarious" (2001: 140). During the postbellum period, these divisions sharpened as "the rhetoric and imagery of hygiene became conflated with a racial order that made white people pure and anyone who was not white, dirty" (Zimring 2015: 89). This rhetoric can be traced in print sources, especially among Southern authors who located poor whites "along a primitive/civilized scale all too often applied to slaves and other people of color" (Mellette 2021: 9). The expansion of print media during the period contributed to the spreading of this rhetoric beyond geographical demarcations and likewise established a visual-verbal repository of poor white types in the collective imaginary nationwide.[5]

The eugenics movement at the turn of the century and its emphasis on "racial blood" (Dyer 2017: 24) helped solidify the stereotype that "large numbers of rural poor whites were 'genetic defectives'" (Newitz and Wray 1997: 2) and "represented a grave internal threat to the white race" (Hubbs 2022: 4). Again, the language of waste separates poor whites from the rest, marking them as inherently flawed and dangerous on account of their twofold status as polluted individuals and polluting agents. Early examples of eugenicist reports published in the 1870s "claimed that 'degenerate' poor white families biologically transmitted morally unacceptable and socially and culturally inappropriate qualities to generation after generation" (Wray 2006: 68), perpetuating a race of mongrels and criminals. The vocabulary in use borrowed heavily from animal husbandry and "highlighted unnatural breeding, unfit governance, and the degenerate nature of the worst stocks" (Isenberg 2017: 176). While the popularity of eugenics waned in the 1930s and 1940s, it made a decisive contribution to the solidification of widespread assumptions about poor whites, which persist in the US collective imaginary to this day (Newitz and Wray 1997: 2).[6]

Nowadays, 'white trash' remains a polarising term, regardless of some tepid attempts to dignify the label — notably, among working-class writers associated with the 'grit lit' genre who have sought to contest negative representations of poor whites (see Hubbs 2022: 108-20).[7] Other derogatory labels have fared better, yet ever so slightly.[8] Nevertheless, white trash continues to be a negative identity in at least two senses of the word: first, its existence is predicated on the negation of the traits associated with unmarked whiteness, which implies it is a mutable concept; second, although the images of both unmarked whiteness and white trash transform over time, the latter works by accrual, accumulating decades of reified prejudice. In other words, it is hard to claim white trash as an identity due to its pejorative nature, but especially because its existence is not predicated on possessing certain attributes, but on *not* possessing them. Any attempt to carve out a white trash identity must be considered carefully, lest they suppress the term's "historical and economic complexity" and turn it into an ahistorical, static notion — or worse, a commodity or aestheticised "consumable identity" that the middle classes can find "attractive" (Smith 2004: 375, 385). The complicated relation with white trash as a social category, as well as the struggle to delineate an alternative identity that departs from, yet re-signifies, the meaning of waste as a boundary that ought not to be trespassed, are central concerns in the short stories by Dorothy Allison and Bonnie Jo Campbell analysed below.

3. Warding off Trash

While the two short stories I examine in this study vindicate the association with trash, to some extent they are likewise firmly anchored in ideas and projections of white respectability that the main characters directly challenge or renegotiate. I use the term 'respectability' or 'white respectability' to denote a set of social codes, attitudes and beliefs that characters in these stories associate with upper- and middle-class normative whiteness. In Dorothy Allison's "Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee", the character of Shirley Boatwright constantly draws boundaries between herself and other poor whites to dispute her association with white trash.[9] Frustrated that she must live with her husband and children, whom she sees as an inferior breed, Shirley is physically and verbally abusive, obsessed with making her family comply with her idea of 'quality'. This becomes a paradoxical request, as she also claims they can never truly be 'quality people' on account of their innate lowly status. Bonnie Jo Campbell's "Boar Taint" follows Jill, a young woman who has relocated from Ann Arbor to a rural community in southwest Michigan after marrying Ernie, a local farmer, as she goes to purchase a hog from a poor white family, the Jentzens. The story offers a nuanced depiction of respectability and

social stigma by showcasing different rhetorical negotiations of class allegiances —specifically, the existing intracommunal divisions and the perception of the same community from an external viewpoint— and considers the malleability of these divisions depending on the position one occupies in the social ladder.

Both stories feature characters who refute their association with the white trash stigma by demonstrating allegiance to respectability. To this end, they stage a rhetorical displacement that involves situating someone else at the bottom of the social hierarchy, thus transferring any associations with white trash to that inferior position by mobilising the language of waste. If "to see ourselves as higher socially, we need to cordon ourselves off from direct contact with muck", these characters epitomise "[t]he desire to dissociate ourselves from excrement, filth, and waste as much as possible" in order to maintain rigid class distinctions (Morrison 2015: 47). The problem is that, as these stories make apparent, it is often not enough to refute one's identification with white trash for it to be effective. Adherence to respectability is often meaningless if it is not corroborated by an outsider's perspective. In "Meanest…", Shirley's insistence on her superior status is met with contempt by her fellow workers at the mill; even though she seeks to ingratiate herself with the foremen by informing on her fellow employees, there is no proof they regard her as anything else than a pawn at their service. In "Boar Taint", Ernie's distancing from the Jentzen family is challenged by Jill's outsider perspective; influenced by her urban, middle-class family, Jill cannot help but notice the similarities shared by Ernie and the Jentzens — which, by extension, bring her closer to the Jentzens than she might have imagined.

As I advanced earlier, the borders of respectability are erected in these stories by mobilising the language of waste against individuals perceived as inferior. In "Meanest…", Shirley cultivates clear-cut discursive boundaries that allow her to sort people into either 'quality' or 'trash', two poles that determine how she treats others. For Shirley, née Wilmer, the Boatwrights belong to a diseased breed of "devils and worms and trash" whose "natural substance was dirt and weeds" (Allison 2018: 21). Her verbal attacks draw from the white trash stigmatype; namely, she is adamant that her husband's father is a drunk and his sisters are lazy and live in dirt-floor cabins (24). Her attitude toward her husband and children seemingly stems from her family's rejection after she married — presumably, below her social station: "My side of the family don't even want to know you're alive" (24). She obsessively strives to demonstrate to others that she is still "one of the *quality*" (21, emphasis in original) by adhering to a rigid code of respectability. For instance, she assigns value to different types of jobs, claiming that "[m]ill workers are a better class of people than miners" (23). Likewise, she conflates respectability and cleanliness, as it is made apparent in her stories of "how big and clean" the

Wilmer house was, "how the porch shone with soapstoned wood and baskets of sweet herbs that Grandma Wilmer used in her cooking, how the neighbors admired her mother and looked up to her daddy" (24). Depicted as the quintessential proper place, Shirley's childhood home mirrors the commendable moral quality of those living in it.

Even though Shirley's obsession with cleanliness and dirt is central to the story, it is suggested that she believes respectability to be an inherent biological trait. In each of the story's fragmentary vignettes depicting Shirley's unmotivated abuse, her eugenicist rhetoric ascribes manifestations of racial degeneracy to her children, such as laziness ("Trash don't know the meaning of use. Just like you kids"), promiscuity and sexual degeneracy that verges on the monstruous: "Wouldn't nobody take an interest in you if you were to birth puppy dogs and turtles — which you might. You might any day now" (Allison 2018: 24). Whereas Shirley believes her own superior status is discernible to the naked eye, noting that "[t]he better people […] know their own" (21-22), she rules out the possibility that any of that status has been passed on to her children: "Boatwrights, you're all *purely bred* Boatwrights" (24, emphasis added). Her fear of pollution is likewise apparent in how she reacts to her many pregnancies, to the extent that she accuses her husband of putting "death and dirt" in her: "All I've got out of you is death and mud and worms" (26). Besides bringing Shirley closer to the stereotypically large white trash family, each new pregnancy entails that she must carry degenerate Boatwright blood inside her, forcing unwanted contact with a source of pollution and thereby posing a threat to her integrity. These forced contacts further enrage Shirley, fueling her hatred for her children.

Even if respectability is coded as an inherent biological trait, this does not prevent Shirley from chastising her children for not living up to her standards. She constantly polices their bodies and personal hygiene and berates them whenever she finds any flaws: "That neck don't look clean to me, Bo. You trying to grow mold in those armpits, Mattie? Why are you so dirty and stupid?" (Allison 2018: 23). This is perhaps the clearest example of how the rhetoric of waste is used by Shirley to erect boundaries that her children will never be able to cross. These divisions act as reminders that they can never be assimilated into white respectability. As the story approaches its climax, Mattie observes Shirley berating her younger brother Bo for his table manners:

> "Quality people use serving dishes". Shirley slapped Bo's hand. "Quality people don't come to the table with grease under their nails".
> "I washed". […]
> "If you'd really washed, you would be clean", Shirley was saying. "Nobody in my family ever came to the table with dirt under their nails. You go wash again".
> My family, Mattie thought. My family. (Allison 2018: 29)

By "oppressing others" whom she sees as lower than herself, Shirley seeks to prevent "becoming the lowest form of trash herself" (Morrison 2015: 52). This attitude is also manifested in her workplace, yet it does not have the same effect — mainly because other workers see Shirley for what she is: a snitch. This difference will become the catalyst for Mattie's rebellion at the end of the story.

Whereas "Meanest…" is rather straightforward in the way it represents how respectability is constructed and understood, "Boar Taint" complicates matters by departing from Ernie's working-class perspective and then inserting Jill's middle-class outlook. The initial portrayal of the Jentzens as seen by Ernie draws from the white trash stigmatype. The road to their farm is "long" and "slow", leading "past where the blacktop gives way to gravel and farther past, where it twists and turns and becomes a rutted two track" (Campbell 2009: 151). This description establishes them as backwoods people, not to be trusted — an impression reinforced by Ernie's reservations about the purchase: "That's an awful cheap price for any kind of hog […]. You got to ask yourself" (152). Moreover, his recollections of having been classmates with a Jentzen kid tap into the white trash imaginary, depicting them as extremely poor, malnourished and illiterate: "Had only one pair of overhauls to his name. He never brought anything to eat for lunch, not even lard-and-salt sandwiches *like us regular poor kids*. He still couldn't read in the fifth grade" (152, emphasis added). Access to normal food separates "regular poor kids" from the Jentzens and their debased or inexistent appetites, continuing a long tradition of identifying strategies to ward off hunger as symptomatic of depravity (Hubbs 2022: 94): "Them Jentzens still living on woodchuck meat and dandy-lion greens?"; "Jentzens got a good crop of pokeweed this year?" (Campbell 2009: 163, 165).[10] Unlike Shirley in "Meanest…", Ernie does not straightforwardly claim adherence to respectability, but his characterisation of the Jentzens clearly portrays them as an inferior class to the "regular poor", working-class type Ernie believes he represents.

By contrast, Jill's encounter with the Jentzens is not constructed by invoking the "good poor" versus "bad poor" rhetoric used by Ernie. For Andy Oler, Jill's encounter with the Jentzens replicates the conventions of "hillbilly horror" as it exploits cultural anxieties, in this case related to the dangers posed by polluted whiteness entwined with rural decline (2019: 171). As a middle-class urbanite-turned-farmer, Jill's experience with backwoods people originates from a different place than Ernie's, even though both versions are ultimately caricatures of white poverty. The scene as viewed through Jill's eyes suggests that she makes sense of her encounter with the Jentzens through the lens of "the city dweller versus evil rural folk paradigm" (Murphy 2013: 135).[11] Jentzen farm is a decaying "turn-of-the-last-century house", shrouded in darkness; when Jill enters, "her work boots

press grit into the plank floor" (Campbell 2009: 153-54). The people inside are silent and do not quite fit inside the room. Jill first distinguishes "the silhouette of a shriveled old man in a thin undershirt, sitting motionless at a table", and then four more men, their faces looking "uniformly grimy" in the dim light of the stove (154). One of them, "with dark blond hair stringy from sweat", sits panting with "[h]is mouth hung open", which reminds Jill of "the way her chickens sweated through their open mouths on the hottest days" (155). Meanwhile, the only woman present, "thirty-five at the most", is described as having a rough face and raw hands, swollen ankles and two missing teeth (156). The emaciated, animalesque profiles, combined with the suffocating atmosphere of the kitchen, make the Jentzens feel grotesquely alien, reinforcing the association between the decaying exterior and the physical decadence of those crammed inside.

Jill's urban, middle-class upbringing places her farther away from both the Jentzens and her husband, a situation that renders her incapable of spotting all the differences between them, which Ernie perceives to be blatantly obvious. Instead, she can spot their common quirks and habits from her outsider's perspective. Namely, she quickly notices that the Jentzens are "not hooked up to the power grid" and remembers how she had to persuade Ernie "to get the electricity connected to the house and barn", a recently introduced feature that did not prevent him from sitting "at the kitchen table with the oil lamp or the Coleman lantern" when left to his own devices (Campbell 2009: 153). Jill's observation that "[p]eople back home in Ann Arbor refused to believe there were still folks without electricity in America" (153) draws a line, not between Ernie and the Jentzens, but between "people back *home*" and rural Michigan, blurring Ernie's claim to respectability as part of the good poor. Later, as she notices a mended tear in the screen door, she is reminded of how they, too, "had repaired their screen with duct tape last week, and she had felt bad, thinking about how her father used to replace a porch screen when it had the tiniest hole" (157). Jill's father's attitude is indicative of a middle-class ethos of consumerism and disposability, one he deems to be the superior option: "Her father couldn't understand how Jill could choose a life where there was no time to relax and *do things right*" (157, emphasis added). Jill imagines him pontificating on her life choices from his office: "Her father might enjoy leaning back in his office chair about now and telling her she'd wasted twenty-five —no, thirty— dollars and a quarter-tank of gas" (162). Compared to Jill's father and his respectable middle-class persona, Ernie's mindset is very much aligned with that of the Jentzens.

Although they represent "the clearest image of the struggling Midwestern farmer on the brink of collapse in the twenty-first century" (Ortega 2023: 53), the Jentzens are not the only ones who struggle financially. Jill and Ernie are going

through a rough patch after Jill squandered most of her grandmother's inheritance investing in a series of failed agricultural schemes (Campbell 2009: 159). Their neighbor has "lost about everything except his house and garage in the last few years" and now works in retail, while his estate has been sold by the bank to "a larger corporate farm" (163). These circumstances raise doubt regarding the community's socioeconomic prospects. While observing Jentzen farm, Jill notes that "[a] big clapboard house like this […] could have been a showpiece in the historic district in Ann Arbor, with the siding, trim, and glass all repaired", but here it is just a rotting anachronism "doomed to collapse" (154). The house and its inhabitants are remnants of a lifestyle that will only get increasingly obsolete as corporate farming takes over; Ernie and his community will follow suit. This realisation hits Jill as she returns home, hog in tow, to find Ernie, their neighbor and his son "sitting at the porch picnic table with the Coleman lantern" (162). The eerie resemblance between this scene and what she witnessed back at Jentzen farm pushes Jill to the edge: "She wanted to unhook the trailer, pull out of this driveway, and head south until she was far enough away that she could look back and see it all in miniature" (163). Jill's assimilation into the category of trash, like in Mattie's case by the end of "Meanest…", appears to be inevitable. However, both these characters manage to re-signify the implications of assimilation through their labor — in Mattie's case, by choosing to sign up with the union and, in Jill's case, by doubling down on her commitment to live as a farmer despite the threat of economic decline.

4. Re-signifying Trash through Labor

After examining the rhetorical strategies deployed to establish (intra-)class divisions in Allison's and Campbell's stories, I would like to address how the association with waste is repurposed by the characters of Mattie and Jill, who vindicate this connection — even if that aligns them with the white trash stigmatype. In both cases, this vindication entails a rejection of respectability embodied by parental figures: Mattie refuses to follow her mother's example at work, choosing class solidarity over aspirations of upward mobility; meanwhile, Jill makes the choice to stay a farmer despite her father's prejudice, even if that implies grappling with economic uncertainty. In doing so, these characters reshuffle the traits of respectability, finding a sense of pride in their association with what others see as trash. Although both stories opt for an open ending, it is hinted that their decision to recast their association with waste may be the solution to their respective conflicts.

Throughout "Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee", Mattie seems to be the only Boatwright sibling to stand up to her mother's attacks: "she hated the way Mattie

would stare back at her and refuse to drop her eyes" (Allison 2018: 23). The other children think Mattie is "crazy", but nonetheless "worshiped her craziness and suspected that without her they might have all curled up and died" (23). Although Shirley reviles all members of her family, she is especially vicious to Mattie and often singles her out for her alleged depravity. In Shirley's eyes, Mattie is simultaneously promiscuous and undesirable, in tune with other portrayals of white trash sexuality as voracious and deviant.[12] She tells Mattie she is a "whore" who is not "worth two cents a night" (25) and takes every opportunity to drum it into her: "[Mabel Moseley] said you were shaking your ass and swinging your hair like some kind of harlot" (30).

In the story, Mattie's rebellion runs parallel to her entrance in the workforce and her sexual awakening. When she and her brother Bo are forced to find work at the textile mill, Mattie soon discovers that other women "stepped aside when her mama passed": "Everybody said Shirley Boatwright believed her piss was wine. Everybody said she repeated whatever she heard to the foreman on the second shift" (Allison 2018: 27). Shirley's attempts to get ahead have earned her a place in the finishing room, "[s]afely separated from the rest of the mill by a wire-and-glass wall" (27), but she does not instill respect in others — only resentment and animosity. Realising her mother's real role in the mill starts to affect Mattie's views. Moreover, on her way to work every morning, she often runs into a young man who openly flirts with her: "Lord, I do love to look at pretty girls" (Allison 2018: 28). Mattie notices that this is "the first time anyone had ever suggested [she] might be pretty" and becomes flirtatious, too, which in turn emboldens her: "She didn't know what she wanted to say to anybody. She only knew she wanted to start finding things out. She felt as if her eyes were coming open, as if light were sneaking into a dark place inside her" (28-29). This positive association between desire and freedom recasts Mattie's sexuality in a different light; instead of the monstruous depravity Shirley perceives, it is presented as a liberating force that shapes Mattie's aspirations in life.

This change in perspective leads Mattie to openly question Shirley and her worldview. This is reflected in the story's progressive shift in focus, from Shirley to Mattie, showcasing her contrasting opinions. Whereas Shirley's food is "[w]hite on white", her daughter fantasises with the vibrant colors of "[b]lack-eyed peas with pork and greens […]. When she had her own kitchen, there would be lots of color" (Allison 2018: 29). Examining the gaps between the floorboards, Mattie wonders, "What would it be like […] to live in a house with dirt floors?" (30). This leads to the final scene where Mattie antagonises Shirley by bringing up the "union man" to her brother: "'Trade union'. Mattie filled her fork again and then looked right past her mama to Bo. 'You think we ought to sign up?'" (31). As Shirley gets

up, most likely to slap her, Mattie finds herself thinking that "when she had kids, she'd sit them all down on the dirt floor and tell 'em to sign with the union" (31). Confronting her mother entails embracing a lifestyle that radically clashes with hers; thus, Mattie begins to chart an alternative pathway that casts the association with dirt in a positive light, rejecting her mother's brand of respectability and embracing working-class allegiance. By depicting Shirley as a snitch allied with the foremen, the story also makes the case that Mattie's fantasy to live in a dirt-floor cabin and sign with the union repurposes Shirley's aspirational middle-class respectability as working-class dignity.

For Jill in "Boar Taint", repurposing respectability also entails rejecting parental influence and embracing her association with dirt. Like Mattie's, her future is uncertain. Jill has gone from "post-graduate student working with experimental bean crops" (Campbell 2009: 153) to full-time farmer in the span of thirty-six months and struggles with her sense of belonging. Whereas she keeps squandering money on failed schemes, such as experimental soybeans that never sprouted or a milking operation that soon becomes obsolete, Ernie sticks to "his hundreds of acres of the same corn, oats, and beans he'd been harvesting for the last three decades" (152) and seems to regard Jill's failed ventures with a mixture of skepticism and pity (159). This perception is perhaps conditioned by Jill's insecurity, fueled by her family's deprecating opinions: "Her family was right: just because she'd studied agriculture for six years didn't mean she knew a damned thing about farming" (161). Her father seems to be particularly critical of Jill's choices, as he tells her that "marrying Ernie was proof positive she didn't know a damned thing about real life" (161). In the story, Jill tries to navigate her feelings of inadequacy and alienation, as well as the looming threat of economic decline — all sentiments that become more acute after her encounter with the Jentzens.

The hog ordeal reveals that the real threat for Jill does not lie in being attacked by the Jentzens, but in becoming the Jentzens. Besides the uncanny parallels between Ernie and the men, Jill notices unsettling similarities between herself and the only Jentzen woman:

> Despite the swollen ankles and two missing teeth, the woman appeared not much older than Jill, maybe thirty-five at the most. Her hair was still a rich brown, but her face was rough, as though sunburned season after season. Jill always tried to remember to put on sunscreen, but rarely reapplied it after sweating it off. The woman held out her raw hand, and as Jill gave her the five and the twenty, she noted her own hand was torn up from scrubbing the cow barn's concrete floors and walls to prepare for this morning's inspection. (Campbell 2009: 156)

These eerie coincidences haunt Jill, who becomes aware of how the gap she had imagined between herself and the Jentzens is closing: "Until Jill had seen the

Jentzen woman, she hadn't understood what her family feared for her" (162). This realisation dawns on her on the drive home. Believing the hog has collapsed and died from an infection, and swarmed by negative thoughts, Jill grabs a fancy "imported dark chocolate bar with hazelnuts" she had just acquired at the grocery store "as an indulgence" (153) and messily devours it with "mud-crusted hands smell[ing] of pig shit":

> She […] tore away the wrapper with her fingers and teeth, undressed the top of the chocolate bar, spit out bits of foil. She bit into the heat-softened chocolate and chewed and swallowed wildly. The luxury of it made her feel drunk. She tore away the rest of the wrapper and devoured the whole damned thing. Despite the pig stink, it tasted better than anything she'd eaten lately […]. (161)

In this passage, Jill becomes physically and symbolically tainted from the perspective of white respectability. She partially confirms her family's fears were founded as she breaks away from middle-class respectability and decorum. Seeing that "her ideas for extra income" may in fact be "hurrying the end along" (Campbell 2009: 162), she is flabbergasted to find Ernie and their neighbors sitting around the Coleman lantern, an image that seems to confirm Jill's fears that they are, indeed, just like the Jentzens: "What would her father say if he were here? Would he make clever remarks about failing farms and inbred families at the ends of dirt roads where everybody had six fingers on each hand?" (164). In this imaginary scornful comment, Jill has crossed over to the other side, aligned with the "failing farms and inbred families" her father likes to ridicule.

Even though she is tempted to flee, unsure whether "she belonged here at all" and whether Ernie "see[s] her as a farmer" (Campbell 2009: 164), Jill chooses to stay. In doing so, she insists on placing value in rural life even if that entails living in contact with polluting substances, like soil and manure. Despite the influence her father holds on her, Jill manages to separate the physical taint that is involved in farm work from the symbolic taint her father conflates with it: "Her father couldn't understand […] how the contours of the farm interlocked precisely with the contours of her mind" (161). Ultimately, it is Jill's passion which gives her the resolve to persevere: "All she'd ever wanted, from the time she was a kid, was to work with land and animals, to work beside a good man" (161). However, she charts her own course after witnessing the fate of the Jentzen woman. In an interview, Campbell noted that the Jentzen men are "especially terrifying" to Jill because she feels they "might devour her for sustenance": "The challenge for Jill staying on the farm with Ernie is that she has to imagine a way she can stay on her own terms and without her own men devouring her" (in Kothari 2008). The end suggests there might be hope in her sense of innovation, as opposed to the stagnant ways of failing farmers (Ortega 2023: 54).

In the end, Jill pursues what might be the only viable alternative left, striving "to salvage what she can of the farm's future" (Ortega 2023: 52) in her attempts to adapt "their agricultural practice to a changing economy", whereas Ernie "continues to farm as he always has, despite evidence that his is a declining way of life" (Oler 2019: 171). Although Jill realises that, "like all the farmers in this downward spiral, she and Ernie could lose everything" (Campbell 2009: 162), the story concludes on a somewhat high note after she discovers the hog is alive and will only need some antibiotics to thrive. Despite the bleak economic prospects, she reassures herself that her pig-roasting plan "was once again looking very promising": "This boar had turned out to be exactly what she needed, a creature even bullets could not stop" (167). This ending is only possible after Jill rejects both her father's prejudice against rural life and Ernie's prejudice against the Jentzens. In staying, Jill ignores her own inevitable association with the poor white stigmatype and tries to make an alternative pathway for herself.

5. Conclusion

Bearing all these aspects in mind, both "Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee" and "Boar Taint" depict labor as a source of pride by reshuffling the tenets of middle-class respectability, represented by the characters of Shirley and Jill's father, to compose a portrayal of working-class dignity wherein associations with dirt and manual labor are cast in a positive light. Whereas Allison's story puts emphasis on the value of class solidarity by linking dirt-floor cabins and trade unions in Mattie's rebellion against the tyrannical rule of white respectability, embodied by her mother, Campbell's story looks past stereotypical depictions of rural folks and farm life as backwards and degenerate, showcasing instead the intrinsic value of physical work. Arguably, if Jill had not been tainted by driving to Jentzen farm and wrestling the hog into her truck, she would have relinquished the opportunity to salvage the farm's future; if becoming tainted renders her closer to the Jentzens and the white trash stigmatype, it is a price she is willing to pay. Similarly, Mattie does not mind being associated with her family and fellow workers' lowly status, as long as she can distance herself from the abuse and impossible expectations her mother places on her siblings and her.

Each story illustrates how the upper and middle classes benefit from the working classes' investment in respectability by including a plot that presents these internal class divisions as having a direct negative outcome for their livelihoods. In "Meanest…", Shirley's desire to move up in society grants the foremen access to information on other workers, potentially jeopardising their activities. In "Boar Taint", farmers continue to believe they do not have it as bad as the Jentzens

despite proof to the contrary, instead of finding a common cause against the expansionist threat of corporate farming. Although the stories do not exactly vindicate a purported "white trash identity", they do reject the white trash stigmatype and its discursive links with waste. Instead of dwelling on the rhetoric of othering deployed by their fellow characters, Mattie and Jill re-signify their ties with waste by introducing new, positive associations between dirt and self-worth — while Mattie vindicates her working-class affiliation and rejects Shirley's aspirations of social ascent, Jill similarly relinquishes her father's middle-class ethos and finds pride in her newly acquired expertise as a farmer, even if that opens a rift between her family's social station and her own. Dorothy Allison and Bonnie Jo Campbell provide relevant examples of how literature can contribute to dignifying working-class lifestyles in the US by fostering positive representation, namely by showcasing life choices that place value in what is often regarded as worthless, but also by presenting the plurality of poor white experiences instead of falling for reified identities and negative stereotypes.

Notes

1. For a thorough analysis of the changing identities of the 'undeserving poor' throughout US history, see Katz (2013).

2. See Forret (2006), esp. "Introduction".

3. At least until the first half of the nineteenth century, terms like "immoral, lazy, and dirty" were still applied to "Irish immigrants, African Americans, Indians, and poor Southern whites alike" (Zimring 2015: 30). Later, however, race divisions pushed understandings of poor Southern whites as not entirely white, solidifying the conflation of poor moral character and race while downplaying the role of class.

4. Nancy Isenberg discusses the "ingrained physical defects" that characterised white trash Southerners in nineteenth century descriptions, noting that by being "classified as a 'race' that passed on horrific traits", the possibilities of improvement or social mobility for poor whites were eliminated (2017: 135-36). This connects to fears of social arrivisme in the South during Reconstruction, epitomised in the figure of the scalawag, and the desire to maintain preexisting social hierarchies on account of alleged racial and biological differences (see Isenberg 2017, ch. 8). In parallel to these transformations in the US South, the growth of an urban underclass living in deplorable sanitary conditions cemented the belief that "poverty and immorality went hand in hand" regardless of location (Zimring 2015: 30).

5. Among these characters, Ransy Sniffle, created by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, paved the way for subsequent representations of poor whites. Sniffle was "notable for his poor diet, his physical deformities, his laziness, apathy, and low intelligence, and his oddly colored skin" (Wray 2006: 40). Moreover, illustrators like E.W. Kemble disseminated the stereotypical image that would come to be associated with white trash (see Hubbs 2022). For further reading on the presence of poor white stereotypes in nineteenth century media, see Harkins (2004).

6. For a thorough chronological review of the antecedents and rise of American eugenics in relation to poor whites, see Isenberg, especially chapters 6 to 8 (2017: 135-205). For a shorter yet compelling overview, see Wray, chapter 3 (2006: 65-95). Regarding the persistence of eugenics-influenced visions of poor whites as intrinsically degenerate, especially in rural contexts, see Murphy (2013) for a comprehensive discussion of the hillbilly trope in contemporary backwoods horror film.

7. For a nuanced discussion of the factors influencing the commodification and vindication (or lack thereof) of white trash identity in recent years, see Hartigan (2005: 109-33) and Smith (2004).

8. For instance, 'redneck' and 'hillbilly' have been partly revitalised by their association with country music, authenticity, and simple life, yet those perceived as rednecks and hillbillies continue to be lampooned by normative whites (see Harkins 2004; Hartigan 2005; Isenberg 2017, esp. 256-261).

9. Henceforth, "Meanest…".

10. For further reading on the association between hunger, moral bankruptcy, and bizarre eating habits among poor whites, see Hubbs (2022), esp. 96-100.

11. Murphy makes the case that rural Gothic narratives "often pivot upon ill-fated encounters between people who are tied to one place, and those who are 'just passing through'", who become victims of locals "whose aggressiveness, resentment, and degeneracy is always linked to the fact that they tied to a deprived rural locale which epitomises the stagnation of what was once 'frontier territory'" (2013: 142). Jill's expectation of violence is shaped by her knowledge of the Jentzens' stagnation, but also by her feelings of alienation as a middle-class outsider trying to fit in a community whose inner dynamics she still struggles to understand.

12. Sexuality among poor whites has been historically depicted as raw, aberrant, and aggressive, characterised by a type of promiscuity that may incorporate taboo practices like incest and zoophilia. To name a well-known example, the popularity of *Deliverance* (1972, dir. John Boorman) with its deviant, rapist hillbillies, has contributed greatly to the perpetuation of this stereotype in contemporary depictions of poor white sexuality.

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