

# 'White Trash' Resistance, Women's Interactions and Identity in Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller*: An Intersectional Approach

La resistencia de la 'basura blanca', las relaciones femeninas y las identidades en *Cavedweller*, de Dorothy Allison: una aproximación interseccional

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**Abstract:** Considered pioneering in unveiling the human aspect of 'white trash,' Dorothy Allison's work has been centered on women resisting social oppression for being white and poor in a male-dominated environment. Such resistance becomes stronger in her last novel, *Cavedweller*, presenting not only poor white women as objects of oppression, but also women of all classes who interact with each other to fight social stereotyping and thus initiate a process of identity reconstruction. This article explores women's resistance against 'white trash' stigmatization at the juncture of class, gender, race and other axes of convergence in Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller*. In so doing, the paper adopts Leslie McCall's intersectional theoretical constructs as the basis for analysis of women's interactions centered on the figure of the mother protagonist of the story, Delia, whose relations with the women in the community and with her own daughters serve as a tool to overcome social stigmatization and forge new subjectivities.

**Keywords:** White Trash; oppression; stigma; women; identity.

**Summary:** Introduction: Women's Portrayal in *Cavedweller*. Female Plurality and Intersectionality in *Cavedweller*. Resistance through Community Female Interactions. Resistance through Family Female Interactions. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** Pionera en desvelar el aspecto humano de la llamada 'basura blanca', Dorothy Allison ha centrado su labor literaria en la representación de la resistencia llevada a cabo por mujeres blancas pobres en un mundo machista. Tal fortaleza se manifiesta con más claridad en la última novela, *Cavedweller*. Esta muestra las relaciones de varios tipos de mujer en su lucha contra los estereotipos sociales con el propósito de reconstruir sus identidades. El artículo estudia la resistencia femenina frente al estigma de la 'basura blanca' en la convergencia de la clase, el



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género, la raza y otros factores. Para ello, el artículo adopta la teoría de la interseccionalidad de Leslie McCall como base para el análisis de las relaciones femeninas en torno a la figura de la madre, Delia, protagonista de la historia, cuyas relaciones con otras mujeres y con sus hijas sirven de instrumento que ayuda a superar el estigma social y a forjar nuevas subjetividades.

**Palabras clave:** 'Basura blanca'; opresión; estigma; mujeres; identidad.

**Sumario:** Introducción: La representación de la mujer en *Cavedweller*. Pluralidad e interseccionalidad de la mujer en *Cavedweller*. Resistencia a través de las interacciones de la mujer en la comunidad. Resistencia a través de las interacciones de la mujer en la familia. Conclusión.

## INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL IN *CAVEDWELLER*

Dorothy Allison's second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998), saw the light of day six years after the publication of her highly acclaimed *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), which became the finalist for the National Book Award (1992) and recipient of the Ferro-Grumley Award (1992). Despite being second in line, *Cavedweller* has also been critically appraised, having received several awards, among them, the Lambda Literary Award (1998).

*Cavedweller* relates the challenges Delia Byrd and her three daughters, Amanda, Dede and Cissy, must face to overcome the stigma of 'white trash' on the path to self-discovery. Though the novel also presents Cissy's own identity-seeking from an intimate perspective through the practice of spelunking, for the purpose of analysis, the story might be summarized as follows: Delia Byrd, a native of Cayro, Georgia, falls apart after Randall, her partner, dies in a motorcycle accident in Los Angeles, California. A recovering alcoholic and the lead singer in Randall's rock band, Delia feels utterly alone after the loss of her partner. Her only thoughts are to return home and reunite with Amanda and Dede, the daughters she left behind. Though Delia could have the moral support of her best friend, Rosemary (a beautiful, educated, and successful African-American woman), while concentrating on raising Cissy (the daughter she had with Randall), she makes the decision to leave Los Angeles and go back to Cayro, where she believes she can build the 'perfect home' for her three daughters and herself.

Her 'homecoming' goes awry, however, the moment Delia drives into Georgia, after a long and arduous journey across the country. At the diner of a truck stop near Cayro, Delia is reminded of her 'white trash' condition. It is then when Cissy (her California born daughter) realizes that the

wonderful world her mother has been telling her about exists only in her mother's mind. Hopes of a bright new start fade away even more as Delia comes into contact with her own people. Her grandfather's farm looks dirty and dusty; her meeting with him feels cold and barren. She finds her daughters, who have been under the care of her mother in law for ten years, despondent and angry at her. To make matters worse, Clint, her abusive husband, has been stricken with cancer and refuses to hand her over the custody of her daughters. As for the town Delia had idealized, it has not forgiven her for having run away. In spite of such desolation, Delia is adamant on making Cayro her home. An old childhood friend helps her find a place to live in and a cleaning job, working night-shifts. In the following months, Delia works hard to earn the town's trust by showing she can be as industrious, pious and law-abiding as any other "respectable" citizen.

Things start to look up when, after having recovered from a deep depression, Delia is asked to take over the Bonnet, a beauty parlor in the center of town. At first, women in the community refuse to go to a business managed by a 'white trash' woman. In time and due to her diligence, inner strength and integrity, Delia wins over the Bonnet's clientele, while transforming the beauty parlor into a place where everyone feels welcomed. One by one, women, regardless of their class, start to frequent the Bonnet hoping not only to improve their looks, but also find empathy and understanding. Gradually, the beauty parlor becomes everybody's favorite, drawing back even the most reluctant customers, such as Nadine Reitower, a middle-class white woman who had always regarded Delia as 'white trash.'

While Delia successfully establishes a solid relationship with the women of Cayro, she is yet to consolidate a family unit in which she and her three daughters can build their 'home.' She manages to reach an agreement with Clint by which she would take care of him in exchange for her moving back in with Amanda and Dede. Living together as a family proves challenging: Amanda, Dede and Cissy need to learn how to strengthen ties and understand each other. Cissy—the California-born girl who had never heard of the term 'white trash'—undergoes a process of adaptation to a reality alien to her. This entails coming to terms with the town's prejudice, making new friends (Nolan, Nadine Reitower's son and later Dede's boyfriend, becomes her closest friend), establishing a good relationship with her half-sisters, and forgiving her mother for having taken her away from California. As far as Amanda and Dede are

concerned, they try their hardest not to be labeled ‘white trash.’ Amanda obsesses over religion and cleanliness, while Dede fights the idea of marriage for fear of becoming her mother, who was subject to male abuse, poverty and contempt, and who eventually abandoned her children. Dede is so terrified of marriage that she ends up shooting her own boyfriend, Nolan, who only wants to spend the rest of his life with her.

In the end, mother and daughters are able to reconstruct their own subjectivities within a ‘family unit’ where they feel safe and fulfilled. The last scene in the story depicts Delia and Rosemary, years later, on the front porch of ‘home,’ watching the grandchildren play and reflecting upon their past. African Americans and ‘white trash’ live in harmony, united and at ease with their own selves.

Though, according to some, *Cavedweller* feels like a continuation of Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the novel offers particularities not found in the former. While both works deal with resisting the stigma of ‘white trash’ to find an escape route from social prejudice to self-discovery, *Cavedweller* approaches the subject from a broader perspective: along with the stigmatization of ‘white trash,’ the writer presents the reader with a multiplicity of women of different origins, class, race, and sexual orientation who, subjected to a life dependent upon a male-dominated world, stand up to their present state of affairs. As a result, *Cavedweller* becomes an exposé that discloses black or white, southern or from elsewhere, poor or middle-class women standing firm together to overcome social conventionalism.

## 1. FEMALE PLURALITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN *CAVEDWELLER*

The ‘female plurality’ found in *Cavedweller* has been harshly criticized by critics who, having their eyes still fixed on her first novel, have not been able to interpret Allison’s intentionality lying beneath the surface. Mathew Guinn, for instance, has defined *Cavedweller* as “a cumbersome novel . . . with a large cast of characters who bear a greater resemblance to mass media portrayals of southerners than to actual people of the contemporary South—as if Allison has capitulated to the definition of ‘a southern novel’ that a national readership might expect” (32). Guinn’s disappointment in the novel is misguided by his strong desire to find in Allison’s second piece an identical reproduction of “sharply etched characters” (32) existing in her previous fiction. Yet Allison does not veer off the subject of ‘white trash’ exposure, but places it amongst other socially misconceived female

characters. On this plane, *Cavedweller* does not represent a diluted version of *Bastard*, but rather a universalized portrayal of social prejudice, aiming to set the stage on which to reconstruct new identities. In a setting where it is possible to expose and denounce social undermining of other female characters, Delia, Cissy and her half-sisters are not alone in resisting and debasing stigmatization. On the contrary, they are surrounded by a milieu of female characters who unravel as oppressed figures, interacting with each other to oppose misrepresentations of the self. In a nutshell, the novel conveys Allison's attempt to communicate to her readership that resisting and allying against social prejudice is a viable alternative to remaining socially shunned.

Female interactions in a socially constraining microcosm signal and underscore the power of agency, aiming to dismantle the popular imagery of 'white trash' and, by extension, that of inequality for women. Such imagery is responsible for positioning the 'demeaned' at junctures or intersections where categories such as 'poor white female,' or 'middle-class single elderly woman,' for instance, are conducive to oppression. Leslie McCall, a scholar who has employed intersectionality as a theoretical framework to analyze, study and understand the social junctures of the oppressed, speaks of the complexity entailed in studying conditioning factors, or categories which create social locations very difficult to get out of. Speaking of the difficulties feminists encounter in employing intersectionality for their cause, McCall affirms:

In fact, feminists are perhaps alone in the academy to the extent to which they embraced intersectionality —the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations— as itself a central category of analysis. One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical construction that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far. (1771)

Centered on "multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations," McCall's framework functions effectively in the context of *Cavedweller*, where the categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality, to name some, are presented as intertwined, not single or isolated. These analytical categories are pivotal to bringing oppression out into the open in the process of subjectivity formation. Because of its continuous interactions between women figures from all walks of life, *Cavedweller* presents itself

as a complex narrative in which its protagonists need support and help from each other to cope with prejudice.

The complexity of women's socializing, or interactions, in *Cavedweller* is worth examining through an interpretation of the intersectional perspective afforded by McCall's theoretical constructs, which involves three different approaches: firstly, an anti-categorical approach states that social life is considered too irreducibly complex — overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures— to make fixed categories. This non-committal approach opts for simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences (McCall 1773). In the case of *Cavedweller*, such an approach would be too simplistic for the female characters in the story. Life for them is anything but simple, as each character is forced to deal with social restraints, such as popular beliefs, prejudice and misrepresentations, among others, which hinder identity rediscovery. Secondly, McCall's inter-categorical approach —another prism of study proposed by the scholar— adopts existing categories, known as “the Big Four” categories of race, class, gender and sexuality (Wray 4), to document relationships of inequality among social groups within multiple and conflicting dimensions (McCall 1774). From this angle, McCall's inter-categorical perspective falls short of dealing with specific complexities in which newly emerged categories incite the oppressed to, for example, either form alliances with the aim of resisting mainstream white dominance, or rebelling against patriarchal societal patterns of sexual behavior. To illustrate the point, in *Cavedweller*, Allison's narrative posits resistance to the superior white establishment upon introducing Rosemary, a black independent singer from L.A., as Delia's best friend, a most suggestive indicator of alliances between minorities: blacks getting together with ‘white trash’ to undermine popular beliefs. As far as sexuality and class are concerned, Nadine Reitower, a middle-class white woman, rebels against a life of suppressed sexual behavior. As time passes, the narrative depicts Mrs. Reitower as a character who has already reached old age and also lost her husband, yet still thinks herself superior to many on account of her condition of white middle-class woman. The categories of ‘old age’ and ‘loneliness’ are clearly underscored when Mrs. Reitower shows signs of ‘insanity,’ often associated with senescence. Having lost all sense of decorum and lacking ‘a man to answer to,’ Mrs. Reitower lets her sexual desires run wild.

The last of McCall's approaches to understanding oppression and marginalization, the intra-categorical, proves most suitable for analysis of female interactions in *Cavedweller*. The intra-categorical approach "interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself . . . but, more importantly, it acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, while maintaining a critical stance towards them" (McCall 1774). The intra-categorical approach takes into account new categories resulting from one's own lived experiences, allowing for an interpretation of other intersecting categories, which at any given time could facilitate mechanisms of oppression; for example, the fear that Dede feels of being labeled 'white trash,' just like her mother.

Drawing on an intersectional perspective on female interactions in *Cavedweller*, what follows is an examination of Delia's resistance to the myth of 'white trash,' symbolized by the notion of home—ever present throughout the story—as a place of unity and shelter. Resistance is embedded as well in the interactions the women of Cayro hold as a collective and, at a more intimate level, in the interactions the women of the Byrd family manage to establish in pursuit of the self.

## 2. RESISTANCE THROUGH COMMUNITY FEMALE INTERACTIONS

A few days after Randall's death, Delia Byrd decides to go back to her hometown, Cayro, Georgia, the place she left over ten years earlier to escape the physical abuse of her husband Clint. Delia has given birth to another girl while in California, Cissy, who will come to Cayro with her. With high hopes of returning back home, Delia has constructed a world of fantasy where her daughters (Cissy, born in California, and Amanda and Dede, the ones she left behind) are the focus of her attention. In a conversation with Cissy, Delia's idealization of Cayro as the 'home' to return to becomes blatantly obvious:

'Don't worry, baby.' 'It will all be different in Cayro,' Delia said. 'It an't like here. People are different there. They care about each other, take time to talk to each other. They don't lie or cheat or mess with each other all the time. They're not scared, not having to be so careful all the time. They know who they are, what is important. And you'll be with your sisters. You won't be alone, honey. Not being alone in the world, that's something you've never had. That's something I can give you.' (10–11)

Delia's dreaming of home has transcended the mere physical representations of a house into the idea of a community (Cayro, Delia's birthplace) that, in her mind, will provide her with the support needed to build a family safety net for her daughters. This idealized image of her hometown vanishes when, after a long and desperate journey across country, the protagonist comes to grips with reality:

'I know you,' she said again. . . . 'You are that bitch ran off and left her babies.' The cook's voice was loud and definite. The waitress's eyes widened. Delia felt her knees go weak. . . . 'You took off with that rock band. Did all right for yourself, did you? Well, don't think people don't remember. We remember. You the kind we remember.' The cook crossed her fat arms and nodded her head. (38–39)

The above-quoted lines reveal the existence of a small-minded, class-stratified community that does not forget wrong doing, nor does it offer forgiveness to a poor white woman. As Sharon Monteith puts it, "Dorothy Allison presents most effectively the small-minded in small town Cayro, Georgia" (539). Being dirt-poor and having run away from her girls and husband places Delia at the juncture of class, gender and expected social behavior. Indeed, her past actions reaffirm the preconceived popular belief that only the low classes, the poor whites, would abandon their family responsibilities. At this point, it is worth noting that the popular belief of poor whites as incapable of taking on the responsibility to rear productive members of society has a long-standing tradition whose origins can be traced back to colonial England. Nancy Isenberg speaks of several measures put in place in London which proposed separating poor children from their families to be "brought up in labor and work so they would not follow in the footsteps of their parents and become 'idle rogues'" (21). As the British Empire rid their homeland of its human trash upon having poor and indigent people sent to America as indentured servants, the poor white stigma also took root in the New World. It is no wonder that Delia may be looked down upon as incapable of performing motherly duties, such as good rearing and role-modeling for her daughters. Through an intra-categorical approach, as a newly configured category—expected socially acceptable behavior—has emerged, Delia is faced with what the rest of the community thinks of her. In addition, the realization that Cayro may



not be the place she always imagined crushes Delia's idealized concept of home where everybody is forgiving, respectful and loving.

Disconcerted by the present state of affairs, Delia seeks social acceptance from a town not willing to forget her past actions. Delia's urgent need for social forgiveness becomes key to her survival: the protagonist concentrates her efforts on regaining the community's trust by attending church services, thus showing remorse and repentance for her actions; she also takes on a cleaning job while trying to provide moral support for her family. Delia even reaches an understanding with her mother-in-law to take care of Clint, her violent husband. Showing diligence and a willingness to lead a life of social respectability presents Delia as 'resisting' the misconception that poor whites are indolent, lazy and a burden to society. On the subject, the idea of poor whites as a social burden gained such momentum in history that in early twentieth century, a debate on whether the detrimental nature of the poor was either 'inherited' or environmentally conditioned arose in the scientific, political, economic, and social arenas, giving birth to new sciences such as eugenics, which demanded involuntary institutionalization and sterilization of the poor and indigent or those considered 'unfit' to live in society (Wray 19).

In time, Delia's efforts to be reinserted into society pay off, as she is given the opportunity to take over a beauty shop, known as the Bonnet. As time passes, Delia's customers find in her beauty parlor common ground to free themselves of any social restrictions. The Bonnet provides the women of Cayro with a sense of safety and freedom, not found anywhere else but home.

In her article about Toni Morrison's notions of home, house and heaven, Cynthia Dobbs states that Morrison "moves the idea of home from one contained within the house to an explicitly gendered, open-borders communal space —its freedom and security defined by the degree to which black women fell simultaneously safe, free and connected" (110). In the realm of the poor white woman, such a concept materializes in the 'communal space' of the Bonnet, which Delia manages to build against all odds. The women of Cayro enjoy the intimacy that the Bonnet offers them, a place to chat about their own realities:

The glowing devotion of the women in the Bonnet could make even heartbreak seem romantic. The joke in the Bonnet was that if a woman changed her hairstyle, she was almost surely changing her sheets. 'Putting

on pink satin instead of white cotton,' M. T. said. 'Madrigal Whiteman wants a hairstyle to go with satin sheets.' (103)

The tone of female comradery and complicity in the lines above suggests that, as Jennifer Scanlon puts it, hair salons can be perceived as sites of female activity serving “to engender positive female identity, challenge rather than simply reinforce negative notions of female beauty, and sometimes promote solidarity across differences of class, race and age” (309). Yet, the Bonnet goes a step further, for intimacy becomes such within the safety of its walls that, eventually, it transforms into a space where any woman can share secrets and confess ‘social offences.’ The following is a passage revealing Marcia Pearlman’s confession of having given her newborn child up for adoption:

Marcia nodded and closed her eyes. A trickle of water ran along her jaw. Deli wiped it away with the towel. ‘I had a baby when I was a girl,’ Marcia said. ‘Fourteen and stupid as they come. Didn’t go out of the house for six months and had the baby at home. My daddy took it to St. Louis and gave it to this lady who found good homes for babies like that. We never talked about it. Didn’t even tell my husband when I married.’ (378)

The feelings of remorse and guilt conveyed in the previous lines lead to empathy towards women who have been left with no other choice but comply with social standards of respectability, no matter the cost. Such empathy is passed on to the reader who, witness to an act of confession carried out in the intimacy and safety of the beauty parlor, “can imagine for themselves a corner of resistance, a place in which to enact a feminist fantasy of personal growth and sisterly solidarity” (Scanlon 310).

Undeniably, the Bonnet has become the physical place from where to derive a sense of unity, safety and belonging. It signifies, in a way, the home of the displaced, those towards whom others feel only contempt and hatred. Elaborating on the notion of home, Cynthia Dobbs reminds us of Toni Morrison’s developing sense of the connection between “a fierce longing for a local, regional, and national home—in short, an African-American situated identity—and a transnational, postcolonial notion of diasporic exile” (120). Morrison’s and Allison’s concepts of unity, safety and belonging do not stand far apart, for “situated identity” is to African American as ‘female identity’ is to the women of Cayro. To them, the Bonnet is ‘home,’ a place to share the notion of “diasporic exile,”

interpreted, in the novel, as the feeling of displacement women experience in their own community.

On a broader scale, the community of Cayro also becomes the place where women's interactions, as a form of resistance to traditional hegemonic norms, start to occur. Sharing mechanisms of oppression, such as, for instance, 'acceptable' behavior dictating what can or cannot be done, female characters create "common politics born out of necessity" (Moraga xix). In this context, collective agency (women's resistance against social oppression) resembles what Moraga has come to define as the "theory in the flesh," which originates in the suffering and survival of the collective. Put it in her own words, collective agency "is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives" (xxviii). Intimacy and privacy are fostered in places, such as the Bonnet, where women gather together to make sense of their experiences of oppression and eventually confront it (Henze 237).

The agency depicted in the fictional reality of the novel is not unjustified, but has its roots in Allison's own. As a writer, Allison has defied society's impositions on women's writings upon uncovering and exposing the stigmatizing of others. In so doing, the author has refused to 'pollute' her intentionality, while adhering to her activist principles. Her 'agency' challenges "taboos located in essentially the same places: rage, accusation (or accusatory despair), and unacceptable sexuality" (Russ 30).<sup>1</sup> Allison's agency is also the product of her understanding the world around her. She knows by experience that society exerts control over the poor white class on account of their 'whiteness,' thus instilling in them a 'fictitious' sense of superiority. Despite being born poor, a woman, and in the South, Allison was greatly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, whose values made her cognizant of the reality she grew up in, which she intends to denounce. She explains:

The sixties. I was born in 1949. That puts me in a particular place in terms of the South and the civil rights movement. One of the places where I saw a sense of identity in my early teenage years . . . . I did not like the world into which I was born. It was clear to me that people who hated black people hated my people and held us in contempt. Now, they held black people in more contempt, and once I grew up and started reading more, it began to

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<sup>1</sup> Before devoting herself to full-time writing, Allison had fought for the rights of women and lesbians, contributing greatly to the second wave of feminism.

seem to me that there was this bad bargain that had been made with poor whites in the South, which is, we'll treat you mean, but we are going to treat them worse, and you're going to take pride in the fact that you're not them, which was the whole black-white thing for poor people in the South. You may be dirt, but you are white. (LeMahieu 674–75)

Allison is aware of the tacit agreement that has long existed between the white classes to claim superiority over a socially-conceived inferior race. It does not come as a surprise that Allison's resistance to the 'status quo' be manifested in the interactions among the women characters of the story. She manages to deliver this message by having intersecting categories, such as gender, race and class, blend in and fuse together. Borrowing McCall's own terms, these come into the scene, inter-categorically, that is, mixed in with other categories. On this plane, the narrative makes explicit the absence of race and class boundaries between Delia and Rosemary, her black friend from California. The first chapter of the novel already reveals Rosemary's transgression of boundaries because of her profound connection with Delia, her best friend. She is the first one to report the news of Randall's death (2) and the one who cautions her about returning to Cayro: "'Oh, Delia,' Rosemary shook her head. 'Lord, gurl, you do not want that. Those children are half grown now. They an't seen you in more than ten years. Nobody there is going to welcome you, honey'" (5–6). Lastly, Rosemary's friendship with Delia has solidified throughout the years they spent together. The two women have strengthened their bonds to the point of empathy and understanding for each other, erasing the divisory lines between two 'supposedly' opposing social groups. Despite their differences in class and background, Delia and Rosemary know what oppression is like. They can relate to each other's pain and suffering. The following passage shows Rosemary's understanding of Delia's hardship:

'I am a cactus rose myself,' Rosemary told Delia once. 'I'm prickly and sweet-centered and dangerous to the unwary.' Delia could hear her chuckle, a deep growl of satisfaction. 'And I'm like you,' Rosemary said. 'I can survive on just about nothing. And nothing is enough when you know who you are.' (149–50)

Rosemary, a black woman who seems to have found her identity, stands shoulder to shoulder with Delia, still longing for home and happiness. These two women (one black and the other 'white trash'), who in the real world would have never become friends, establish alliances in the fictional

reality of the story, posing resistance therefore to superior mainstream whites.

Rosemary also challenges the social imagery built around black women: the narrative calls into question traditionally-perceived notions of white female beauty. The following text, which takes place during Rosemary's first visit with Delia in Cayro, discloses Rosemary's stunning beauty:

Rosemary was the most beautiful black woman they would ever meet. . . . She was flawless, her face clear and glowing. She had dark mahogany skin that gleamed with reddish highlights, and a gorgeously shaped mouth, dark red and pursed like a rosebud. Her short brown hair glistened with sweet oil and showed the delicate shape of her skull. When she climbed out of her rented car, Amanda was startled and intimidated. Dede was simply enthralled. (153–54)

The concept of beauty stated above goes against the social stereotypes pinned on African-American women, which historically have been those of either hypersexuality or sexual deviance. To illustrate the point, the general public in nineteenth-century England would line up to peek at Sarah Baartman's "over-sized and grotesque physiognomy and genitalia" (Gilman 232). Rosemary's beauty, however, centers around her facial and hair attributes, more in tune with white Anglo-Saxon female beauty standards. Furthermore, such eloquent description of her beauty only goes to show Allison's defying stance to social stigmatizing and, in turn, social stratification. For Rosemary symbolizes the sophisticated world of show business, of a place so very distant from the South, not to mention so very atypical for a black woman. In addition, Rosemary is financially independent, capable of supporting herself, "I'm your granddaddy's worst nightmare, child, a black Yankee woman raised to be rich and bossy" (163). Here, the intra-categories of Rosemary's beauty (more resembling that of a sophisticated upper middle-class white woman) and financial stability (a feature more in accordance with the white businessman type) favorably factor into the equation of resisting popular beliefs.

Another form of resistance to the establishment is found in the figures of Nadine Reitower, Nolan's mother, and Tacey Brithouse, her black housekeeper. Upon Delia's opening of the Bonnet, Nadine refuses to go, for in her mind Delia is a disgrace to the community, "I told Marcia before I wouldn't have Delia Byrd touching me. Now that hussy's taking over the

only place I've ever gone to get my hair done!" (89). In the words of Karen Gaffney, Nadine associates Delia with a sexuality that will contaminate her, even if Delia only touches her hair (47).

When, upon her husband's death, Nadine Reitower finds herself not having to justify her actions, she releases her long-suppressed sexual desires, once a sign of forced-upon conformity to society. Her excessive thinness, an indicator of her self-inflicted repression, makes her vulnerable. Inevitably, Nadine collapses, literally and figuratively letting herself go: her body, as well as her socially accepted behavior, tumble down, revealing a character that refuses to continue to be a 'respectable white middle-class woman.' Wheelchair-bound, Nadine tells Tacey, her housekeeper, how she feels about sex:

'If I could get up out of this chair, I'd go sit naked on the garbage cans in the morning just to see if the boys would let me suck on their shoulders and put my heels up on their hips.' She sighed again, a perfect heartbroken sigh. (291)

Allison transcends social conventions of 'respectability' attributed to white middle-class women, faithful to their husbands and incapable of having impure thoughts, by turning Nadine Reitower into a 'sexually perverse creature,' a trait affixed to poor 'white trash' women. The idea of sexual deviance in the text is reinforced by Nadine's sitting on "garbage" cans. For Nadine, trash has come to signify sexual pleasure and freedom, rather than depravity and degeneracy. Turning Nadine from a superior middle-class woman into a lust-driven woman who envies poor 'white trash' women's sexuality allows Allison to demystify the social stereotypes and stigmas built around women, be those either middle class or 'white trash.' Yet, in this interplay, the narrative adds another layer to already complex categories. Nadine is also bound to debunk the stereotype of the hypersexual black woman as she wants to become like Tacey, her black cleaning lady: "'Oh, you know. Black girls get to do everything. Me, I never got to do nothing.' Nadine smacked her lips and sighed. 'If I'd been born black, I could have been sucking men's tities since I was twelve'" (291). If, before, Nadine rejects both social groups (blacks and 'white trash') in dismissing them as impure and dirty, now she rejoices in her freedom to explore her newly discovered sexual desires. In the words of Karen Gaffney, "she celebrates the kind of sexuality she has formerly found disdainful" (47).

On the whole, resistance to social misconstructions is revealed twofold: on the one hand, the creation of a common place where everyone can feel safe liberates women to expose oppression originating from the intersection of different and multiple categories, not only the 'Big Four.' Such are the cases of Marcia Pearlman, confessing to having acted against socially expected behavior, and Nadine Reitower, whose categories of physical illness, old age, and widowhood drive her to release her most repressed sexual desires. On the other hand, intersecting categories do not hinder identity rediscovery; on the contrary, they become a motivation to explore new identities. Along this line, Rosemary is an illustration of multiple categories intersecting towards identity building: she is a California-born black woman who has achieved success, beauty and style.

### 3. RESISTANCE THROUGH FAMILY FEMALE INTERACTIONS

As previously stated, demystifying the popular belief that 'white trash' families are dysfunctional and incapable of forging stable family relations unfolds as another form of resistance in the narrative. Just as Delia manages to provide a place of safety for the women of Cayro, so she tries to do the same for her daughters. But the idea of home that at first Delia forges in her mind is not what she experienced while living with Clint. In those days, 'home' was for Delia a place of violence and fear. Having agreed to take care of Clint, her abusive husband, Delia remembers what 'home' was really like:

Delia turned away. God had a hell of a sense of humor, she thought. She remembered lying on the floor of this bathroom, pregnant with Dede, pissing herself because she was hurting too bad to stand . . . . All those years ago, when she had bought that gun at the flea market near the Atlanta speedway, she thought she would have to kill him . . . . 'There an't no slaves in the South no more,' she said. 'You been trying to make a slave of me.' Clint just looked at her, his dirty blond hair hanging in his face, his jaw working, the hatred in him like a black light shining out of his eyes. He laughed a harsh laugh and turned and walked out. She wanted to go after him. She wanted to shoot him then. Instead she put her head down on the table and wept into her hands. (147)

Delia's memories of home do not evoke safety and belonging, but sadly reflect a lifestyle led by poor whites, which, according to Tokarczyk, is marked by "severe material deprivation, increased vulnerability to

violence, and public scorn” (148). If Delia were to reclaim her rights to build a place of safety for her daughters and her, she would have to start from within, from the concept of family lying beneath, a family she feels she needs to create by strengthening ties between Amanda, Dede, Cissy and herself.

The concept of family does not end for Delia in her relationship with her three daughters, but rather it extends to the relationship that the girls ought to construct as sisters. Sisterly relations, then, emerge as a new category in the mix of intra-categories at play, becoming the starting point from which to build Delia’s concept of home. Female relationships within this family prove intrinsically complex. Regarding Cissy, the girl does not feel compelled to find any connection with her sisters as she belongs to another world, California, a world in which the categories of gender, class and race are dismissed. Under this light, McCall’s anti-categorical approach seems appropriate. In the first pages of the novel, Cissy does not identify herself with her mother’s origins, nor is she willing to initiate any relationship with her half-sisters, as her stance to ‘white trash’ is that of denial. California comes across as the home Cissy longs to recapture, for she feels she belongs to a place where nothing concerning ‘white trash’ may exist, “‘I want to go home,’ Cissy thought. But she had no home” (60).

The impossibility of moving back to California, nevertheless, will force Cissy to deal with the fact that she has no home, no physical place to go to. In the absence of the familiar, the homely, Cissy starts to associate ignorance and dumbness with Cayro, the unfamiliar, the place she rejects, where ‘white trash’ live. But her preconceived notion of ‘white trash’ as contemptible takes a turn when, upon listening to Nolan play the violin, “Cissy’s mouth would fall open, and she would feel suddenly small and stupid and completely Cayro, Georgia . . .” (260). The feeling of the unexpected, of being ‘surprised’ by one’s thoughts, had emerged early in the narrative. For instance, Cissy’s first encounter with Dede does not indicate rejection, as Cissy would have anticipated, but rather a series of perceptions that indeed surprise her. In the following lines, the traditional concept of southern female beauty is called into question once again. Not only do the terms “pretty” and “ordinary” become positive, but they are stripped of any underlining pejorative connotation. In addition, Dede’s gaze at Cissy unfolds premonitory of a sisterly relationship yet to emerge:



Dede had looked like any other raw-faced teenage girl, blond hair pinned back, blue eyes piercing and cool. What bothered Cissy later was that her half-sister looked so ordinary, that there was no aura of mystery about her, no electrical shock when they touched . . . . The immediate difference between them was that Dede was pretty. For the first time Cissy wondered what she would look like when she got older . . . . Gazing into the mirror with the memory of Dede's features still imprinted on her own, Cissy saw what pretty looked like. What she could not puzzle out was the other thing she had seen in that face. Dede had looked at her with curiosity, not hatred. Her face had been neutral, cool, and distant, not hostile. That face that was Cissy's face had been almost as unreadable as her own. (65)

As Cissy wonders about her future beauty reflected in her sister, what has really caught her attention is the curiosity that in that brief encounter they both experienced, instead of the immense hatred she had expected to feel.

Though there are some passages in which Cissy's mindset is challenged, the narrative offers numerous examples of how difficult it is for her to overcome preconceived notions of 'white trash.' The text below relates Cissy's lingering feelings of inadequacy and her persistent denial of both the community of Cayro and her sisters:

Everything was about 'your sisters.' Everything was Dede and Amanda. The world was full of people who looked at Cissy like she was some dog who might bite, some girl who did not matter at all . . . . From the first moments, Cayro, Georgia, had settled down on Cissy like a clamp on her heart, the weight and substance of two girls she had only known in her dreams. 'Your daughters,' she said to Delia. 'Your daughters, not my sisters.' (113)

As for Amanda and Dede, they too are forced to embrace a new reality in their lives, represented by the presence of a mother they hardly know and a sister they had never met. Amanda's deep religious belief is the only thing that keeps her from falling apart in a family that seems to pull her away from the world of her grandmother, the only representation of home that she can identify with. Similarly, Dede's despondence drives her away from any hope of familial belonging into the sad reaffirmation of her condition of poor white. Dede goes on a 'crazy' rampage, dating boys and driving recklessly, so typical of this group. Standing at the intersection of class, gender and origin, the women in the Byrd family are at odds with each other, while trying their best to rediscover themselves. The pursuit of individual identity leading to a state of self-accomplishment, once family

ties are established, requires breaking free from all social misconstructions through self-acceptance. It is Delia, the returning mother, who interprets her homecoming as an act of craziness: “I think they are sane out in California, which God knows they an’t much here in Georgia,” Delia told Cissy after they came back to Cayro. “But I was born here, so I was born crazy. And I want to die here . . .” (323). The idea of accepting one’s roots is implied in these lines, so is the fact that, in the process of self-identification, one needs to reach a breaking point.

Amanda and Dede’s breaking point consolidates Delia’s dreams of a stable family unit. Amanda’s obsession with southern Christian values, now redirected towards cleanliness and order (331), constitutes another form of resistance against the notion of ‘white trash,’ as dirtiness has long been associated with southern poor whites. Along this line, Jeff Forret states that southern poor whites were seen as “idle, lazy and indolent; ignorant, uneducated and suspicious; impoverished and malnourished; dirty and disease-ridden; as well as drunken and immoral” (2). In time, Amanda’s desperate attempts to reject ‘white trash’ leave her with a feeling of loss and disconcertment, forcing her to question her own identity in order to start anew. The following passage transmits Amanda’s insecurities about herself:

. . . it seems to me it’s a whole different kind of thing. This is hard when you don’t know what you’re doing, what’s the right thing to do, when you can’t be sure you’re not really a fool. I didn’t know nothing about that. And I never wanted to. . . . I guess I am going to have to learn. (376)

Questioning her purpose in life compels Amanda to reach an understanding on life itself, which translates into a genuine effort to get to know her mother and sisters. This emerging desire for a feeling to ‘belong’ becomes stronger when the sisters are made aware of Dede’s attempt to kill Nolan, who adores her and wants to marry her.<sup>2</sup> Dede’s insecurities about long-term commitments have been acted out on her boyfriend for, as the text itself indicates, “Delia Byrd’s daughter had done the one thing she had sworn never to do. Dede had put her life in the power of a man, and it did not matter that Nolan loved her” (382). Dede’s breaking point that forces her to re-evaluate her identity is triggered by a desperate attempt

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<sup>2</sup> In the fictional reality of the narrative, Nolan’s portrayal is positive, as he is the only male character who is neither oppressive nor dominant.

to obliterate any potential mechanism of oppression represented, in her case, in the figure of Nolan.

McCall's theoretical constructs of new emerging categories facilitating oppression are present in these pages. While Amanda's dream of playing, first, the perfect Christian and, later, the perfect mother, crash against the realization that Delia is not to blame for what happens to others, Amanda's own intersecting category will be her mother's past experience. On the other hand, Dede, her younger sister, who knows that marriage does not warrant a place for safety, reaches the breaking point of wanting to do away with it all; or, in other words, wanting to eliminate who she thinks is the cause of her fears and insecurities: Nolan, the man who loves her unconditionally.

The intersecting category of others' past experiences (Dede sees in her mother's failures the potential to fail herself) as well as having being brought up on misconceived patterns of socially accepted behavior (Amanda believes that leading a Christian and orderly life will get her social respectability) force both girls to reach a breaking point from where to reconstruct their sisterly interactions.

Family ties strengthen in the end. Firstly, Delia and her daughters find a way to seize control of their lives, turning therefore to each other for love and support. The narrative reveals Amanda's love for her sister when charges are brought against Dede for having shot Nolan:

Amanda dropped her gaze and drew a deep breath . . . 'Dede's difficult, but she's not evil. She'll do the right thing if we help her.' 'Amanda,' Delia's voice broke when she said the name. 'Amanda, you never fail to surprise me.' She put her arm around her daughter's stiff shoulders, holding on until the body softened in her embrace. (395)

Dede's admiration and love for her mother also starts to grow: "Dede watched Delia go out with a face full of awe and longing. As hard as it was to imagine, that was her mother —flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. 'My God. My God'" (331).

Secondly, Delia's desire to spare her daughters the painful consequences of her actions turns into hope for the generations to come: "There was a cost, a cost to everything. Delia had paid all her life. When she looked at her girls, all she wanted was to have them not to pay that much" (344). In the words of Karen Gaffney, "Delia has hope in her

grandchildren's generation, that they will not have to experience the same pain she and her daughters did" (56).

## CONCLUSION

In reaching an understanding of the development of female interactions in *Cavedweller*, we are faced with a diversity of women characters exuding plurality and complexity. As far as plurality is concerned, women of different races, classes, and origins socialize and interact while building the right setting to expose the social category of 'white trash woman.' Without the presence of the many women characters in the story, Delia, Cissy, Amanda and Dede's predicament would have been difficult to empathize with. As for complexity, McCall's theoretical approaches on the complexity of categorical interplays sheds light on the analysis of women characters' relations to both overcome social oppression and reconstruct identities. For Delia to resist the myth of 'white trash,' and thus rebuild her own self, she has to realize that the women she interacts with, in and outside the community of Cayro, are also, or have been, victims of oppression and that only through an alliance with them will she be able to lead a life away from stigmatization. As axes of convergence, other than gender, class, race, or sexuality, can also turn into facilitators of mechanisms of social injustice, McCall's different interpretations of complex intersectional manifestations prove valid as a theoretical framework by which to examine categories intrinsic to specific female characters' positions. If female relations within both the Byrd family and the women in the community have served to present and resist 'white trash' constraints, so have they to denounce social constraining of any kind. In so doing, the novel moves on to a higher plane of intersectionality where the categories of race, class, gender, sexuality and new emerging ones come into play to show that identities cannot be explained through the analysis of one isolated category. Far from it, identities, whether marked by social stigmas or newly formed, are made of different and multiple aspects of one's own lived experiences, and are all equally important.

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