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*University of Mississippi*

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“I EAT SHIT FOOD AND AM NOT WORTHY”: NEGOTIATING THE QUEER WEIGHT OF  
“WHITE TRASH” EMBODIMENT IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S CORPUS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

REBECCA A. ALBRIGHT

May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Dorothy Allison’s work—and specifically *the women who hate me* (1983), *Trash* (1988), and *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994)—explores the unexpected alliances and radical difference and desire produced by interactions between fatness, queerness, and “white trashiness” on the terrain of late-twentieth-century representational and lived southern culture, and specifically how queer and “white trash” embodiments are both legible in terms of fatness, much in the way that gravy thickens in Allison’s writing to envelop and signify simultaneously lack and excess, shame and ecstasy, disgust and desire, and difference and community. Indeed, it is in the space between being shamed and branded “recalcitrantly material”—to borrow a term from Jay Watson’s *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985* (2012)—for her “white trash” body and appetites and exulting in her queerly, defiantly “outlaw” legibility that Allison advocates for and makes visible those she calls “born poor, queer, and despised”: a “subnation . . . stubborn and hungry for justice in an unjust world” (*Skin* 209).

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, JoAnn and Rickey Handley, who worked their fingers to the bone and made untold sacrifices to make my graduate education and this project possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my fellow students and closest friends Jordan Savage, Rachel Cason, Kaitlyn Vogt, and Allison Combs—aka the “Clambake Collective”—for keeping me sane these past three years. The intellectual boons afforded me by graduate school would not have been nearly so fulfilling without the attendant love and laughter they have brought into my life. I also owe many thanks and raised glasses to my partner, Anthony Pate, for providing me with unconditional emotional support and attempting to lift my spirits even when I was difficult to the point of undeserving.

And, of course, this thesis would never have come to pass without the guidance and support provided by Dr. Jaime Harker, Dr. Katie McKee, and Dr. Leigh Anne Duck. A very special thanks goes to Dr. Harker for her unfailing confidence in my abilities and encouragement of my independence in formulating and developing this project. Had I not taken her course on the Aesthetics of Liberation my first semester of graduate school I can say, without a doubt, that my work would be much less creative, colorful, and conscientious.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“To resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the ‘they’ that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary. All of us—extraordinary.”* – Dorothy Allison

Always quick with a wry, even devastating, observation delivered through a sugar-sweet southern drawl and punctuated by a belly laugh at the irony of it all, Dorothy Allison might express discomfort over critics dubbing her a literary darling or heroine, but she enthusiastically welcomes comparisons to Roseanne Barr and other “big mouthy girls” who are “willing to be fools in public, to be despised” (Allison, “The Roseanne of Literature” 71). “Don’t mess with me, honey, I’m liable to pour gravy on you”—the attitude that complements what Allison calls her “Roseanne pose” as a big, brash, unapologetically visible working-class lesbian—captures her stance on matters of propriety and manages to congeal, much like gravy, the generous helpings of the author herself into a satisfying whole (71). Indeed, gravy acts as the tack that bonds the plurality of identities Allison otherwise treats with a pained ambivalence and an aversion to being “pinned down” (76).

After all, it is gravy “like mother’s milk singing to your bloodstream” that her semi-autobiographical character Bone in the novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) craves in the leanest times when Daddy Glen is out of work (71), and it is gravy that Allison touts in her ode

to southern cooking, “Panacea,” as the “simplest, tastiest, and most memory-laden dish” in her recipe arsenal for its ability to conjure recollections of her mother and her hardscrabble youth spent first in Greenville, South Carolina, and then in Florida during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Allison, “Panacea”). So, too, it is the “musky gravy” of a girlfriend, Jay, that makes her narrator in the short story “A Lesbian Appetite” “shak[e] like a newborn puppy trying to get to its mama’s tit” in anticipation and to “lick and suck” Jay’s fingers thick with the cream from between her legs until she is “drunk on it” (*Trash* 157). Its ability to be stretched in times of desperation when, as in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, “biscuit dinners” composed of hardtack and pepper gravy become a means of survival (71-72), coupled with its sumptuous, sensual qualities when eaten by the bowlful for the sheer pleasure of the gustatory experience—which Jay’s “musky gravy” evokes—charge it with the polarizing qualities of excess and poverty<sup>1</sup> that so frequently attend depictions of the poor southern bodies that predominantly consume it—or at least that do in the cultural and national imagination of the U.S. middle and upper classes.

The luscious, richly thick and creamy, fatty southern-style gravy that clings to the edges of Allison’s childhood memories and gratifyingly seeps through the fingers with which her characters and she stroke and satisfy their lovers also sticks to her ribs, however, recalling the over-worked and “gravy-fed” tribe of “big, husky, strong looking and wide-faced” South Carolina women from whom she descends. “Fat is equal to ugly,” she vents to interviewer “Barbarism” of the 1990s indie magazine *FaT GiRL: The Zine for Fat Dykes and the Women Who Love Them*, offering that the women in her family and she herself are “physical outsiders” for diverging from what she calls the svelte “American ideal” (Allison, “Difficult Seductress”). Allison, who refers to her aunts as “big women who ate and cooked a lot,” pointedly explains

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<sup>1</sup> In *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985*, Jay Watson writes: “literary and artistic representations of the South are abundantly peopled with

that “being poor and trashy [is] about being fat”—a statement that alludes to the insidious ways that fat denigration threads its way through cultural practices and beliefs, thereby working to reinforce other systemic, cultural, and economic inequities. As such, Allison’s insight helps elucidate why her stepfather, obsessed as he was during her childhood with “dragging [his] ass into the middle class,” monitored her mother’s, sisters’, and her food intake and berated them for how “fat and ugly” they and her mother’s side of the family were in comparison to the thin women belonging to his middle-class kin (“Difficult Seductress”). Gael Sweeney, speaking indirectly to the contempt Allison recalls, suggests that fat is a “body blasphemy” because the “excessive body evades and outrages the dominant social order—mainly the Northern middle class” (256). While Allison’s stepfather was no more a member of the middle class than he was a resident of the region north of the Carolinas, Sweeney’s inference rings true to Allison’s experience in the sense that her stepfather’s middle-class aspirations compelled him to literally trim the fat from his family in a bid to lighten the load for bootstrap-hoisting and to carve out a space of upward mobility. Indeed, Allison suggests that when cultural and physical svelteness equate, part of “passing as middle class is trying to be skinny,” which is why her stepfather interpreted the “extra” weight they carried as an impediment to moving up the socioeconomic ladder and reaching the “American Dream”—an aspiration that for him meant “escaping” the South for California, though in reality it materialized as him migrating his family further southward to Florida in the 1960s to evade compounding debts (“Difficult Seductress”).

In light of this context, we can begin to see how in Allison’s writing gravy acts to bind and condense together the links between body size and notions of belonging and social status—or, to use a term more befitting contemporary studies of culture, to ideas of citizenship. Though an icon of the traditional southern spread—so much so that it inspired the name for the Southern

Foodways Alliance's quarterly journal, *Gravy*—in Allison's hands the dish does not come to the table bearing nostalgic evocations of "southern comfort" despite (or more fittingly, in Allison's case, because of) its signification and significance as a link to her "poor and trashy" South Carolina upbringing ("Difficult Seductress"). Instead, Allison plays on the dense, adhesive quality of gravy, serving it up as a fitting vessel for symbolically conveying the richly, thickly, darkly carnal "materialities" that adhere to southern identity—the "bodily density and strangeness," to quote Jay Watson (10), that is the hallmark of the representational South, whose mascot is, arguably and to be explored at length momentarily, the fat body. And while gravy is not the singular means by which Allison signals her engagement in such discourses, it is a distinctive fixture across her writing, appearing as it does in her poetry, fiction, memoir, and essays. It therefore functions in this study less as a linchpin and more as a gateway to addressing her treatment of the body and embodied practices (namely sex and eating) as being "intertwined with the operating modes and the stereotypes" of the categories "class, race, sexuality, and nationality" which accordingly constitute the focal scope of this thesis ("Difficult Seductress").

However, the center of this thesis—from which these categorical concerns spin out centrifugally—is not just the body, but the "fat" body because it plays such a consistent—though critically unexplored—role in Allison's writing as an indicator of her sexuality, regionality, ethnicity, and class. Namely, of what she self-identifies as and subsumes under her "white trashiness" in response, I argue, to her experience of being told as a child and an adult, by her class-obsessed stepfather and lesbian feminists in New York City alike, that "Fat is trashy. Fat is lower class. Fat is evidence you are unredeemed" ("Difficult Seductress"). In poetry, fiction, and essay collections such as the aptly titled *the women who hate me* (1983), *Trash* (1988), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), *Skin* (1994), and *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), as well

as in interviews, Allison articulates her lesbian identity that she claims as “queer” only because of her “white trash” background—and the “politically incorrect body and desires that operate interpretively in relation to it”—render her a “queer queer” even in alternative social circles meant to be “safe spaces” (*Skin* 107). Her work thus explores the unexpected alliances and radical difference and desire produced by interactions between fatness, queerness, and “white trashiness” on the terrain of late-twentieth-century representational and lived southern culture, and specifically how queer and “white trash” embodiments are both legible in terms of fatness,<sup>2</sup> much in the way that gravy thickens in Allison’s writing to envelop and signify simultaneously lack and excess, shame and ecstasy, disgust and desire, and difference and community. Indeed, it is in the space between being shamed and branded “recalcitrantly material”—to borrow a term from Watson—for her “white trash” body and appetites and exulting in her queerly, defiantly “outlaw” legibility that Allison advocates for and makes visible those she calls “born poor, queer, and despised”: a “subnation . . . stubborn and hungry for justice in an unjust world” (209).

According to Amy Erdman Farrell in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (2011), the “connections between body size and citizenship are particularly salient today,” even more so than when Allison produced the bulk of her writing in the 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s, as “concern about a national ‘obesity epidemic’ continues to draw extraordinary attention and resources, vying for front-page coverage against news of global market collapses, environmental disasters, and human rights violations,” and garnering alarming designations such

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<sup>2</sup> My focus on the intersections among these subjectivities is informed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s contention in *Epistemology of the Closet* that while “not all oppressions are congruent . . . they are differently structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments” (33). She goes on to stress that the “comparison of different axes of oppression” is important work “not for any purpose of ranking oppression, but to the contrary because each oppression is likely to be in a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization” (33). It is with this crucial task of untangling those “complex embodiments” that the current study concerns itself.

as the “terror within” and a “threat every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction” from former U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona in the months and years following 9/11 (Farrell 3; Edwards). Correspondingly, it has become increasingly important for the nation to search out and then publically identify the “ground zero” of this “internal enemy” through the propagation of charts, graphs, and especially maps that mark—often in red—the areas that pose the highest risk to public health and safety. As such, the question of the place and meaning of the southern body in relation to the national body—an ongoing conversation carried out in the realm of southern studies—is important as ever, for the South routinely finds itself pegged as the originary site for overweight and obesity in America. Indeed, headlines routinely pose such questions as “Why Are Southerners So Fat?” (*TIME* 2009), “Mississippi Most Obese State: Southern Diet or Culture on the Skids?” (*Christian Science Monitor* 2012), and “Are Southerners Fat or Just More Honest About Their Weight?”<sup>3</sup> (*Pop Science* 2013), and a Google web search of the exact phrase “why are America’s southerners fat?” returns 3,440,000<sup>4</sup> unique results. Taken together, the general public’s fascination with the number of extra notches seemingly punched into the “Bible Belt” speaks to a national investment in the idea of the South not only being somatically distinctive, but in that difference figuring as a discrediting and dangerous “fatness” that renders it more of a regional rather than a national menace.

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<sup>3</sup> This headline was prompted by the recent revelation that the CDC collects data on state-by-state obesity rates through self-reported surveys. Due to the subjective nature of such research, the CDC was asked to recalculate its results for 2012, which revealed that while the South is “fat,” southerners are perhaps not more so than the rest of the country, particularly midwesterners, and that the data might suggest that southerners were simply more upfront about their weight than individuals from other regions, though this is also inconclusive conjecture.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a search completed on December 1, 2014. The number is variable by day as pages are posted and removed, but it never strays far from that provided above.

That the South annually threatens to become America's "Stroke Belt"<sup>5</sup> seems a ubiquitous fact to the extent that it has saturated popular and professional ideological spheres. Even respected historian Sander Gilman gives credence to the hype in *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (2008) when he writes: "What strikes me first when I sit in the Café du Monde in New Orleans is the girth of the people in the cars passing by. You can only see them bisected; holding phones to their ears, yet everything visible drips of fat. The flesh hanging from their arms, multiple chins, their eyes framed in fat" (123). After describing the hypervisibility of New Orleans's fleshly inhabitants—even as they pass by, half-concealed, in vehicles—he declares: "Today there is more than a little empirical evidence that the South beats all when it comes to weight" as "nine out of ten states with the highest rates of obesity [are] in the 'old' South" (124). Other studies, though mismatched in data (which implies more than "hard" science is at play in the "fattening" of the South), support such a conclusion: according to Alexandra Brewis in *Obesity: Cultural and Biocultural Perspectives* (2011), "in thirty-two states—mainly in the South (Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia)—around a third of people were obese" in 2008 (59). Do six out of thirty-two polled states constitute a "majority"? Why is the South, of all regions represented, set apart, especially when other regions of the country report similar if not equivalent statistics? For example, in a separate 2006 study that Brewis documents, the Midwest not only trails behind the South by just half a point in the percentage of population "overweight" category—it *surpasses* the South by more than a point in the "obese" category (4). Nevertheless, while headlines do not blare alarmistically that America's "heartland" threatens to burst, they strongly suggest that the "Bible Belt" is "in

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<sup>5</sup> See Claire Suddath, "Why Are Southerners So Fat?," *TIME on the Web*, July 9 2009, <<http://content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1909406,00.html>>.

need of tightening,”<sup>6</sup> and thereby figure the region as the nation’s gut, driven as it is by base, hot, and unrestrained appetites—a depiction that is historically sedimented, as we shall uncover.

Indeed, what more compellingly explains this disproportionate representation of southern bodies in scolding reports such as the annually published “F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America’s Future”<sup>7</sup> than simply “cultural values that favor sweet, high-fat foods, and lower levels of income and education,” as Brewis advocates, is confirmation bias (59). Her evaluation, after all, is not based in scientific objectivity but in the assumptions that southerners lack the cultivated or learned taste needed to achieve and maintain physical fitness. This process by which “fat” becomes the controlling image of the South is at least partially elucidated by what Pierre Bourdieu, channeling Émile Durkheim, calls “logical conformism” (172). Logical conformism, Bourdieu explains, is a “kind of common sense of things that permits different minds to agree or at least to communicate, and is the means by which publically expressed and collectively recognized signs organize and crystallize knowledge about and understandings of their subjects into controlling images that reinforce the symbolic power wielded by those who discursively construct these realities” (Bourdieu qtd. in Jones 33). For instance, rather than being a blunt facticity, “fat,” argues Stefanie A. Jones, is a significant part of a system of “exercising bodily classification and control that is integral to the maintenance of other systems of differentially distributed power” (44). “Fat” can be pinned to so many bodies, Jones contends, that the “signified it indicates clearly exists outside of physical determinants alone” (44).

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<sup>6</sup> See the “About Us” page of the Southern Obesity Institute website (<http://www.southernobesitysummit.org/>) maintained in support of the annual Southern Obesity Summit (S-O-S), the largest regional obesity prevention event in the United States instituted in 2007 and organized by officials from the American Health Association, National Health Institute, and Center for Disease Control, among other national health and safety institutions.

<sup>7</sup> “F as in Fat” has been funded and published annually by the Trust for America’s Health since 2003.

“Fatness in the United States,” claims Farrell, rather than being a neutral descriptor of size and health, denotes “excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy, disposable, and sinful habits” (10). While in other historical periods and in other representational domains fatness may function as quite a different social sign from what Farrell claims it does in America today, what she identifies as the contemporary constructions and understandings of “fat” embodiment are key to understanding the “fattening” of the South and its implication in what Watson calls “the body work that has throughout southern history served as the material ground of the region’s culture and experience” (21). When thinking of the “fat southerner” stereotype within this framework, it becomes imperative that scholars of the contemporary South turn a critical eye toward the cultural work performed by size and shape in regards to the southern body.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Sinews of Fat and “White Trash” Connectivity**

According to Watson, ideas about the South have “historically happened” on the site of southern bodies, as a legacy of literary and artistic images attest (21). Informed by Louis Althusser’s theory of the body, Watson argues that ideology inscribes onto bodies “a cultural story of power, legitimacy, and difference . . . as it differentiates them into beneficiaries and

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<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to note that a treatment of the southerner’s representationally aberrant size and shape as at least partially constructed would not, as some might worry, imply that the initiatives led by the likes of the Southern Obesity Summit and its ancillaries to pinpoint, research, and eventually minimize the “food deserts” in the South and to establish more comprehensive nutrition programs in southern schools and community centers are misguided. Nor would it work to overlook and overshadow the valiant efforts of such programs to ensure that every citizen of the U.S. receives an equitable as possible chance to eat and exercise his or her way to optimal individual health. Instead it would provide social constructionist and historical perspectives to what are typically determinist debates about the simultaneous lack and excess of the southern body, and perhaps even help root out the stigma and shame that inform the regional specificity of such humanitarian-minded programs and thereby undermine their efforts. An assignment of lack in the areas of education and resources to southerners alone suggests that poverty and its ill effects are primarily southern phenomena when that is clearly not the case.

victims, subjects and objects, ‘us’ and ‘them’,” and that southerners have been relationally relegated to the latter since as early as the eighteenth century as part of a “long tradition in U.S. intellectual and cultural history of thinking about the South and its inhabitants through, and sometimes *as*, the body” (23, 10). The earliest cohesive representations of “southern bodily alterity,” he details, are “hyperembodied” depictions of white southerners found in 1790s magazine sketches and early national novels published in the urban centers of the northeastern U.S. Every aspect of these figures attributes to a gross physicality, as they are prone to “drunkenness, lechery, indolence, gluttony, [and] violence” and speak in “thick impenetrable accents” and “creolized dialects” meant to conjure the “specter of coloniality and its negative moral associations” (16, 12). Later the features that defined these figures would coalesce into full-fledged tropes as southwestern humorists co-opted and spread them in the form of “intensely and overwhelmingly embodied” poor white subjects that “drink to excess, disfigure each other in brawls, lust openly after inappropriate people, eat clay, stage elaborate pranks that physically abase their victims, and in general exhibit a bodily excess and indiscipline that flouts bourgeois norms of bodily etiquette” (14-15). “While there have been ‘white’ people living in poverty in every region and time of America’s history,” Katherine Henniger contends that a “vast legacy of literary and visual images has established a ‘freak,’ ‘queer,’ ‘grotesque’—and, especially, southern—tradition of poor white representation” in the U.S. for which Watson’s examples serve as the origin or prototype (138). And the elements of “white trash” stereotyping we know today—which Beverley Skeggs succinctly describes as “southern, big hair, loud mouths, fat bodies, and rampant sexuality” (100-101)—are clearly identifiable in the gluttonously consumptive displays of these early representations of poor white southerners, as Henniger claims that “excessive,” “perverse,” and “always highly visible” bodies and behaviors form the

basis of “white trash” representation (142). Adding to this, Matt Wray attests to how lower-class southern whites, despite having gone by many different names including “cracker,” “sandhillier,” “barrenite,” “redneck,” “hillbilly,” and “poor white trash,” have consistently been “marked, made visible” by way of corporeal extremes (120-21).

Despite being “marketed as figures of fun”—at least for their target audience of bourgeois, northern urbanites—these bodies from their earliest to their current iterations have served a serious function as regional ambassadors for a “somatic South,” contends Watson (18), and thereby were (and continue to be) crucial to the formation and maintenance of an unmarked, dematerialized, and altogether “ontologically thin” national identity and citizenship that centers whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle classness as supposedly abstract cultural norms (12). According to Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (1997), the function of the label “white trash” as a cultural category is two-fold: “it is a way of name actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and it is a set of myths and stereotypes that justify their continued marginalization” (172). They are, in short, “the necessary forms of alterity that delineate a field of national belonging” in the U.S. as defined by the dominate standard of whiteness (11-12).<sup>9</sup> Enduring perceptions of the South as “uniquely backward and corrupt” underpin constructions of “white trash” deviance, so while “white trash” certainly is not unique to the South, this particular discourse, says Henniger, “cannot be removed from the regionalism that informs it” (138). “White trash” is, for all intents

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<sup>9</sup> Before continuing this line of discourse, it is important to clarify a few points. I do not want to misrepresent Watson’s argument by suggesting that he construes “white trash” as solely bearing the symbolic weight of “southern bodily alterity” within the national imagination (16). The examples he provides featuring poor whites serve to demonstrate the long-standing nature of distinctly embodied representations of southern identity, and thus are a crucial but relatively minor thread in his larger design. I, on the other hand, will argue that “white trash” functions as a container for the “bodily density and strangeness” invested in the southern body as distinct from the national body (10).

and purposes, an avatar for the worst the South has to offer—the “low Other, the source of disorder,” as Henniger argues (146). Indeed, she claims that “delineating and representing a ‘they’ has been crucial to forming both the American and southern nations, and in both cases ‘white trash’ has served as a good picture of the ‘they’” (146). Joel Williamson’s “grits thesis” helps explain this process, as he theorizes that upper- and middle-class southern whites have championed an interpretation of politics and race relations in the South that foists much of the blame for the region’s reputation for racial violence on “the grits,” or “lower-order whites,” in a diversionary attempt to avoid stigma and to obscure the fact that “upper- and lower-class whites have worked in tandem on the racial front” (292, 295). While Williamson only speaks to the issue of violent racism here, the relational scapegoating he describes can be used to elucidate the manner by which “white trash” has been made to representationally embody the excesses of meaning and materiality—racial, regional, sexual, and class particularities—that would otherwise trouble the bounds of white supremacy, and by extension heterosexual and bourgeois universality, that define national abstraction. Sweeney specifies the nature of this relationship further when she states that “northerners” become “efficient, energetic, and self-restrained” only in opposition to “white trash” southerners who function as the “vulgar, hot, sensual, oversexed, overeating, overweight, lazy, poor, backward . . . underbelly of not only the nation, but the South as well” (255). Emphasis in Sweeney’s description is clearly placed on the ways in which the “white trash” body is made to overspill the boundaries of normative whiteness primarily via the overlapping tropes of food and sex overconsumption, which fat dually signifies.

In *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995), an autobiographical account of her childhood and complicated family relationships, Allison bears witness to this dynamic when she describes the women in her family as “valueless, better off abandoned” because being “wide-

hipped,” “wide-faced,” and with “wide hands” meant they were “predestined” to a life “marked as workhorses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another *species*” (*Two or Three Things* 32-22, emphasis mine). Their fatness, she strongly suggests, marks them “white trash”: the “ungrateful” and “unredeemed” poor who are “destroyed or dismissed to make the ‘real’ people, the important people, feel safer” (*Skin* 13). Indeed, to preserve the impersonal, unbiased quality of normative whiteness, “white trash” becomes heavy with the weight of those abjected qualities that reveal the lie of white superiority and disembodied national identity, thereby “siphoning off the guilt, desire, and denial and leaving behind its idealized counterpart embodied by the glossy, one-dimensional, all-American women,” writes Maud Ellmann, that parade through the pages of such magazines as those through which Allison observes her mother, sisters, aunts, and cousins “thumbing” (3). Ultimately, this abjection constitutes a “hard and hidden work”—a work that is “misrecognized as the very excess and overconsumption it is designed to hide” and that would otherwise weigh down what Ellmann, in *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (1993), calls the “kind of women one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars that she is often used to advertise, bathed in the transcendent radiance of the commodity” (3).

Farrell helps us further elucidate this connection, for she explains that the development of fat stigma in the U.S. relates to “prevailing ideas about race, civilization, and evolution” (5). Fat, she argues, in time became a central player in the cultural development of what constitutes a proper American body and body politic, and as such is intricately related to “gender, sex, and racial hierarchies,” particularly in respect to the historical formation of “heteropatriarchy and white supremacy” (5). “Since the end of the 19th century,” Farrell claims, “fatness has served as

a potent signifier of the line between the primitive and the civilized, feminine and masculine, ethnicity and whiteness, poverty and wealth, homosexuality and heterosexuality, past and future” (126). In short, fat denigration works, in stealthy and complicated ways, to reinforce the existence of classicism, sexism, homophobia, racism, and “all other processes by which our culture categorizes and oppresses people through bodily hierarchies and stigmatization” (126). Fatness became, she argues, a “sign of redundant and dangerous excess”—of bodies “out of control” and certainly in “excess” of white normative standards (75). In *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (2004), Kathleen LeBesco adds that “[b]ig, profusely round bodies also provoke racist anxieties in the white modern West because of their imagined resemblance to those of maligned ethnic and racial Others; fatness haunts as the specter of disintegrating physical privilege in this case” (56). In other words, “fat was and is not white,” writes Farrell, and thus has the power to invoke racializations of class and sexuality, among other categories of distinction, when applied to and reinforced systematically through ideology and such processes as logical conformism discussed earlier in this introduction (60).

### **The Queer Excess of “White Trash” Appetites**

Assertions of lacking taste predominate in the construction of what Sweeney calls the “white trash aesthetics of excess” (249). According to Michael J. Weiss, the absence of discriminatory judgment is what undergirds the “white trash” demographic as “proprietors of carelessly and immoderately curated bric-a-brac”: i.e. “artificial grass, velvet paintings, double-wide trailers adjoined as a sign of status, fish sticks, Spam, muscle cars, John Deere caps, sideburns, collections of dolls or Hummelware, pink flamingos in the front yard, painted tires that hold flowers, and people who like Liberace or Elvis” (27). The very term “taste,” with its suggestion that one can “inherently taste what is ‘classy’ or appropriately pleasing, just as one

tastes sweetness or salt, positions the failure to do so as abnormal, or as an embodied disability,” he says (28). In effect, this normalizes and naturalizes an arbitrary standard based on “bourgeois consumption patterns and capitalist status desire” (28). Moreover, it marks “white trash” consumption as the scene of excess and uncontrollability. After all, the most singularly undeniable trait of “white trash” is its excess—as Florence King puts it, “the definition of trashy is trashy” (13). Indeed, Sweeney argues that the “white trash body is, by definition, an excessive body” because the term “trash” itself indicates the waste and disposability associated with the “marked” white body that in its perceived “failure” to literally “capitalize on its inborn privilege” (255)—and thereby sustain the myth of a classless America as well as the invisibility of whiteness as a racial category—“threatens to,” in the words of Skeggs, “spill over and contaminate the order of the nation that is white supremacy/privilege” (104).

While this excess might have representationally taken the shape of sallow, slack, and shambling bodies caked with dirt and plagued by diseases such as hookworm and pellagra (Wray 113, 66) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations, in contemporary America these degenerative traits collapse under what has come to monolithically signify, writes LeBesco, “reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, [and] transgression of boundaries,” and act as “the most indisputable materialization of class taste or lack thereof”: i.e. fat (*Revolting Bodies* 3).<sup>10</sup> Take for instance Jim Goad’s description in *The Redneck Manifesto* (1997) of the cult of dietary excess that surrounds “white trash”:

TOO MUCH CHOLESTEROL. Food that turns the most nimbly peristaltic  
colons into cold granite mausoleums. Hungover and half-awake workers hunker

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas the slender body previously signaled poverty and sickness, writes Farrell, “once surplus food supplies were available to middle and increasingly even many lower-class Americans by especially the mid-twentieth century, the mark of the wealthy became the ability to restrain one’s self” (41-44).

down for breakfast at the local greasy spoons, clogging their arteries just like the river's clogged with hazardous sludge. It's a hyperbolic diet—eggs, butter, syrup, pancakes, sausage, sour cream, and grease-dripping home fries buried alive under bacon-laden country gravy. So much fat, you might as well be scooping raw lard from a can with your hands or Dumpster-diving outside a liposuction clinic. It's fat over fiber, mammals over plants. (125)

Goad is known for his fittingly *goad*ing and over-the-top pronouncements that are not to be taken as trustworthy or dispassionate. However, in this instance he clinches the general point that a voracious appetite for “bad” food attests to the behavioral “proof” of a “white trash” nature. According to Cammie M. Sublette and Jennifer Martin, foods that are considered “edible” but high in calories and “devoid of nourishment” such as “Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, Twinkies, Ho Hos, Moon Pies, Hamburger Helper, Wonder Bread, and Miracle Whip” comprise the “majority of the white trash diet, at least in the cultural imagination of America’s middle and upper classes” (32-33). As Elspeth Probyn adds in *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (2000), “it is now well recognised that the further one moves up the economic scale, the lower the consumption of bread, dried vegetables, and fatty foods” which are aligned with lower-class consumption and used to explain why “the poorer are more likely to be fat” (28). Tad Friend, in his 1994 *New York Magazine* article “White Hot Trash,” even goes so far as to blame “white trash behavior” for the upswing in rates of overweight and obesity among the U.S. population. He complains that “the boom in comfort food is very white trash” and references Ernest Mickler’s *White Trash Cooking* as proof of the “white trash” predilection for “High-Calorie-Pick-Me-Ups” that have come to define American eating patterns by spreading beyond the

“mobile-home owners of the Trash Belt of the eleven states of the old Confederacy” to make America writ large a “White Trash Nation” characterized as “just plain FAT” (Friend).

Whereas “middle- and upper-class eating is highly regulated both because of the material foodstuff consumed”—and all that it ideologically implies—“and because of the bodily result and class markers of consumption,” argue Sublette and Martin, “white trash” consumption is construed as “gluttonous, compulsive, in poor taste, and couched within pathologizing narratives of addiction” (21, 24). Not only is the slender body associated with the middle and upper classes—the way one achieves that slender body has become equally classed, as to be called “cigarette smoking thin,” they write, is to suggest a “trashy” means of suppressing the appetite (30). In fact, “any means of appetite suppressant is a little ‘trashy’,” they say, and suggests itself as a “means to attenuate addiction,” for the “notion of restraint is based on personal will power, having the ability to order and control desire in such a manner that no temptation is acted upon” (30).<sup>11</sup>

In this narrative of excess, Farrell argues: “compulsive eating is also easily linked to, and often acts as a signifier for, compulsive sexuality and an overall lack of ‘normal’ standards of self-control” (128). Friend, again, draws such a connection in “White Hot Trash” when he argues that along with widening the nation’s waistline, the “white trash epidemic” has caused the loosening of sexual mores: “it’s suggestive to contrast the 1953 Kinsey Report,” he writes, “in which just 5 percent of females reported having had more than ten premarital partners, with the 1993 Janus Report, which shows 55 percent of women having had more than ten partners—an

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<sup>11</sup> As Susan Bordo asserts, “from its nineteenth-century emergence as a cultural phenomenon, anorexia has been a class-biased disorder, appearing predominantly among the daughters of families of relative affluence” (62). Linking the eating disorder to social hierarchies in general, Bordo explains that in situations of food surplus, “an ability to ‘rise above’ the need to eat imparts moral or aesthetic superiority only where others are prone to overindulgence” (62).

elevenfold increase” (Friend). And indeed, assertions of out-of-control eating and sex life, of “excessive, warped, and perverse” consumption of food and sex as well as sexual reproduction, are staples of “white trash” representation and, as we shall continue to uncover, are also subsumed under the sign of fatness that ultimately marks “white trash” foodways and sexual practices as “queer” (Henniger 142).

In “Trashing the Presidency: Race, Class, and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair” (2001), Micki McElya persuasively argues that “naturalizing narratives of deviant sexuality and aberrant family structures mark the point of production, and the reproduction, of ‘white trash’ culture,” as “white trash” stereotyping abounds with “in-breeding, honky-tonk sluts, child brides, incest, compulsive philanderers, and the unforgettable, drooling, hillbilly sodomites of the film *Deliverance*” (159). Queer scholarship and activism, writes McElya, shed light on the “sexual demonization intrinsic to ‘white trash’ stereotyping” (159). Such work exposes the ways in which the “dominant organization of sexual practices and gendered behaviors into static, cohesive identities distributes power and enables regulatory oppression,” which Cathy J. Cohen illustrates when she argues that “constructions of ‘underclass’ pathology are utilized to place many people of color outside the protective bounds of heteronormativity” (Cohen qtd. in McElya 159). This setup, she argues, challenges the assumption of there existing a “uniform heteronormativity from which all ‘heterosexuals’ benefit”—a mode of thinking that conceals the ways in which “deviant heterosexualities” can become a “primary nexus of oppression and marginalization through racialization” (Cohen 452). And indeed, representations of excessive and uncontrolled sexuality signify practices that must be “expelled from the category ‘white,’ literally as trash, because they endanger the heteronormative alignments of sexuality and gender

which center whiteness, and heterosexuality, as supposedly abstract cultural norms” (McElya 160).

Indeed, it is in this implication of excessive appetite (for food, drink, and sex) in response to an inward “deprivation” that “white trash” becomes queer: according to Diana Fuss, the queer subject is not defined by lack but excess—“the lack of lack—the surplus that precedes and delimits need, the unintelligible remainder that circumscribes the boundaries of the rational, the overness that must always come first to mark off the deviant from the normal” (56). Fuss elaborates that queer individuals, as defined by early twentieth-century psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and absorbed thereafter into the popular imagination, “lack lack, or lack a certain mature relation to lack,” and thus “fall” under the “excessive weight, the weight of desire” (55). Born of deficiency and excess together, the queer subject has “overstepped her bounds and desired too much” and collapsed under the “heavy burden” that is her “ambitious” aspirations, which leave desire and lack behind and thus serve to perpetuate the cycle of inadequacy supplemented by surfeit (55).

The suggestion that queer subjects lack the requisite self control needed to curb what are presented as inherently intemperate desires that thusly manifest as deviant and uncontrolled physical practices indicates a point of comparison that can be used to conceptualize the queerness of “white trash” appetites and the fatness that acts as their signification. And indeed, the queerness of fat embodiment and fat sexuality, which is always already embodied, can be read in the “gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and excesses of the fat body,” argues LeBesco (*Bodies Out of Bounds* 67). According to her logic, fat “complicates normative bodily ideals based on gender binaries”—“too much” fat, or fat in the “wrong” places, may “de-feminize” female bodies by “making them larger, by constituting a different line and silhouette which may both

exaggerate and disrupt the ideas associated with the ideal feminine body” (67). For male bodies as well, “some fat may be acceptable and even masculinizing since proper masculine embodiment is typically conceived as ‘big,’ but the presence of ‘too much’ fat on male bodies may have a feminizing effect, emphasizing breasts or softening a body which ‘should’ be hard” (68). Therefore, fatness “disorients the normative embodiment of gender, and, by extension, heteronormative desire” (68). This is the case even when a specific fat body “might otherwise work to embody normative gender ideals” (68). Furthermore, fat sexuality can also be considered “queer” because it involves the erotic desire for and of “queer” bodies. Fatness, then, disrupts heteronormative embodiment and constitutes the fat body as a site of radical, queer difference.

Tying these threads together, in his article “Class and Feminine Excess: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith” (2005), Jeffrey A. Brown notes that today the thin body “demonstrates that the individual has learned to properly self-regulate” and that the “physical traits of [thinness] are metaphors for social traits and desirable behavior” vested in the disembodied conventions of normative whiteness and its social alignments (79). The “fat” body thus stands in direct contrast and is “emblematic of all things socially unacceptable and hence white trash” (81). For instance, Anna Nicole Smith, when she was still relatively “thin,” writes Brown, “was characterized as sweetly southern and small town” (83). Once she gained weight, she was “depicted as a slutty hick who dropped out of school because she was too stupid to be good at anything but sex” and whose “only marketable skill was taking off her clothes” (83). Also stressed was her first job out of high school as the breakfast cook at “Jim’s Fried Chicken” outside Waco, Texas, a position she left only to become an exotic dancer (76-77). Hence, her biographical sketch, post-fatness, came to reframe and characterize her as quintessentially “white trash,” a “fact” corroborated by

her southern-fried, deviant heterosexuality. Seemingly overnight what was once a “wholesome” and publically endorsed sexuality transformed into a queer carnality read into her excess flesh.

These links are perhaps more recognizable and comprehensible, however, to anyone acquainted with mass-mediated depictions of Elvis Presley, specifically the “white-jumpsuited, fat, in-your-face Elvis of the seventies” whose hysterical gorging on food, drink, and drugs rendered him a spectacle of excess who scandalized, in Sweeney’s words, “urban, mostly Northern, arbiters of good taste” by flagrantly embodying and parading all the tropes of southern “white trash” distinctiveness at once (251). For many, Elvis lives on in memory not (or at least not only) as the svelte hip-swinger of the 1950’s but as the butter-streaked, gravy-drunk Las Vegas performer of the late 1970’s who the 1996 BBC documentary “The Burger and the King”—the title of which riffs on the popular rumor that Elvis died while sitting on the toilet, hamburger in hand—immortalizes. His former cook, Mary Jenkins Langston, recounts therein that Elvis would gorge, while reclining in bed no less, on sausage gravy with buttered biscuits and fried bacon sandwiches cooked in a stick of butter each until “he’d have butter running down his arms,” breathily intoning “this is good, Mary” in an orgiastic display of gluttonous consumption (qtd. in Martin). Langston even claims that Elvis once confided in her that “the only thing in life he got any enjoyment out of was eating,” and particularly so the rich foods she prepared in king-size proportions and served to him in his king-size bed (qtd. in Martin).

Without fail, such ruminations on his grotesquely framed eating habits and weight gain revolve around his impoverished upbringing. Indeed, according to the documentary, Elvis’s love of fat-rich food goes back to his childhood lived in Tupelo, Mississippi. “Elvis never took to filet mignon and caviar,” claims Langston; instead, he remained ever fond of the food he ate as a youth such as “pig feet, collard greens, and chitlins” that have their roots in the southern black

community (qtd. in Martin). This is one of many ties linking Elvis to the black community of the South beyond the enormous debt his career owed to the Blues tradition: for instance, he came of age in Memphis, Tennessee, in urban slums and projects where he and his family lived with other poor white and black residents of the city, and he appropriated what Sweeney calls the “sexuality and scandalizing power of black bodies” that by turns terrified and titillated white middle-class America (251). Thusly, we again see the consumption of too much (and the “wrong” kind of) sex and food serving as racialized and racializing shorthand for white deviance.

Furthermore, the public’s morbid fascination with Elvis’s seemingly uncontrollable appetites and their legibility on his body as “white trash” shorthand in the years leading up to and following his death compounded to arouse interest in the nature of his sexual proclivities and peculiarities. This cross-signification is most clearly evidenced in Albert Goldman’s best-selling 598-page biography, *Elvis* (1981), wherein he infamously and repeatedly disputes Elvis’s heterosexuality vis-à-vis his fatness and “white trashiness.” He deems Elvis’s stage persona that of “a homosexual in drag” and an “obese go-go girl”; suggests that his promiscuity masked “a latent or active homosexual[ity]” and a “deadened dick . . . like most Southern men”; and labels Elvis “a redneck with savage appetites and a perverted mentality,” “a pervert, a voyeur” who harbored an incestuous desire for his mother “like most hillbillies,” all the while leveling these charges of debauched sexuality alongside grotesquely detailed descriptions and criticisms of the singer’s diet and dining habits (qtd. in Marcus 50). Indeed, Goldman claims that Elvis did not “have the brains to eat right” and thus consumed, “like a hysterical woman,” large quantities of fat-rich southern foods while “propped up in bed like a big fat woman recovery from some operation on her reproductive organs” (49-50). The feminizing, queering influence of fat is

undeniably at work in Goldman's comparisons, as is the assumption that Elvis's "white trash" roots are the wellspring for both.

The book's sensationalism and virulent bias left many readers with a bad taste and more than a little skepticism; however, its critical success speaks to its resonance with pre-existing narratives of decline and degeneracy that constitute the "white trash" mythos. Despite "being a poster child for adolescent rebellion in the 1950s, as the decades wore on and Elvis lost the hard, slender lines of his youth," as Sweeney writes, the media tides shifted as they would decades later for Anna Nicole Smith (267). No longer a sex symbol, he became a national joke whose punch line was familiar and expected: "extreme southern white people," John Waters' claims, using his preferred term for "white trash," "look incredibly beautiful until they're 20, and then they look about 50" (qtd. in Friend). Indeed, the sordid rumors surrounding his early death only served to feed his deification as *the* "white trash" icon, for as Waters' suggests the "white trash" body tends toward profligacy—a wastefulness that degrades over time, à la fat Elvis, if "trash" appetites are not disciplined and contained.

Elvis's mythic obsession with food and tendency toward fatness, then, bespeak not only his "white trash" roots but also signify a "deviant heterosexuality" implicated in the class and regional stereotype of excessive, uncontrolled consumption that is coded as immature and regressive, a signification evidenced in Tad Friend's comparison of "white trash" to "one long boiling tantrum primed to explode," "the terrible twos forever," and the nation's "inner child" in his 1994 *New York Magazine* article "White Hot Trash" (Friend). This is the "contradiction" that the October 21, 1981, *Rolling Stone* book review of Goldman's *Elvis* notes as the key to the singer's ruin: "The fact is that somehow inherent in Elvis's great fame as an American ideal and idol is a contradiction that was the seed of destruction" (qtd. in Marcus 55). Although the *Rolling*

*Stone* review is mum on specifics, it requires no leap to read therein the logic<sup>12</sup> that Elvis, poster boy for the American bootstrapping myth, nevertheless played host to the internal threat of southern, “white trash” excess that contradicted and undermined his status as an “American ideal and idol,” ultimately degrading his body and image in national memory.

Bill Clinton’s racialized class position, similar to that of Elvis with whom he has so often been associated, is based, too, upon a “trash” subjectivity not wholly related to day-to-day material realities. As a “racialized set of attributes, behaviors, and desires,” “white trash” culture is “detached from tangible poverty and becomes mobile—traveling from generation to generation as pathology, even when poverty is left behind,” and Clinton serves as a primary example of this phenomenon (McElya 163). Throughout his campaign for national office, says McElya, Clinton struggled against dominant perceptions of a “backward, corrupt South while simultaneously relying upon romanticized images of the region to carve out a distinct national persona” (164). Yet as effective as this approach often was, Clinton was never able to distance himself from the ubiquitous nickname “Bubba” that detractors and skeptics mobilized in order to “expose the ‘fat,’ white, ‘redneck’ underbelly of all that charisma” (164).

If Clinton’s family and regional backgrounds produced and located his racial and class identity in popular representation, the constant reports of his voracious appetites, particularly for food and sex, attested to the behavioral “proof” of his inherent “white trashiness.” Couched within pathologizing narratives of addiction, assertions of Clinton’s inability to control himself, whether “confronted with a cheeseburger, sex, or an easy lie,” labeled his behavior as the product of a “white trash” culture he cannot escape; they are the enactments of that culture, or “trash acts” (McElya 165). One of the most prominent assertions of Clinton’s excess and

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<sup>12</sup> Especially because Goldman dedicates much space in *Elvis*, the book under review, to making this very case.

uncontrollability is his supposed gluttony. The former president's love of Big Macs was such a dominant theme in his first national campaign that some even suggested a "boost in burger sales for McDonald's based on the free advertising" (Gibson). Critically, not only was Clinton's appetite deemed "trashy," but so were the foods he desired: pizza, burgers, barbeque, and assorted other "junk" foods.

Assertions of his out-of-control eating and sex life—of his excessive and warped consumption—identified Clinton's "trash" acts and, as with Elvis, served to feminize and queer him. Indeed, Clinton's "pudgy" body became "prima facie evidence for his various departures from the hard model of national manhood" (Bordo 723). Susan Bordo notes that during his tenure, Clinton's "eating habits were feminized" as his love of food was "continually represented as embarrassing, out-of-control, feminine 'binge' behavior" (723). Furthermore, despite Clinton being pilloried for engaging in the most stereotypically straight-male sex, "the kind of tacky, shameless, cigar-chomping erotics of power celebrated from the locker room to the boardroom," in "The Symbolics of Presidentialism: Sex and Democratic Identification" (2001), Dana D. Nelson and Tyler Curtain admit that "something about the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship" was "definitely queer"—namely, his "promiscuous sexuality" and the "sodomitic" nature of the sex acts exchanged as well as the "same-sex erotics" that inflected them (41-42).

It is precisely this framework of deviant heterosexuality and uncontrollable lusts for food and sex that instigated Clinton's impeachers to read his behavior as an aggressive act against the heteronorm, or the national body. In their eyes, as a "white trash" "Bubba" with presidential power, Clinton had the ability literally to destroy the nation through his degradation of the office. He could "warp and unsettle normative standards by replacing them with his own cultural dysfunction" and assault on American ideals just as his "southern bodily alterity"—his fat,

undisciplined, unworthy “white trash” body—“haunt,” in the words of Watson, the spare, restrained, and “ontologically thin” national body (McElya 166; Watson 13). This fear of “white trash” values, and the “bodily alterities” they produce, “metastasiz[ing] through our cultural lymph nodes” from the top down is what prompted Friend to apocalyptically warn of the “exponential spread in stereotypically white-trash behavior [throughout the country], whether exhibited by those in the underclass or by figures like Roseanne Barr and Bill Clinton” (Friend). In a move that combines the threads of argument interwoven thus far, Friend further responded to Clinton’s presidential inauguration and the “spread of stereotypical white-trash behavior” it spawned by exclaiming: “Like the urbanities in *Deliverance*, we have found ourselves in the grinning clutches of sexually predatory backwoodsmen. White-trash culture commands us to ‘squeal like a pig!’ And we’re oinking” (Friend). After all, he reasons that “white trash’s connotations increasingly describe America” as “[t]he country is becoming underclass-laden, illiterate, promiscuous, and just plain FAT” (Friend). Thus, not only does Friend blame the national “obesity crisis” on “white trash,” stating “the boom in comfort food is very white trash” and led to the “balloon” in overweight and obesity between 1960 and 1990—he also claims that gone is the concept of shame, as “ten years ago, no one would talk about fat, incest, or wife or child abuse” whereas by the 1990s tabloid TV had begun embracing and flaunting “problems that were previously repressed and unarticulated for good reason” (Friend). Here, Friend’s fat denigration works to reinforce regionalism, classism, racism, and homophobia. Perhaps most shockingly he suggests that “white trash” should be pushed back into the closet of the South before the “death of outrage” transforms America into a shameless nation of citizens who, in the words of Fuss, “lack lack” and thus who will necessarily collapse under the “excessive weight” of unchecked, unabashed desire.

## **Making Room for More: Feeding Fat Shame**

In the case of Allison, for whom food and its bodily and ideological residua are personally political as they bespeak the “white trash” identity by which she queerly defines herself, there is a certain performative agency and desire to “radically disrupt oppressive, normalizing discourses” and a resistance to the pressure of humiliation imposed to police this “failure” that is not similarly attributable to Elvis Presley or Bill Clinton (McElya 166). Despite the middle-class income she has earned in the years since publishing *Bastard Out of Carolina* and entering the guest lecture and teaching circuit, she claims that “there’s this illusion that if you go to college, then you’re no longer working-class” but that this simply “isn’t true” (Allison, “Moving Toward Truth” 82-83). With these words, Allison challenges conventional perceptions of upward mobility. She argues that she “does so with [her] very body,” for she is “acutely, sometimes painfully, aware that [she does not] meet the profile of a middle-class woman”—svelte and soft-spoken—and instead embodies the larger culture’s “image of the lower class woman . . . [as] this big mouthy dangerous thing” that she acknowledges and performs through her “Roseanne pose” (Skeggs 133; Allison, “The Roseanne of Literature” 71). Often, Allison says, she has traveled to readings or conferences as an honored guest and upon arriving at the hotel or venue felt disdained as a trashy “fat dyke” about whom she imagines the overseers incredulously questioning, “We’re going to give *her* a room?” (Allison, “Dorothy Allison” 32). What she captures in this observation is the way that, according to Sweeney, the “excessive” body aggressively calls attention to itself, flaunting its “tackiness” in the open in a spectacle scandalizing to the white, bourgeois, heteronormative culture that directly opposes the “non-culture” of “white trash” (255).

As Beverley Skeggs would note, Allison's body is read as a sign of excess through which her class "exclusion, injury, and pain" are justified (Skeggs 182). This "politics of they," as Allison deems it (*Skin* 35), is a form of social distancing—the tendency for groups to define themselves against what they are "not" in order to avoid the stain of stigma by association and to assert their normalcy in comparison—in pursuit of the "middle-class patina" of respectability (142). This process begins, according to Pierre Bourdieu and borne out in Allison's anecdote, with the body: the most "indisputable materialization of class taste" because it is "sign-bearing, sign-wearing"—the "producer of signs which physically mark the relationship to the body" (Bourdieu qtd. in Skeggs 192). The vulgarity associated with the fat body is often met with disgust expressed as contempt, markedly so in Allison's anecdote about how she travels to gigs simultaneously as Dorothy Allison, "fat," "trashy" woman, and as Dorothy Allison, respected author:

I get on a bus and people will refuse to sit with me, people say nasty things, I'm hauling my luggage through the airport to get to the next plane and people have literally tripped me. This is a real . . . People hate fat women. And they have complete permission to act out on it. So, when I am anonymous, when I'm just another fat woman; it's mean. When I show up as the writer they tend to be more polite and very careful, but it's still there. I suspect the answer is to get rich and famous. ("Difficult Seductress")

As an anonymous everyfatwoman, Allison is met with disgust in response to her body and the "poor and trashy" signals it sends ("Difficult Seductress"). Only when she is known as Dorothy Allison, author, does she garner calculated respect, and thus she wagers that a combination of

wealth and status is required to overcome the disgust provoked by the materiality of the fat body and its negatively encoded meanings.

This disgust produced about class and read on the body is, Probyn argues, always a matter of proximity. Disgust, she writes, has “evolved to protect the human being from coming too close” (15). More importantly, however, expressions of disgust rely on public recognition. In other words, when something or someone is designated as disgusting, it provides reassurance that “we are not alone in our judgment of the disgusting subject,” generating consensus for what Probyn calls “heteronormative, middle-class standards” to maintain symbolic order (16-17). The phrase “that’s disgusting” and its affiliates “sound more often than not like a plea to establish common ground, generating comfort in the recognition that what offends *me* also offends *you* and to assuage doubts that *we* have not been contaminated, that *we* are not disgusting or shameful” (18). Disgust and shame, then, “illuminate the body’s capacity for reaching out and spilling across domains that would otherwise be kept separate or hidden from view” (19). Thusly, in talking about the closeness of eating and sex in signifying and signaling the racial and class lines overspilled and defied by the “white trash” body, it is necessary to consider the forces of pride and shame that “do battle in a body that knows itself to be disgusting for its engagement in non-normative corporeal practices” (19). A rumination on the interpenetrating lines of shame and disgust that coil in the body is particularly apt to discussions of Allison’s work, as the powerful affects of disgust and shame—as well as hard-won pride—are integral to the corporeal politics she expresses therein in relation to food/eating and their constitution (from within and without) of her sexual, class, racial, and regional identity.

Despite Allison’s intense acknowledgment of the shame she feels in response to the multiple stigmas her particular tastes for “perverse and immoral” food and sex (*Skin* 118) draw

even within the lesbian-feminist community—encapsulated so well in the line from her short story “A Lesbian Appetite” that reads, “Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and am not worthy” (*Trash* 152)—in general, “projects of identity politics (be they feminist, queer, grounded in the body and sexuality) have tended to erase shame and disgust from the agenda,” says Probyn (127). Pride has been an energetic and productive movement that, at its most successful, forces a reassessment of the measures of social inclusion and exclusion. “This has been true of queer pride,” avers Probyn, and “its tactics now replay within other body politics, notably fat pride,” which traces its origins to the pamphlets and packets circulated within communities of mostly women involved in the women’s and gay pride movements in the 1970’s that contained manifestoes calling for an end to size discrimination in the areas of employment, education, public facilities, and health services (134). Furthermore, Marilyn Wann, one of fat pride’s most vocal advocates and author of the book *Fat!So?* (1998), is explicit about using queer arguments in order to found fat pride, calling on “America’s ninety-seven million fat people” to vigorously “come out” of the size closet—a metaphor borrowed by the gay pride movement that has become a staple of fat liberation discourse ever since (122).

This strategy is predicated on a model “whereby an individual, having felt the force of external disgust, rejects the shame she or he feels and is liberated through and into the realm of corporeal pride” (Probyn 127). “At the level of individual as well as collective self-worth,” writes Probyn, “this is highly important work as the immense success of queer pride and the ongoing triumphs of fat pride attest” (127). However, this maneuver also has the potential, as David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub point out in their edited essay collection *Gay Shame* (2009), to act as a form of erasure, especially since gay pride, for instance, “does not make sense without some reference to the implied shame of being gay” (3). In basic terms, the editors and

contributors to *Gay Shame* raise and attempt to address the question of “what can be possibly left after the affirmation of pride” (4). Put another way: can there be politics after pride? As Probyn queries: “Do the deep and hard questions about my bodily reaction to other bodies and my own get smoothed over in affirmative statements?” (129). In response to such questions and years before the publication of *Gay Shame* wherein these concerns collect and cohere, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank proposed in *Shame and its Sisters* (1995) that the time may have come for cultural theory to stop “detoxifying the excesses of the body, thought, and feeling” and to acknowledge shame and disgust as “potential ground for airing of the injustices registered in bodies” (22). Indeed, they argue that:

both these affects produce bodily knowledges: disgust, as spitting out bad-tasting food, recognizes the difference between the inside and outside of the body and what should and should not be let in; shame, as precious hyperreflexivity of the surface of the body, can turn one inside out—or outside in. (22)

In this way, “the body in shame, incited by disgust, then reappears as a judge of the body, itself as well as others” (Probyn 144). According to Probyn, “shame makes of our bodies a judge of our affects as actions” (145). Thus, by bringing the dynamics of shame and disgust into prominence we are forced to “envision a more visceral and powerful corporeal politics” (145).

Indeed, the process by which the fat body becomes shorthand for the viscosity and carnality of “white trash” embodiment draws out the tangibility of power, its contours and flavors, to reveal its workings at the gut level, thereby betraying the fragility of the membranous borders separating the “disembodied subjectivity” of national personhood from the “disturbing materialities” of southern regionality (Watson 11). To those who get their power from adopting an unmarked, metaphorically disembodied subject position, the fat body and its presumed

appetites can be usefully offensive, outrageous, and revolting. I would insist, however, that there is something revolutionary about identifying with the fat body, especially insofar as it is purposefully revolting. As Allison demonstrates, eating as a trope can work both ways, confirming or challenging traditional class and sexual paradigms and permitting us to read through to the “ambiguous character” of a society that Peter Stallybrass and Allon White call “the complicity of disgust and desire which fuels its crises of value” (20). In Allison’s hands, the preparation of food and its eating become sites of revelation and incipient revolution; therein the cultural, culinary, corporeal, and carnal intermingle as she draws out, like the bitterness from an eggplant, the tangible links between “what we eat, who we and others think we are, how and with whom we have sex, and what we are becoming” with an eye toward the bite of disgust, shame, and pride that attend those interminglings resulting in a downright messy, queer concoction (Probyn 168).

### **Rounding It Out**

As mentioned previously, Allison adopts a queer politics to reclaim and reimagine the experiences of the “white trash,” the fat, the poor, women, lesbians, and especially sexually transgressive lesbians—those who inhabit dual roles as scapegoats and cogs in the United States (Allison, “We’re as American as You Can Get” 6). However, as Christina Jarvis correctly observes, Allison “eschews models of queer politics and theory that problematically marginalize the body” (764). This is because Allison is acutely attuned to the role(s) her body and its significations play in the making of her multiplicitous lesbian subjectivity, I argue, which she communicates through the shame she registers in response to disgusted receptions of her body for the way its fatness is read in conjunction with and as a visceral marker for her sexuality, class, ethnicity, and regional background. She makes this connection explicit in her *FaT GiRL*

interview with Barbarism when recollecting the time that she, in answering an audience member who asked, “How can you do what you do? How can you be who you are?,” started talking about the process all writers continuously undergo of “discovering their vulnerabilities,” which led her to address her fatness by stating, “You know, sometimes I look at myself and I think oh god, yeah, I’m fat.” In reply, she says, “he flinched! It was like I had said something really forbidden or disgusting. And because he flinched, I went on about it for quite awhile” (“Difficult Seductress”). Her tactics therefore play on the fact that shame will “render deeply uncomfortable those who have sought to shame her: she seeks to render fat prejudice (and other prejudices implicated thereby) as uncomfortable, as close, and as touching an affair as disgust” (Probyn 169). In other words, we can see here a strategy that refuses to downplay shame and disgust, and instead makes of these affects a ground for a “very public airing of the injustices registered in bodies” (165). While her goal is to eradicate disgust, she also deploys that knowledge to great effect. In fact, as Probyn might explain, it “fuels her visceral response to injustice on the part of fat people, and more widely to others who have been shamed” (165).

Despite the richness of her body of work in which she puts this politics to work in full force, shockingly little scholarship has focused on Allison’s publications beyond *Bastard Out of Carolina*, her critical darling, and what has been written on that novel tends to narrowly focus on its depictions of sexual violence and how she navigates the divide between truth telling and stereotyping in her portrayal of “white trash.” There are, however, two published essays on her short story “A Lesbian Appetite,” Christina Jarvis’s “Gendered Appetites: Feminisms, Dorothy Allison, and the Body” and Jacqueline Meisel’s “Foreign Bodies: Be/Longing and Gender in the Short Fiction of Dorothy Allison,” that move beyond such concerns. Jarvis and Meisel claim that when read through the lens of materialist feminism, “A Lesbian Appetite” enacts Judith Butler’s,

Susan Bordo's, and Donna Haraway's theories of embodied subjectivity by offering a variety of lesbian roles performed through eating as well as sexual practices. While Jarvis and Meisel provide needed insights into Allison's grounding of lesbian desire in the body and its appetites, Jarvis does not address the class tensions that are crucial to understanding the connections between food and sex in the story, as she explicitly calls for further work "to account more fully for the role that the narrator's Southern, 'white trash' background plays in the constitution of her lesbian identity" and Meisel disregards the anxiety surrounding the regional and classed fare that the narrator craves and that set her body and behavior apart from the lovers she takes in New York in favor of a utopian reading of food as a "vehicle for endless reinvention and as an equalizer that dissolves sociocultural boundaries, leaving behind the pure affect of desire" (Jarvis 786; Meisel 170).

Distinct from Jarvis's and Meisel's interpretations, I challenge that rather than elide her "deviant" appetites in the pursuit of belonging, the narrator in "A Lesbian Appetite" never foregoes her desire for battered, slathered, fried dough or her lovers' "musky gravy"—in fact, in the dream vision that caps "A Lesbian Appetite" she is at a barbeque surrounded by her lovers—even those who do not share her taste for southern food, including those who find it offensive—as well as her family, and everyone feeds her until her hunger is finally sated (133-34). It is an acceptance of the sum of her parts—including her queerness, her fatness, and her "white trashiness"—that she desires and that she struggles to find in lesbian-feminist communities outside her fantasy, which is as true for the narrator in this particular story as it is for the narrators throughout Allison's corpus and for the author herself.

In order to chart the progress of Allison's corporeal politics from her involvement in the lesbian-feminist movement in the 1970s and early 1980s to her break with the nationalized

organization and sojourn back to the South that sparked her writing career, this thesis begins chronologically in chapter one by piecing together and parsing Allison's strained relationship with lesbian feminism as expressed in her first and only poetry collection aptly titled *the women who hate me* (1983) and written in the summers of 1982 and 1983, as well as in several essays published discretely between 1981 and 1985 and collected in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994). This chapter will demonstrate how even at the earliest point in her writing career—just as she begins to defy the “impulse to forget” and comes to understand that much of the hatred directed at her sexual preferences stems from hatred of her “class and regional background” that are read on her body and in its corporeal practices—Allison grounds her lesbian identity firmly in appetites defined by queer eating as much as they are by the shame she experiences in response to disgusted reactions to the traces they leave on her body and their “revolting” significations (*Skin* 23-24). Although she admits that “it was a miracle I did not kill myself out of sheer despair when I was told I was too lesbian for feminism, too reformist for radical feminism, too sexually perverse for lesbian feminism, and too damn stubborn for the women's, gay, and queer revolutions” (215), in *the women who hate me* she openly acknowledges the shame she is expected to feel because, as she tells *FaT GiRL*, becoming comfortable with being held in contempt by other people is a form of trying to “pass” as middle class—a coping strategy she relinquished after years of “blending in for safety” (16) due to its destructive effects on her self worth, evidenced in her reference to suicidal ideations, and the way it perpetuates the “destruction, self-hatred, and lifelong hopelessness” (36) that is key to the process by which “a major part of the population”—“the people who destroy [them]selves,” “both queers and southerners and all [they] represent”—is “chewed up” in order to allow “a few

people who believe themselves to be special lead a special life” (Allison, “We’re as American as You Can Get” 6).

However, rather than adopt a politics of pride in response, which Allison admits she is “too stubborn” to accept (*Skin* 209), she converts her shame into “life-saving bravado” couched in hypervisibly transgressive alimentary-sexual acts signaled in *the women who hate me* by lusciously combined food and sex imagery (“Difficult Seductress”). In doing so, Allison puts affect to work as an analytic optic into the politics of bodies, and as a force for their transformation. Therein her fat, “white trash” body and lusts act to “fissure any straightforward celebration of queer eating and loving,” as Probyn would say (160), which is a thread carried into chapter two wherein I will focus on the short stories found in Allison’s later work of fiction, *Trash* (1988), and particularly the story “A Lesbian Appetite.” At this point in her writing, Allison continues to explore the ways in which disgust and shame rework the body’s relation to others and selves, as well as the role desire plays in the profusion of connections that disgust engenders. Simply put, beginning with *the women who hate me* and with increasing complexity and nuance in her later works, Allison pushes back against the disgust that marginalizes her fat form and the queer, “white trash” significations that spiral out from there by presenting disgust as a reaction to fundamental desire at the corporeal level, or, as Elspeth Probyn states, “to counteract the body’s willful concomitant disgusting attraction . . . the object [of the attraction] must be hidden, hinted, indirect, mediated, symbolized, and ultimately abjected” through the public display and acknowledgment of disgust (135). Indeed, she interrupts this order of operations by not internalizing the shame affect but externalizing and projecting it on to the disgusted party. Furthermore, and at the systemic level, in doing so Allison makes visible the process by which nationalized and nationalizing communities use the “white trash” body to

mediate and symbolize, in the words of Watson, their “recalcitrant materiality” that is rendered revolting and desirable by turns.

Viewed through a fat studies lens, the connections between “white trashiness” and queerness articulate a node of intersectional experience that represents both a political need and an opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange not only in terms of Allison’s work but also in regards to individual disciplines and their imbrications more broadly. In outlining the historical deployments of fatness, I would like to again quote Farrell when she argues, “Since the end of the 19th century in the U.S., the fat body has served as a potent signifier of the line between the primitive and the civilized, feminine and masculine, ethnicity and whiteness, poverty and wealth, homosexuality and heterosexuality, past and future” (126). Implicated, though not expressed, amid all of these dualities is the relationship between region and nation and, more specifically, the South and the United States. As traced in the introduction to this thesis, the representative southern body—especially in recent decades—is one marked by excessive corporeality that itself bears the stigma of perverse sexuality and “white trashiness” when framed by middle-class anxiety and reassurance. While works by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Moon, Marilyn Wann, Kathleen LeBesco, Elena Levy Navarro, among others, investigate the connections between fatness and queerness on the map of human alterities, the matter of geography (spatial or imagined) remains relatively unexplored in relation to these interlocking categories despite the ways southern “white trashiness” perceptibly shapes the bounds of normative and aberrant corporeality in America.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “THE WOMEN WHO HATE ME HATE / THEIR INSISTENT DESIRES, THEIR FAT LUSTS”: AFFECTIVELY RECLAIMING THE “TRASHY LESBIAN” IN *SKIN* AND *THE WOMEN WHO HATE ME*

As touched on in the introduction, exposing and resisting the “politics of they” that Dorothy Allison defines as the impulse by which “human beings fear and stigmatize the different while secretly dreading that they might be one of the different themselves” constitutes the core of her political and writerly commitments to dispelling the myth that “for some to have good lives there must be others whose lives are truncated and brutal” (13). Although Allison sustains this same passion for “justice” throughout her writing career, the publication of *the women who hate me* was the igniting spark and the first public enactment of what would become her credo quoted as the epigraph to this thesis: “To resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the ‘they’ that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary” (*Skin* 36). The “lying myth and easy morality” that *the women who hate me* primarily works to dispel is that “[t]here’s always somebody worse than us,” someone on whom to pass the burden of being “the they” so that “we don’t have to” (Allison, “Interview with Dorothy Allison” 33). “I’ve found this in the sexual community . . . I’ve found it in the gender community” (33), she continues, emphasizing the ways that even marginalized groups can replicate and perpetuate the “politics of they” in the service of not being the “lowest common denominator” (33). This is a counterproductive cycle, however, that breeds

“hiding, blending in for safety” (*Skin* 16) and ultimately renders its participants “in collusion with their own destruction,” she insists, as they shirk alliance building for the expediency of enclaves encircled by “walls” constructed out of fear and fortified by “secret guilt and shame” (118).

Allison admits that for much of her early adulthood, she gave in to the pressure to build “walls of fear, shame, and guilt” in her own mind and to man them with the “public silence and private terror” that together support all systems of oppression (*Skin* 78). “[S]hame was the constant theme of my childhood,” she claims, given that she and her family were designated “white trash,” a category against which everyone else in the South defines their relative normality in order to deflect the stigma of living in what C. Vann Woodward once called the “perverse section” of the U.S. (*Skin* 151; Woodward ix). As the second chapter of this thesis contends, in her later publications such as *Trash*, Allison works to demolish such “walls” and to demystify the intricate lattice of class, gender, sexual, racial, and size prejudices that worked together to render her “queer queer” for being “white trash” within the space of what Donna Jo Smith calls the “Queer South” and for being a “trashy lesbian” within what might alternately be termed the “Queer Nation” (Smith 378; *Skin* 50).

However, her fiction is not where she first began what would become her lifelong commitment to loudly and publically challenging the “politics of they.” Rather, she started her journey in the early 1980s with the experience of “fearing for her life” within the space of the national lesbian-feminism movement (*Skin* 56). She explains that the power and pervasiveness of the false notion that “the security of any community depends upon the oppression of others” was made more apparent for her upon witnessing how even within lesbian and feminist communities—“where we had addressed considerable attention to the politics of

marginalization”—there was still “so much exclusion and fear, so many of us who did not feel safe” (25). She thus used the platform of *the women who hate me* to confront the “sisters” and “lovers” with whom she had lived and worked closely during the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York City, but who “were afraid to speak or be seen” with her after she became vocal and visible about her sexual desires and body that other lesbian feminists deemed “politically incorrect” for not lining up with the “respectably middle-class” image they wished to cultivate and project, which underscores the ways in which her sexuality and her class status were constructed as falling outside the “normative (and overlapping) moral orders of the middle class and the lesbian community” (119).

This explains why Allison observed much of the hatred directed at her preference for BDSM play and strap-on, oral, and other forms of penetrative sex to be thinly veiled class hatred; indeed, she describes her designation as a “trashy lesbian” to be “intimately constructed” by “white trash” stereotypes of perverse sexuality and unrestrained appetites and thus notions about the connections between her “family, region, [and] sexual desire” (*Skin* 50). This contempt was lodged, as she details in the seven-part title poem of the collection, against her “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” for their being in excess of the sanitized and streamlined “ascetic model” preferred by the movement for its bland neutrality many of her fellow lesbian feminists hoped would translate into mainstream acceptability and respectability (“the women who hate me” 21). Assimilationist identity politics dominated the faction of the movement to which she belonged, and thus such a model was symptomatic of their long-term plan to transform their image from that of “publicly provocative, outrageous, and promiscuous queers” into that of “monogamous, couple- and community-centered lesbians” which Allison’s “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” compromised due to the “trashy” hypersexuality they bespoke (*Skin* 118). Thus, on a smaller

scale than that discussed in the introduction, fat denigration worked in the movement to delimit the bounds of abstract normativity by acting as shorthand for the implied lack of restraint and correspondingly excessive, “trashy” appetites of “those queers” (118).

What this image overhaul ultimately bred was a hostile climate of body and appetite shaming that convinced Allison (and others like her who failed to “fit”) to “hide to survive” and become “accustomed to the state of contempt” (*Skin* 17). She explains that within the movement: “I knew that the most important thing I had to do was protect myself and hide my despised identity, blend into the myth of both the good poor and the reasonable lesbian”—identities connected by the implied discipline of their appetites (21). While she sublimated her desires to activism and forewent expressions of her “authentic sexual identity” for several years and thus tried to “pass as middle class,” written in her “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” was the “proof” of her “white trash” background and associated “queer” sexuality, she says, which consistently managed to overflow, just enough to raise eyebrows, the line dividing her public politics and private passions (23). Therefore it came as bittersweet relief when that line was finally rubbed out following her participation in a panel titled “Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality” about the lesbian BDSM scene at the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in April 1981. Thereafter, Allison was outed as a “pervert” and a “queer” and ousted from the movement for proving, from their perspective, her “trash nature,” an experience that temporarily convinced her that her “ultimate shame and fear” had been realized—that she was the “slutty, racist, stupid, fat cracker dyke” she believed people had always pegged her (250).

Despite the trauma inflicted by being told she was “too sexually perverse for lesbian feminism,” this very public “coming out” left Allison unprotected by those “walls of fear, shame, and guilt” she had so long ago erected, relied upon for cover, and since maintained. Thereafter

she was forced to abandon the evasive and destructive strategies of “running away” and “hiding within regular dyke networks” while simultaneously juggling a “passionate secret life” that she kept up for years in order to avoid being exposed as one of “those queers” (*Skin* 19-20; 118). The reaction of her fellow lesbian feminists was nevertheless “terrifying,” she admits, most of all because it confirmed that even within a marginalized community billed as a “safe space” cultivated for the sex and gender nonconforming, the “politics of they” still exerted a powerful pull. But more importantly, to her writing at least, this experience opened her eyes—after all, “you can see a whole lot further if you don’t have those big walls around you,” she says—to the absurd irrationality of the system by which particular individuals and groups come to be “the grease that turns the wheels of this society” who are “chewed up” so that others can “lead special lives” (Allison, “We’re as American as You Can Get” 6).

And thus *the women who hate me* was borne over the span of three summers following the Barnard Conference on Sexuality out of necessity—as an alternative, she says, to “kill[ing] [her]self out of sheer despair” over the constraints placed on her body and sexuality by straight society as well as by her fellow lesbian feminists (*Skin* 215). However, rather than follow the lead of the “women’s, gay, and queer pride revolutions” of the period, which she confesses she was always “too stubborn for” (215), or continue down the path of self-denial and assimilation, Allison therein attempts to enact a politics of the body that does not internalize or reject experiences of hatred and feelings of shame as most pride and assimilation projects respectively do. Instead, I argue that in *the women who hate me* she seeks to incorporate those affects as productive forces for challenging the “lying myths and easy moralities” that had fooled her for so long into keeping silent about, trimming down, and ultimately self-sabotaging her life in the service of “maintaining the status quo in a new guise” (36). This is why she uses the collection as

a platform for addressing the issues of sexual fear and class stereotyping and stigmatization that plagued the movement and bred “shame and grief and rage and resentment” that went unspoken out of “private terror” (151). Whereas the essays collected in *Skin* provide the theory for this visceral, affective body politics (written as they were within the same three-year period), *the women who hate me* is the practice that imagines what that politics might look like when put into effect and what revolutionary potentialities the aftereffects might hold. Indeed, the words “fear,” “shame,” “guilt,” “hate,” and “contempt” appear, in total, 243 times in *Skin* alone. These expressions are not relied upon so readily in name in *the women who hate me* but are just as prevalent, imbuing and undergirding nearly every poem, and even the collection’s title, with their affective force and the “shame” they provoke.

Insalubrious as airing the harsh truths of her embattled existence may seem, her mother once told her that not only will the truth “not kill you,” it is less dangerous than the “impulse to forget” (*Skin* 151). This is why she came to find such fault in the politics of pride and assimilation. According to Allison, the logic of pride movements “reproduces antagonisms between ‘us,’ the shamed, and ‘them,’ the ones who shame,” which is a dynamic that aligns too closely (though in the reverse order) with the “politics of they” (215). Pride often leads its proponents to “play off of the stereotypes and misconceptions of mainstream culture,” she contends, and moreover to indulge in “self-mythologizing fantasy” rather than doing the important work of “describing difficult and sometimes painful realities” (36). One such reality, for example, is her stubborn love and reverence for her “white trash” family. As she describes it: “every impulse to hold them in contempt sparks in me a countersurge of pride [that is] complicated and undercut by an urge to fit us into the acceptable myths and theories of both mainstream society and lesbian-feminist reinterpretation,” even when neither of which fit—a

predicament that impelled her to “fight broad generalizations about [her] identity from every theoretical viewpoint” (11).

However, she also rejects assimilation politics—which, too, encourage the sublimation of shame but through internalization rather than flagrant rejection—as her attempts to please “the women who hate her,” she says, “only further engaged their contempt and my own self-contempt” (*Skin* 36). Allison even goes so far to suggest that in a culture where shame is absent, whether by way of pride or assimilation, feelings of contempt, blame, and guilt are not erased but instead, to quote Elspeth Probyn, “seethe under the surface of a sanitized veneer of acceptance” (130). For she notes that although “there was a lot of lip service paid to sexual tolerance” in the lesbian-feminism movement, her body and sexual practices “were widely viewed with distaste or outright hatred” due to the classism that operated furtively but pervasively beneath the surface to brand her the queer “they” against which the movement formed the more palatable image of their lesbian “we” (*Skin* 24).

This bind she identifies as plaguing both pride and assimilationist identity politics suggests that the negation of shame merely pushes contempt and disgust underground where they operate insidiously. This is why Allison aims in *the women who hate me* to drag those affects into the open so as to vivify reflection on “the why” and “the what” that constitutes the “disgusting,” to quote Probyn, and thereby to harness the potentially radical possibility of making disgust and shame into what Probyn calls “profound acknowledgements of the incongruity of placing others within the category of the disgusting” so that such behavior cannot become systemic and normalized (*Skin* 132). Thus, against a model of pride or assimilation at the expense of contempt, disgust, and shame, Allison demonstrates that these affects should be “rethought within a politics of representation that causes individuals to reassess, at the level of

the body and through the shame of having designated another as disgusting,” questions about the proximity of “us” to “them” that break down those “easy moralities” (215). Ultimately, she does so by commanding the “women who hate her” to confront her honestly rendered “white trash” body and appetites, desires, and pleasures that are elsewhere and otherwise collapsed into the “fold-up, mean, cardboard figure” of the “slutty, racist, stupid, fat cracker dyke” and used as a shield against the discomfiting touch and taste of the wielders’ own internalized or externalized shame (16, 250). Thus, she embraces her “outlaw status” and uses it as an advantage to “make people uncomfortable” so that they might “come to see” their implication in the greater system of oppression (Allison, “We’re as American as You Can Get” 6). “Traditional feminist theory,” she laments, has had a limited understanding of “class differences and how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial”; resultantly, such an ideology “implied that we were all sisters who should only turn our anger and suspicion on the world outside the lesbian community” (*Skin* 11). However, just as she has refused to mythologize her family and thereby excuse the racism they perpetuated even while being marginalized themselves, Allison uses *the women who hate me* to expose the interplay of “desire and denial” at work in the contempt her “sisters” expressed and the interconnected shame she felt for her body, sexuality, and class which had up to that point remained unexamined prejudices (11).

While apparent throughout the collection in titles such as “silence grew between us,” “not speaking/screaming,” “we all nourish truth with our tongues,” “the terror of my enemies,” and “I chose this ground,” Allison’s focus on the affective and relational possibilities of publically and uncompromisingly verbalizing disgust, contempt, and shame is most readily observed in the seven-part title poem, “the women who hate me,” which is a fitting place to begin given its thematic centrality to the collection as a whole. The poem opens thusly:

The women who do not know me.  
The women who, not knowing me, hate me  
mark my life, rise in my dreams and shake their loose hair  
throw their thin wrists, narrow their already sharp eyes  
say *Who do you think you are?*  
*Lazy, cuntsucking, scared, stupid.* (21)

In these first lines Allison foregrounds that the method by which “the women who hate her” situate themselves relationally is “mark[ing] her life” with labels that convey what she calls in *Skin*: “the distance, the fear, the contempt communicated through the hateful eyes of someone who knows how different we are from each other” (7). She stresses twice that her detractors “do not know her” to emphasize the extent of their detachment from her made more acute through their narrowed-eye delivery of the slurs “[l]azy, cuntsucking, scared, stupid” that cut with an intensity mirroring that of their “sharp eyes.” Her discomfort is made palpable, disconcertingly so, through the cowed position in which she is placed in relation to the women who, in ris[ing],” “shak[ing] their loose hair,” and “throw[ing] their thin wrists,” make moves to establish their social distance and dominance relative to her, the target of their contempt, by increasing their physical distance with shooing movements—“ris[ing],” “shak[ing],” and “throw[ing]”—that Probyn defines as the “turning away” that accompanies and asserts disgust’s “superior disdain” (134).

Accentuating these movements and the disavowal they convey are the physical characteristics of the women whose “thin wrists,” “sharp eyes,” and what Allison describes a few lines later as their “shallow cheeks,” distinguish them as morally superior, especially when set in relief by the moral violations with which they charge Allison through the insults “cuntsucking,”

“stupid,” and “lazy.” As Susan Bordo asserts, “an ability to ‘rise above’ the need to eat imparts moral or aesthetic superiority only where others are prone to overindulgence” (62). While the overconsumption of food is not specified in the insults lodged at Allison, the indulgence and immoderation of her “fat lusts” are intimated by “cuntsucking” and “lazy,” and as she tells *FaT GiRL*: “Fat is trashy. . . . Fat is evidence you are unredeemed” (“Difficult Seductress”). Conversely, her detractors’ “thin wrists” and “shallow cheeks” confer upon them a “state of grace” that she argues was reserved for those “ephemeral and unsubstantial” lesbian feminists who displayed “no actual sexual desire, no appetites at all” and thus were “saved” by and revered for the asceticism of their “conceptual lesbianism” (*Skin* 94-95). Thus, although corporeal fatness is not invoked in name, “cuntsucking” and “lazy” serve as indicators of Allison’s “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” of which her compatriots disapproved to the point of public excommunication in order to project a controlled, coherent image of disciplined lesbian appetites and thus subjectivities.

Furthermore, the morality and amorality invoked by these characterizations falls along class lines, as “cuntsucking,” “stupid,” and “lazy” align with common “white trash” stereotypes that Allison lists as falling under the following categories: “drunken, no-count, lazy, whorish, stupid” (*Skin* 148). And indeed, the connection is made explicit later in the poem when she, taking up as much space on the page as possible, catalogs one by one the barbs that have been slung at her by her “shallow-cheeked,” “thin-wristed” detractors:

*Whitetrash*

*no-count*

*bastard*

*mean-eyed*

*garbage-mouth*

*cuntsucker*

*cuntsucker* (23)

These slurs, disconnected as they may initially seem, together censure Allison's presumed lack of restraint that is the antithesis to the "ascetic model" embodied by the "women who hate her." The implication, of course, is that her detractors are the "respectably middle-class" lesbian feminists who sought to dissociate themselves from the stereotype of dykes, "bloated, fat, and sweaty," "licking hungrily at rigid clits" with abandon about which a fellow lesbian feminist once hissed, piercingly and contemptuously, at Allison: "I hate that. That's what *they* think we do" (*Skin* 87). In an attempt to move away from that image of the rapacious "cuntsucker," then, Allison's "sisters" promoted tribadism as the "egalitarian, female, feminist, revolutionary" lesbian sex act because it complied with the sedated, sanitized version of lesbianism that would more likely be deemed socially acceptable or at the very least tolerable by the straight, middle-class society into which they were working to assimilate (118). Thus, by couching their contempt in such slurs as "cuntsucker," "white trash," "garbage-mouthed," and "lazy," and in describing the women themselves as "thin-wristed" and "shallow-cheeked," Allison asserts a causal relationship between the social distancing they perform and the classism entrenched within the movement, as dictations of "right" and "wrong" ways of embodying and performing lesbian feminism were defined with the stereotype of the "no class, trashy queer" in mind (190).

The shame that Allison feels in response to these attacks is made apparent in her quietly punctuated exclamations of "[g]oddamn" interspersed throughout and accompanied by capitulations such as "[a]n't gonna get it" and admissions to hosting "a secret thing shameful and complicated" in the wake of their criticisms ("the women who hate me" 22, 25). However, after

acknowledging that “the world was made for” these “shallow-cheeked,” “safe little girls,” her tone is emboldened (21). She combatively responds with what she calls her “BRAVADO,” “life-saving, precious bravado” (22), a strategy she learned from her aunts, she tells *FaT GiRL*, “big women” who were “laughed at” and mocked, but who would follow their hecklers and blisteringly “talk back” in order to force them to face—by increasing the very proximity from which they wished to distance themselves through their public statements of disgust—so that they might “witness their own actions,” as Probyn would claim, “and be shamed by them” (“Difficult Seductress”; Probyn 143). Allison concedes that “the fantasy that [she] cooked up of [her] aunts as not giving a shit about what people thought of them—big women comfortable in their bodies—is just that, a fantasy,” and in truth they simply “embrac[ed] being scary” and “being unacceptable” in order to “take up space in the world without fear”; thus, the toughness they played at was “bravado, a life-saving strategy” (“Difficult Seductress”). Nevertheless, Allison clung to these performative moments, she says, as examples of ways to live “naked in the world, unashamed even under attack, unafraid even though there is much to fear” (*Skin* 164). This context elucidates the dramatic turn that each of her poems, particularly the titular, take in *the women who hate me*, as they convey the mix of “pride and shame” and “the hopeful and the tragic” that Allison came to learn was necessary for her to live “naked in the world” without sensationalizing or suppressing the “complicated truths” of her life (156).

She deploys this mediatory tactic in “the women who hate me” when she alternates between cataloguing the litany of abuse and shame she has endured and performing bravado, as she does in the lines that follow:

What do they know of the women in my body?  
My weakening hips, sharp good teeth,

angry nightmares, scarred cheeks,  
fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything.

Rather than allow the “women who hate her” to simplify her “complicated truths” to the “cardboard dimensions” of “*Whitetrash / no-count / bastard / mean-eyed / garbage-mouth / cuntsucker / cuntsucker*,” Allison, like her aunts before her, closes the distance between “us” and “them,” her detractors and herself, by seizing narrative control and confronting them with her body’s literal marks of distinction. But she does not idealize her “weakening hips, sharp good teeth, / angry nightmares, scarred cheeks, / fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything”; instead she does as her mother once commanded and “gaz[es] at the world with [her] scars and outrage plainly revealed, determined not to hide,” using her detractors’ disgust and her registered, though not internalized, shame as springboards for making what she calls in *Skin* “an ethic out of public honesty, of forthright insistence on my right to be anything I damn well please, scars and all” (*Skin* 155, 127). And, as she affirms here, that is a “trashy lesbian, feminist activist, and an honest writer” (50).

Furthermore, following her flagrant display of her “scars and outrage,” her “mix of shame and pride,” Allison chooses to retroactively define it as a performance of:

BRAVADO.

The women who hate me

don’t know

can’t imagine

life-saving, precious bravado. (21-22)

While seemingly a capitulation to the pull these women exert over her governance of self, in this passage Allison puts her shame to work as what Adam Frank and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick call a

“near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy” that has the power to “turn us inside out and outside in,” spilling the body across domains otherwise kept separate—what Allison calls “boundary lines” maintained by “internalized fear, shame, and guilt” (Frank and Sedgwick 11; *Skin* 78). By challenging that the “shallow-cheeked young girls the world was made for” cannot fathom the necessity and importance of the bravado she performs in order to live “poor and queer” in a “world that despises both” because of the privileges and protections afforded them by their class, Allison lays bare what she elsewhere calls “the secret core of shame of the middle class”—the knowledge that their security is built on the insecurity of others (*Skin* 11, 25). As such, Allison reworks the relationship between her body and the bodies of the “women who hate her” by using their contempt and her shame-fueled performance of bravado to reveal their interdependent closeness.

Allison draws them closer still in the lines that follow, wherein she specifies that the “secret shame” of such “respectably middle-class” lesbian feminists extends beyond class into the realm of sex:

God on their right shoulder  
righteousness on their left,  
the women who hate me never use words  
like hate      speak instead of nature  
of the spirit not housed in the flesh  
as if my body, a temple of sin,  
didn't mirror their own. (23)

Allison again suggests, in that hard-hitting final line, that the “moral and aesthetic superiority,” to quote Bordo, imparted by the ascetic ideal they embody is dependent upon the designation of

others, specifically Allison in this instance, as “fat” in the indulgence of their “lusts” (62). The privileges conferred by their “thin wrists” and “shallow cheeks” are dependent on their disciplining and disavowal of the “fat lusts” that they share with Allison’s “kind”—indeed, that “mirror” hers—and from which they thus must distance themselves in order to prove, to quote Probyn, that they “have not been contaminated” and “are not disgusting or shameful” (133).

Allison confirms this reading in the lines that follow wherein she states:

The women who hate me hate  
their insistent desires, their fat lusts  
swallowed and hidden, disciplined to nothing  
narrowed to bone and dry hot dreams.  
The women who hate me deny  
hunger and appetite,  
the cream delight  
of a scream  
that arches the thighs and fills  
the mouth with singing. (24)

She pinpoints in their hatred what Probyn calls “an intense subjective awareness of trespassing proximity” that, even if not consciously acknowledged, recognizes the closeness of their “insistent desires, their fat lusts” to those of Allison, and thus provokes them to project their self-hatred outward in order to establish their distance and “moral and aesthetic superiority” (Probyn 142). However, rather than internalizing their externalized shame, Allison—like a “mirror”—reflects it back. She renders her own “fat lusts” joyous in the very open-mouthed, arched-thigh indulgences that terrify and tempt in turns the women who thrust the weight of their “hunger and

appetite” on those “trashy” and “publicly provocative, outrageous, and promiscuous queers” (*Skin* 118).

As if to stir desire in her detractors and thus further accentuate their proximity, Allison overstuffs her climactic image with sumptuous, savory language that captures in its own extremes the interconnectedness of her “fat lusts” and their “dry hot dreams.” The thrown-back head, spread thighs, and open-mouthed “singing” that announces the “cream delight” of satisfied hunger convey an openness and visibility that Allison claims the “respectably middle-class” lesbian feminists feared because “it was the public expression of desire that was embattled, any deviation from what we were supposed to want and be, how we were supposed to behave” (*Skin* 78). This is why they “swallow and hide, discipline to nothing” and reduce to “bone” and “dry hot dreams” their appetites—to protect themselves at their own expense as well as that of those who refused or lacked the privileges to do so and who thus became known as “perverts” and “queers” (16). However, by “dragging out,” as she writes later in the poem, such “secret,” “shameful things” (“the women who hate me” 25) instead of leaving them buried or denied, Allison attempts to establish understanding with the “women who hate her,” and to thus avoid the “us” versus “them” rhetoric that she could have easily fallen back on in order to render the “middle and upper classes as the villains” in a “morality tale” which would see her as the “working-class hero” (*Skin* 17). But that, as she says, would just mean “maintaining the status quo in a different guise” (36).

Twenty-seven poems make up *the women who hate me*, and while there is not enough space here to examine each, nearly all of them extend forward the work of the title poem by espousing Allison’s refusal to trim and compartmentalize her life in the service of “hiding, blending in for safety” as she did until it was “burst open” when she lost patience with her fear of

what the women she worked with, mostly lesbians, thought of “[her] family, who [she] slept with, and what [they] did together” (*Skin* 16, 34). However, there is a noticeable progression away from explicit expressions of disgust and even shame in the collection as it develops outward from “the women who hate me.” Indeed, the further into the collection one delves, the less noticeable the pain of exclusion and rejection become while the satisfaction of desires previously denied for their “political incorrectness” come to the fore (70). But this does not mean that Allison foregoes the affects of disgust, contempt, and shame. Rather, she continues to draw out the interpenetrating lines of disgust, shame, and desire in the body, but she uses the reflexivity established in “the women who hate me” as a foundation for playing up how, according to Frank and Sedgwick, “shame experience,” such as “shyness about a strange sexual impulse,” is characterized by its “failure to renounce its desire for the disgusting object as well as the need to avoid shame-humiliation” which thus results in the “desire-shame-disgust cycle defined by continual progress and retrogress” (22-23). Allison seeks to push beyond this entrapping and stagnating cycle but to do so by sparking feelings of discomfort in the “women who hate her” through her out-front representations of her “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” that invoke desire based on corporealizations of the “shameful desire and disgusting knowledges” of her detractors, thus compelling them to find pleasure in their shame (Probyn 145).

In this way she avoids the “pride trap” of “representing our sexuality as simple, straightforward, and life-saving” by “glossing over the difficulties” and “rewriting the terror of desire, making it all easier than it is” (*Skin* 143). In order to liberate desire, writes Allison, one must instead work “where the terror hides” and “not lie even to comfort,” as “the truth” comes from discomfort, in joining the “the body and its lusts with the mind and its anxieties” (143).

This is why she utilizes recognizable markers of her “trashy” background, body, and sexuality throughout the collection—not for the purpose of fostering an ultimately “false tolerance” of her identity by rendering it hypervisible, but to stimulate distress and discord that might destroy the “system of censorship” altogether by presenting what she calls a “remade life” lived “in terrifying, naked intimacy” with “scars revealed” that functions as a blueprint for how to live unbounded by heteropatriarchal structures and strictures<sup>13</sup> (142). Such is the power of wearing disgust, shame, and desire “on the outside,” for in telling the truth, “all of it,” she argues “there is magic”—“if you show yourself naked for me, I’ll be naked for you,” Allison writes, thereby creating a “covenant” that has the potential to be replicated until, ideally, “everyone lives as freely and happily as their neighbors” (145).

For Allison, there is something “powerfully queer in revealing our excesses and vulnerabilities,” in shirking the idea that the “surface of the skin” should be treated as a barrier dividing the internal and external life, and should thus “hide all the secrets” deemed too shameful to be worn on the outside (148). She imagines this “stripping down,” destabilizing work (148) in the poem “what is the dream of flesh?” which I argue acts as a manifesto for “living naked in the world”:

I will not give one for the other  
trade flesh for mind or memory.  
The dream of flesh is integrity  
the body joined with its own ambitions  
honestly acknowledging the cunt  
as fully as the belly,

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<sup>13</sup> Which Allison argues were recreated within the lesbian-feminist movement but in a “new guise” (*Skin* 36).

honestly honoring the women

who stir my flesh to dream. (54)

As a project, *the women who hate me* intends to “dig out” the shame and contempt that, internalized, “goes to the bone” (*Skin* 148). To turn “inside out,” as Frank and Sedgwick would say, the “vulnerable insides” and to thusly collapse divisions not only between what is felt and what is revealed but also between the substance of the “mental self” and “physical self” (Frank and Sedgwick 11). For Allison, the threads of the ethical and the political wend their ways through body/social assemblages, and thus to divest the body of its “fat lusts,” its “hunger and appetite,” for the purposes of being more in tune with the political, which she argues was a core problem within her lesbian-feminist community, is counterintuitive (“the women who hate me” 24). Allison proffers that the body be treated not as a container for the “cunt,” “belly,” and their appetites that are literally minded by the “mind” that tends to “matters of politics divested from matters of sex,” but as an equally important part of what she calls “the whole and the complex truth of our lives” (*Skin* 111). This is why she couches the “dream of flesh” in the image in which the poem culminates: “Flesh on flesh / sunlight on my eyelids / I dream the dream of the body / the muscles that loosen / the belly’s cry for justice” (53). She calls her request that the body, the “belly” and the “cunt,” be incorporated into the political consciousness of the movement “not too much / not an unjust demand / or a greedy one,” as her desires had so often been deemed. However she asserts that such a change is urgent because the “flesh is hungry, starving” for such “justice” to be rendered to its equally as important needs which Allison was frequently told “would have to wait” (“what is the dream of flesh?” 53; *Skin* 116). But as she reiterates throughout *Skin* and brings to a head here, reductionist politics that purport to address

the “essential issues” while letting “that other stuff slide for now” in reality “let people slide” (116).

Thus the poem “what is the dream of flesh?” provides a useful intervention, for with its emphasis on the “belly’s cry for justice” it suggests that matters of political consciousness must move beyond the “conceptual” into the realm of the “actual” where issues of the body and its appetites are pertinent. By privileging the “cunt as fully as the belly,” Allison anticipates Probyn’s theory that “we are alimentary-sexual assemblages, bodies eat and have sex with vigorous class, ethnic, and gendered appetites” which articulate “what we are, what we ‘eat,’ and what ‘eats’ us” (33). So, in order to honor “the whole and the complex” and thereby to eschew identity politics that marginalize the body and shame expressions of self deemed “too close” to it and not buried deep enough beneath the skin, Allison begins to imagine in “what is the dream of flesh?” an integrationist lesbian-feminism that uses the failures of the former model as a basis for collapsing divisions while still acknowledging the specificities of the composite elements of identity. And as we shall see in an examination of poems that flesh out this model, Allison uses food and eating to perform such work, which is not only apt as her appetite for food as well as sex found her labeled a “white trash cuntsucker,” but because as Probyn claims, “eating has the ability to place different orders of things and ways of being alongside each other, inside and outside inextricably linked” which is the discomfiting project to which *the women who hate me* affectively and effectively builds (33).

Indeed, in *the women who hate me* there is a synthesis of mind and body foregrounded by hunger and eating, desire and sex, as signifiers. In other words, the mind-body dichotomy is comparable to the theory-practice dichotomy. Both, when synthesized, transcend limiting binaries. Giovanni Colombetti and Evan Thompson describe the embodied consciousness that

precedes the act of ascribing words to experience: “Meaning and experience are created by, or enacted through, the continuous, reciprocal interaction of the brain, the body, and the world” (56). The next step is to think, speak, or in Allison’s case, write a version of this interaction into being. The poem “hollow-cheeked” does just that by personifying the false antagonism erected between “good sex and the revolution” among her fellow lesbian feminists in a humorous vignette that seemingly pits them against each other but that instead deconstructs that duality through the crisscrossing vectors of food, eating, and sex (*Skin* 86). She first sets up the ideal lesbian feminist as a “hollow-cheeked woman of mystery” who soberly fashions herself in “black clothes and grey vest” (38) while also being:

lean, fast, and

largely unknown

but mysterious

fascinating

always provocative

hollow-cheeked (38)

Allison undeniably sketches here the activist and writer that her “lovers” and “sisters” in the lesbian-feminist movement would prefer: svelte and disciplined in body and behavior, seemingly tangible yet ethereal, and elusive much like the women who she argues “conceptualize[d] their sexuality and starve[d] their appetites” (*Skin* 90) to the point that they “trade[d] flesh for mind” (“what is the dream of flesh?” 54). However, she interrupts the flow of this vision following the “hollow-cheeked” line, as if with a record scratch, by admitting that the insubstantiality of the “hollow-cheeked” ideal “is the first,” and primary, “problem.” She then asks, [d]id you ever notice how the famous ones / are always thin?,” a question she follows with the turn:

I could be very good at leanness  
if you did not taste so good  
so good with chocolate, so good with gravy  
so filling, the legend, you, my appetite  
rich, delicious, mesmerizing,  
like fine sherry with a sharp edge  
or attitude with tight pants. (38)

While at first glance these lines seem to feed into the mind-body split she denounces in “what is the dream of flesh?,” the implication that the “you” Allison takes to bed is the “hollow-cheeked woman of mystery”—who represents the idealized asceticism of activist politics—points to the scene’s subversiveness. Indeed, that she imagines herself seducing and being seduced by such a “conceptual lesbian” alone elides the divide between public politics and private passions.

However, Allison takes her deconstruction further by introducing food in its literal and metaphoric dimensions to the coupling, and thusly imagining lesbian sexuality outside traditional frameworks altogether. In doing so she advocates a vision of sexual relations as being contiguous with and a part of other relations, especially given the evocations of “chocolate” and “gravy” that conjure the indulgent southern dish “chocolate gravy” with which she imagines the “lean, fast” body of the “hollow-cheeked woman” melding. In a move similar to that Elizabeth Grosz makes in her essay “Refiguring Lesbian Desire” wherein she claims that the “bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space,” Allison suggests that her “fat thighs, fat lusts, fat everything” and the specificities of region, class, and race that they, for better or worse, signify should factor into the larger consciousness of the lesbian-feminist movement as they play pivotal roles as significant as sexuality in the constitution of lesbian identity (75). But perhaps

what is most striking about the closing image is how it invalidates the conceit of the “hollow-cheeked woman” as being streamlined to the point of near incorporeality, as Allison’s desires and hers are rendered coterminous, which leaves the reader with a model and enactment of an integrated, embodied lesbian feminism achieved through reciprocal “naked intimacy.” While built on the disgust and shame of Allison’s detractors and her own shame for harboring desires in excess of the “leanness” of body and lusts preferred by her “lovers” and “sisters” in the movement, “hollow-cheeked” nevertheless moves beyond those affects by using them as a catalyst for imagining a “life remade” without “boundary lines,” wherein the “erotic and the everyday facts of our existence,” she writes in *Skin*, are merged “as they should be” (145-46).

Despite professing in the poem “i chose this ground” that “a lifetime away from the cornbread / warm milk hunger of my childhood / I chose this ground / this lesbian city ripe with color” (“i chose this ground” 63), Allison admits in the poem “appetite” that, while living in Brooklyn, South Carolina and Florida still “sit in [her] appetites” (“appetite” 51). This dynamic captures her integrationist approach in *the women who hate me*, as well as in her later works, to the relationship between her sexuality and the other defining categories of her identity: as demonstrated in “what is the dream of flesh?” and “hollow-cheeked,” amalgamation is her goal, though with the caveat that the specificities of her “family background, the region, the class, and the body [she] grew up in” remain distinct so that they may “speak to [her] whole complicated experience” (*Skin* 67). Being constrained by what she calls “class, race, sexuality, gender—and all the other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other” is not her goal, but given her commitment to bearing witness to the experience of disgust, contempt, and shame in order to move beyond them, her need to “excavate from the inside” those categories so that she may understand and undermine the “politics of they” falls in line with her larger project (25). “All my

life,” she writes, “I have hated clichés”: “politically correct parables” and “simple-minded rote speeches” that deny the “power of the whole and the complex” (111). That is why she had always found “stories that purport to be about poor people or queers or southerners” to be “cruel, small, and false,” for they failed to take seriously or represent fully the multiplicities of and intersections between those identities and instead reduce them to “cardboard dimensions” (111).

In order to literally “fill out” such “cardboard dimensions,” in the poem “butter my tongue” Allison envisions herself supping on her lover during oral sex, “buttering” her tongue with her cream and “taking sips” and savoring her fluids like the “whiskey and bourbon” she recalls performers swigging in furtive snatches at tent revivals she attended as a youth in South Carolina (“butter my tongue” 43). Although this image is erotically charged and simulates an orgasmic crescendo that climaxes with the words “higher, higher,” it also smacks of Allison’s frenzied hunger to recapture through her lover’s body the dense substance of her childhood that connects the mouth, gut, and groin into a “gospel” of the body originating in the “belly” and radiating outward (43). As in “what is the dream of flesh?,” here she ties together “flesh,” “mind,” and “memory”: her lover’s cream calls to mind the butter that softened the biscuits of her childhood as well as the ecstatic, erotic, and drunken spirituality of Southern Baptist revivalism. Thus, like gravy elsewhere, here butter evokes and conveys the materialities of region, race, and class that fold into her sexuality, rendering her not only a lesbian, but specifically a “feminist, queer, working class, fat dyke” (*Skin* 165).

Butter and gravy, too, are among the alimentary substances that congeal the various articulations of her embodied lesbian subjectivity in the poem “dumpling child” in which the “dream of flesh” is climactically realized. Allison tells *FaT GiRL* she has always considered “dumpling child” her “fat poem” in a collection of writing that speaks to the experience of “fat

dykes”<sup>14</sup> (“Difficult Seductress”). And indeed, Allison grounds that experience in voracious appetites and expansive pleasures fulfilled through “white trash” food and foodways that merge seamlessly with lesbian sex acts. She announces herself therein a “southern dumpling child / biscuit eater, tea sipper / okra slicer, gravy dipper,” proclaiming, “I fry my potatoes with onions / stew my greens with pork” (“dumpling child” 9). Then, without pause and thus coalescing the two halves of the poem, she continues:

And ride my lover high up  
on the butterfat shine of her thighs  
where her belly arches and sweetly tastes  
of rock salt on watermelon  
sunshine sharp teeth bite light  
and lick slow like mama’s  
favorite dumpling child. (9)

So sensually described are the alimentary acts with which she begins the poem that “biscuit eater, tea sipper” and “gravy dipper” make as much sense as euphemisms for cunnilingus as they do descriptions of the cooking and eating patterns of poor southerners, especially given her tendency to blur the lines between the language of eating and sex in the rest of the collection. Thus the performative actions she takes to satiate her appetite with the bodies of her lovers—“dipper,” “sipper,” “eater”—equally call to mind the performative actions she took to satiate her appetite with the food of her “white trash” roots.

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<sup>14</sup> It is also noteworthy that “dumpling child” was chosen for inclusion in *What Are You Looking At? The First Fat Fiction Anthology* edited by Donna Jarrell and Ira Sukrungruang and published in 2003.

This connection serves as the set up for the lip-smacking feast that follows which sees Allison riding “high up” on the implied fat thighs of her lover, “buttering” them like pillowy biscuits with the cream of her pleasure and “biting” into the sweaty, sweet, and plump skin of her belly like the soft flesh of a salted, ripe watermelon, a scene that concludes with her “licking” her lover’s cunt “slow like mama’s / favorite dumpling child.” In light of that final line, the title of the poem takes on a double meaning—she is a “dumpling child” not only for her childhood spent devouring her mother’s rich, fattening, and decidedly “white trash” fair, but also because she is the eager eater of her lover’s “dumpling” mound. What she communicates, then, is the inextricableness of her sexual subjectivity and those of her class, race, region, and body. One bespeaks the others, and any divisions made among them are thus shown to be contrived and delimiting in effect, which by association condemns the separation of “fat lusts” from the political lesbianism performed by the “women who hate her” as well as their disregard and disdain for expressions of desire “marked” by those specificities listed above as they considered them superfluous to the cause—a way of thinking Allison challenges head on with her seductive rendering of such a confluence of food, sex, bodies, and identities.

According to Probyn, in sex and eating alike, the “diverse nature of where and how different parts of our selves attach to different aspects of the social comes to the fore and becomes the stuff of reflection on the issues that trouble society most: appetite, desire, greed, and pleasure” (14). Those “moments of precariousness, when the body is turned inside out—when something tastes of memories, and activates aspiration, gratitude, desire, recognition, or disgust”—are what imagistically and thematically unify Allison’s poetry, for driving *the women who hate me*, and climaxing in “dumpling girl,” is the compulsion to establish new corporeal relations through the affects of disgust, contempt, and shame that are lodged especially in the

acts of sex and eating and harbored in the residua they are perceived to leave on the body (145). Allison taps into the power of these affects to remake the body—to “render public,” as Probyn writes, “what we seek to keep inside” (145)—through her repeated depiction of bodies’ borders being crossed through the process of consuming food that evokes flesh and flesh that evokes food. In doing so, she refuses the logic that identity can be divided into distinct and untouching component parts, which is why she draws bodies uncomfortably close: to symbolize the touchingly interdependent quality of her “fat lusts” and her detractors’ “dry hot dreams,” of her “fat thighs” and their “thin wrists,” of her “white trash” queerness and their “respectably middle-class” lesbianism in literal as well as figurative proximity. She argues thereby that the boundaries of the imagined tidy packages that constitute identity categories must be disrupted or dissolved in order to offer in their place a productive confusion. This dissolution demonstrates how identity is a dynamic doing that cannot be singularized but instead should be treated with respect to the individual flavors, textures, and inherent possibilities of its specificities.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BODIES “OUT” OF BOUNDS: BURSTING BINARISMS OF “QUEER”/“WHITE TRASH” THROUGH “FAT” FOOD, FLESH, AND DESIRE IN *TRASH*

Before writing *the women who hate me* and the essays compiled in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* but after being driven out of her former lesbian-feminist community in New York City, Dorothy Allison travelled home to the South and to the family from whom she had spent a decade distancing herself in the hopes that by literally abandoning her “white trash” past she could claim a “respectable” future modeled after the type of cosmopolitan political activist she mythologizes in the poem “hollow-cheeked.” However, she quickly realized that in disentangling the threads of her identity she was in turn unraveling, disintegrating, and destroying herself in order to “blend into the acceptable myth of both the good poor and the reasonable lesbian” which perpetuated the “easy moralities” undergirding the oppressive “politics of they” that operated stealthily within the movement (*Skin* 21). Allison thus “went home again” to her mother and sisters to “visit, talk, argue, and begin to understand” the origins of the internalized class hatred that had led her to hide and resent her appetites for being “evidence” of her “white trash backwardness” (21, 148).

Because the “Barnard Sex Scandal” and its ensuing fallout delivered her from the false protections of her “regular dyke networks,” Allison was forced for the first time in a decade to acknowledge her “white trash” roots as the “core of shame” in her life that she had spent years enwrapping in layers of disgust and contempt secured by fear to the point that she no longer recognized the family she had spent a decade burying (*Skin* 24). However, in returning home and

dredging up the painful details of her upbringing, Allison argues that she was able to accept the “whole complicated truth” of her life as a “child of [her] class and [her] unique family background,” which thereby reinvigorated her belief in and commitment to activism as it facilitated her putting together a “meaningful politics” couched in “nakedness rather than hiding”—a politics that kick-started her writing career with the publication of *the women who hate me* alongside the essays later compiled in *Skin* (24-25). But returning to the South was also an important step in this process of “unmaking” which Allison undertook in order to “reclaim and reinvent the experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian,” as she writes in her foreword to *Trash*, for she first encountered the “politics of they” and thus first began compartmentalizing and hiding the unsavory and “difficult to swallow” aspects of her identity when growing up “poor, queer, and despised” in South Carolina (*Trash* 12; *Skin* 138). Indeed, it is there that she was first branded, years before her lesbian-feminist community ousted her for being “a pervert and a queer,” “one of those publicly provocative, outrageous, and promiscuous queers”—not simply for her attraction to women but more so for the constructions of divergent heterosexuality and family formation that render “white trash” a queer category (*Skin* 118).

A major insight to come from this revisit is her assertion that “[m]e and my family, we have always been ‘they’ that is talked about so dismissively,” referring not only to her “birth family” but to her “queer family” of “friends and lovers” as well, for she identifies her “family” as being “we/they, the white trash *and* the queer” (*Skin* 10, 24, emphasis mine). Allison’s consistent alignment of her “queerness” and her “white trashiness” tellingly speaks to the imbricated nature of the categories and the stigmatization she experienced first in South Carolina and later in New York City for what Ann Cvetkovich calls the “intense southern regionality and hence subnationality” bespoken by the “interdependent queerness of her sexuality, class, and

race” that left her “straddling cultures from the fringes of each” (372). By “intense regionality” Cvetkovich suggests that while the South is already “queer” given its “regionality,” being also a “trashy lesbian” rendered Allison “queer queer” and thus beyond the bounds of any straightforward categorization and an “outlaw” at every turn no matter the company she kept (*Skin* 10, 107).

In her essay “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity” (1997), Donna Jo Smith establishes the queerness of southern regionality to which Cvetkovich alludes and that thus helps explain her terminology. Therein Smith argues that “definitions of the southern” are regularly utilized in the national imaginary to sustain myths of American innocence, and that America has thus “long projected its ‘Queer Other’ onto the South”<sup>15</sup> (378). What she encompasses within the designation “Queer Other” are “negative excesses of meaning,” which is why she argues that the notion of a “southern queer” is “manifestly redundant” given the “lack of restraint” that both “queer” and “southern” represent: “Since the South is already an aberration, what is a southern queer but deviance multiplied? In other words, did Truman Capote really need to tell the world he was a pervert? After all, he was from south Alabama” (370). In her playful line of questioning, Smith underscores the fact that if the South is already characterized by “qualities of excess,” then to identify as a “queer southerner” is to be beyond the pale, or as John Howard succinctly puts it in his foreword to *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (1997): “we queers are just a tad too perverse” even for the “perverse section” (4).

Howard goes on to argue that “queer southerners” are alternately “exclude[d] from the fold” of southern history by “other southerners” and evoked at its margins when convenient as

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<sup>15</sup> Smith’s argument could be considered a precursor to Jay Watson’s “recalcitrant materialities” but one informed by queer theory rather than body theory.

“perverts and sinners” (4). Patti Duncan, in the interview compilation *Out in the South* (2001), echoes Howard’s assessment. She laments that despite southerners being what Mab Segrest once called “American Family Freaks” for possessing a “really deviant sexuality,” other southerners, “particularly those tied to fundamentalist religions,” are “very much letting the gay and lesbian communities know that we’re perverts, we’re sinners, we’re unnatural” (39). As Duncan suggests, those southerners tortured by their own precarious position within the American schema target the queer identified among them, in the words of Segrest, “to punish for their own alienation, to bear the burden of strangeness” (26). Thus even within the space of the “Queer South” there are distinctions made by the “keepers of southern history”—those vested with the authority to speak on behalf of the South—in order to distinguish the “acceptable degree of southern eccentricity and difference” that is “taken pride in” from the “over-the-top perversity” of “those queers” which the “keepers” are quick to specify “is not tolerated down here” (Howard 4).

While Smith and Howard make no mention of the role class plays in the constitution and circulation of the “Queer South,” Duncan clarifies that the “perversity” of “those queers” that “is not tolerated” by the white, well-to-do gatekeepers of southern culture also encompasses the degeneracy ascribed to “white trash.” According to Duncan: “when you consider the stereotype of inbreeding, among others, there’s this idea or myth among southerners that poor whites have this really perverse, fucked-up sexuality . . . as if we’re all hypersexual, somehow sexually wrong” (38). This myth of “fucked-up sexuality,” she says, resultantly makes poor whites “kind of queer, and certainly weird, regardless of orientation” (38). Here Duncan uses “queer” as an inclusive term that accommodates the myth of deviant heterosexuality that defines “white trash” as capable of producing only “bastards” and thus incapable of representing or reproducing the

South “appropriately” (39). The “white trash” family is necessarily a “queer” family, then, not because it fails to reproduce heterosexually, but because its supposedly warped reproduction—consider the joke “you know you’re a redneck if there are no forks in your family tree”—produces “failures” by way of what Cvetkovich calls a “toxic, trash sexuality” (373). This “trash sexuality,” she continues, exerts itself “liberally but beyond the bounds of when and where it *should*” and endangers alignments of sexuality and gender which center “glorified, bourgeois, white heterosexuality” as the “southern standard” from which definitions of the “queer” and the “white trash” are removed and used to maintain myths of southern innocence just as definitions of the “southern” are removed and used to maintain myths of American innocence (Cvetkovich 373; Smith 378).

However, despite the blurriness of the lines that define and divide them, few connections between “queer” and “white trash” communities are fostered, at the national or the regional level, due to contradictory assumptions and definitions that paradoxically pit them as antitheses while at the same time drawing them together in what Adam Frank and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick call the “desire-shame-disgust cycle defined by continual progress and retrogress” (23). Indeed, Allison comments in *Skin* that her life’s work has been “writing and trying to piece out what it means to always be the expatriate working-class Southern lesbian in a place that barely tolerates queers, let alone queer queers” (107). She further elaborates that both her “birth” and “queer” families have in turns made her feel “really queer” because the “strange” combination of her class and sexuality upsets notions of what it means to each group to be “queer” and to be “white trash” (Allison, “Under Dorothy Allison’s Skin” 38). Sedgwick helps illuminate this admittedly confounding dynamic when she suggests that “contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in

some way from, the operations of incoherencies of definition” that are “inherent to definitional binarisms” (9). Indeed, those “contradictions,” she argues, serve to obscure and confuse the “dependent relations” on which such binarisms are built and thus prevent the establishment of “potentially deconstructive cross-understandings” (10).

Though entrenched, these binarisms are not incontestable—a point proved, according to Scott Herring in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010), when one considers the discomfortingly close relationship Alabama-based artist Michael Meads cultivates between the subjects of his photography series *Alabama Souvenirs: Photographs from the Deep South* and their intended “gay metropolitan spectator” (99). Meads’ representations of rural southern life, according to Herring, “infuriate . . . while they also deconstruct” homonormative gay U.S. cultures by producing gaps in “sexual knowledge concerning the bodies of poor southern whites whose cultural ‘poverty’ and ‘backwardness’ fascinates, repels, and aggravates” in a manner that taps into those “potentially deconstructive cross-understandings” of which Sedgwick speaks (103). These images, taken from the 1980s through the 1990s, capture white male residents in their late teens and early twenties of Eastaboga—the small northeastern Alabama town of four thousand where Meads was born and raised. The men, as Herring describes them, “chug beers, hold cockfights, share pornography in the cramped quarters of a trailer home, embrace each other in the nude, drape themselves in Confederate battle flags, and sit shirtless to eye the camera in poses that index homoerotic desire, if not its actualization” (99). In one image, for instance, two men sit nude on a bare mattress in a trailer-house while striking poses that strongly suggest the photographer has captured a post-coital moment made all the more visually captivating by the setting which simultaneously draws on and threatens to rupture “white trash” stereotypes as Meads juxtaposes the “homoerotic” and the “hillbilly” (98). Another, which Meads titled *Pig*

*Belly*, crops an unnamed man's body, and the viewer sees only a pale, stout torso below the man's raised shirt. In his right hand, parallel to his exposed, rotund stomach, he holds a hunting knife dripping with blood (98). This image seemingly invokes the stereotype of menacing "white trash" or invites the viewer to stare at a spectacle of southern "backwardness" from an exoticized land evocative of what David Bell calls "narratives of poor rural regions like the Deep South" that have "long explored the badlands of the rural: its sick, sordid, malevolent nasty underbelly"—quite literally, in this case (qtd. in Herring 105).

Despite this apparent purpose, however, within the context of the larger *Alabama Souvenirs* collection *Pig Belly* creates in the intended gay urbane spectatorship a sense of "anarchic confusion and frightening irritation" that mediates between "identification and repulsion," and that thus upsets the "desire-shame-disgust cycle" that Allison similarly disturbs in *the women who hate me* (Herring 108; Frank and Sedgwick 23). Indeed, the collection displays eroticized "white trash" bodies in poses that suggest earlier icons of Western gay male art (Caravaggio's *John the Baptist*, for one) at times draped in the contemporary queer iconography of the rainbow flag and at others positioned among such rural, southern cultural ephemera as fishing tackle boxes, Natural Light beer cans, bloodied hunting weapons, and even the Confederate flag. The shocked responses elicited by these strategic positionings, which Herring calls a critique of "metronormative taxonomies" in gay culture, capture the "queer queerness" of southern materiality in relation to normative heterosexuality *and* homosexuality (105). Indeed, as Herring documents, in November 2003 Manhattan-based and queer-identified users of DataLounge—a "gay and lesbian chat room devoted to arts and politics"—reacted to the series with a mixture of disgust and desire captured in comments that describe the photographs as "creepy," "frightening," and "disturbingly hot" (107).

More salient to our discussion of Allison's work, however, are the ways in which castings of classed and regionalized sexual alterity as well as their disturbance occur through metaphorical or direct discussions of fatness and food, as evidenced in response to Meads' collection. "Ew," one respondent writes, "makes me glad I don't live in the redneck states. Those guys have nasty beer bellies by the time they hit 23. Sad" (qtd. in Herring 100). Another user, clearly disquieted by the images, asks: "Is this a glimpse into gay life in the rural south? The guys get heavier and heavier, turn into bears and radical fairy types and suck each other off during gay fishing or hunting trips? I mean, what gives here? I honestly want to know" (qtd. in Herring 100). Finally, yet another sneeringly muses, "Jeez all these guys posing for dollars. SPAM must be getting expensive" (qtd. in Herring 100). The fleshiness of most of the depicted men and their ascribed diets of cheap beer and SPAM—drink and food coded as "white trash"—both confirms and confuses national understandings of poor, southern embodiment. Indeed, metronormative and homonormative visual strategies, as Herring argues, "fail to encapsulate and explain bodies" such as those exhibited in *Pig Belly*, for while they might literally seem to represent the "sick, sordid, malevolent nasty underbelly" of "white trash" appetites, when framed as queerly desiring and desirable and packaged for a cosmopolitan gay audience they complicate singularistic understandings of the stereotypical "white trash" body as well as what and how its corporeality signifies (Bell qtd. in Herring 105).

Coming off the back of the "Barnard Sex Scandal," Allison's sojourn South similarly served to agitate and confuse the delimitations and binarisms she mediated between in order to blend in with whichever community she was currently part of. This experience thus compelled her to imagine a way out of those constrained conditions by forcing her "white trash" past to converge with her "queer" present on the page as they did in her multiply constituted and

embodied subjectivities—a spontaneous intermingling that she had nevertheless spent much of her life attempting to undo by sublimating it into easier-to-stomach compartments. Although *the women who hate me* begins this decompartmentalizing and destabilizing work by communicating that “no single element of identity—be it class, race, gender, or sexual orientation—can truly be understood except in relation to the others,” it does not delve into the details of her background beyond displaying, complicating, and facilitating transformation by way of the negative values assigned to her body and alimentary-sexual behaviors (*Skin* 210). However, the two fiction publications that followed on the heels of *the women who hate me* and found their inspiration in her trip home to “visit, talk, argue, and begin to understand”—the short-story collection *Trash* (1988) and the highly acclaimed novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992)—more explicitly exhibit Allison’s newfound willingness to examine in unison her class, racial, and sexual selves and express a keen understanding of the alienation individuals experience when forced to separate those selves from one another. However, due to the volumes of criticism already written on *Bastard Out of Carolina*, as it is Allison’s critical darling, this chapter will only take up stories from *Trash* as demonstrations of this impulse because *Trash*, like *the women who hate me*, has been understudied in light of the success of Allison’s first novel and thus deserves its own space for consideration.

Therein Allison announces herself<sup>16</sup> “queer” to mean “more than lesbian” and to therefore reclaim those aspects of her identity that had defined her as marginal among her “birth”

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<sup>16</sup> As noted in a footnote located on page four of the introduction to this thesis, Allison’s writing, particularly in *Trash*, skirts and often blurs the line dividing fiction and truth, for her stories therein are pulled from her own experiences which can be confirmed by cross-checking details about her life doled out in interviews, essays, and her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. For this reason I refer to the unnamed narrators, avatars for Allison, in *Trash* as alternately “narrator” or “Allison” to signify the instability of this distinction. This is not to devalue the literary merit of the collection by suggesting the stories are fiction masquerading as

and “queer” families and to emphasize the social (as well as sexual) aspects of such an identity (*Skin* 23). And, most importantly given the focus of this thesis, I argue that Allison delivers this disruption through the vectors of what she calls in *the women who hate me* her “fat thighs, fat luts, fat everything” (21). Indeed, much like Meads’ *Alabama Souvenirs*, Allison’s *Trash* traffics in marked stereotypes of simultaneous excess and lack—fat food, fat appetites, fat bodies—that representationally define “white trash” embodiment but ultimately interrupt their singular classification by using them to explode the simplifying narratives that divide and conflate “queerness” and “white trashiness” as they come to bespeak the literal roundedness of Allison’s “fully, nasty, complicated life” that she refuses to render more palatable (*Skin* 111).

Squeamishness, “squirming in the seat,” is her goal, and as she states in *Skin*: her “badness, monstrosity” that “affront the appeasing middle-class mind” are the tools she uses to create “anarchic confusion” by “telling the no-shit truth” that refuses that which is “simple, frozen, and handed down from on high” (136). Allison, like Meads, uses disgust and disorientation triggered by unexpected confluences provocative of “desire and denial” in order to burst binarisms and facilitate, in the words of Sedgwick, “potentially deconstructive cross-understandings” (*Skin* 11; Sedgwick 10). Thus, we find in a story such as “A Lesbian Appetite,” from the collection *Trash*, that while Allison labels her “appetites” specifically “lesbian,” she subverts expectations of what constitutes “A Lesbian Appetite” by tingeing “tender, soft biscuit sex” that evokes evenings spent being nourished by her mother with the bite of violent sexual encounters that conjure the desperate hunger and frustration that defined much of her childhood (*Skin* 58). *Trash* is, after all, a recovery of those parts of Allison’s identity previously jettisoned as “trash.” Indeed, it is an attempt to “reclaim and reinvent the experience of a cross-eyed

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autobiography; rather, I mean to do justice to the complex relationships across the divides of identity, content, and form in her writing that Allison forges and fluidizes.

working-class lesbian” that never effaces violence or messiness and that presents sexuality as “encompassing much more than the gender of one’s object choice” and as only “one variable among many that produce identity,” just as sexual desire is revealed to be only one permutation of “A Lesbian Appetite” (*Trash* 3, 12).

As Jillian Sandell reports in her essay “Telling Stories of Queer White Trash” (1997), Allison’s short stories in *Trash* have “garnered mixed reception in terms of how they are generically located” (224). While most reviewers agree that the stories are concerned with the overlap between sexuality and violence, one reviewer claims it as lesbian erotica while another understands it to be primarily about sexual abuse (224). But what such generic squabbling misunderstands is the indivisibility of Allison’s identity politics that are themselves coterminous with her writerly preoccupations, and thus any attempt to pin down the thematics of her writing is to betray its refusal to be so easily classified. As she writes in *Skin*: “[O]ften I felt need to collapse my sexual history into what I was and was not willing to share of my class background, to pretend that my life as a lesbian and as a working-class escapee was constructed by the patriarchy” without speaking to the effects wrought by the “invisible and much-denied class structure of our society” (15-16). What is untenable about this approach, Allison says, is that she “can’t and won’t ascribe everything problematic about [her] life” to any one process of social “categoriz[ation] and dismiss[al]” because that would ultimately be to deny the truth of her reality (16). Thus it is misguided to peg *Trash* as any one project because it is at the same time erotic as it is a critique of the sexual and psychological violence wrought by classism as well as an imagining of the “dream of flesh” literally rendered as a “dream” culminating in the conjoining and legitimation of all her appetites. These concerns are not discreet for Allison, and

nor should they be for the readers of her work, for to make them so is to recreate the same schismatic politics she means to deconstruct.

And deconstruct she does in stories such as “River of Names” in which she imagines the “stomach churning” merger between her past and her present passions:

Jesse and I have been lovers for a year now. She tells me stories about her childhood, about her father going off each day to the university, her mother who made all her dresses, her grandmother who always smelled of dill bread and vanilla. “What did your grandmother smell like?” I lied to her the way I always do, a lie stolen from a book. “Like lavender,” stomach churning over the memory of sour, doughy sweat and snuff. I realize I do not really know what lavender smells like, and I am for a moment afraid she will ask something else, some question that will betray me. (9)

What this “lavender lie” and the “memory of sour, doughy sweat and snuff” (9) divergently conjure in the story is a “horror film reel” that plays behind the narrator’s eyes detailing the “river of names,” the “dirty water rising,” that is her family’s violent, deadly history which contrasts with the “soft-chinned innocence” and “fairy-tale, middle-class life” of her unsuspecting girlfriend (18). Allison feels the “river” flow between their bodies even as Jesse wraps her arm around her stomach and presses her belly into Allison’s back, for the narrator’s “shame, self-hatred, fear” hangs between their bodies “like a wall” that she struggles to “tear down” (18). As in the poem “what is the dream of flesh?,” here Allison underscores the ways in which sexuality and class intersect in their relationship to the body and to memory, and specifically how an integration of “flesh,” “mind,” and “memory” is necessary to “tear down” the walls of “shame, self-hatred, the fear” that prevent the dream of “flesh on flesh”—cross-

body, cross-class, cross-sexuality connections—from being realized. However, “River of Names” adds “flesh” to its correlative poem by not only detailing the particularities of Allison’s class background that divides her from Jesse, but also offering a concrete strategy for bridging that divide and realizing the “dream of flesh”: the “truth telling” that the narrator’s confession to her girlfriend Jesse in the story’s final line, “I lie,” initiates (19). This moment suggests that the narrator has begun the process of breaking down the “wall” that divides their “flesh,” “mind,” and “memory” and which promises to undam the “river of names,” causing it to flow from her mouth, thereby enveloping and buoying them rather than “drowning” Allison, leaving her “gasping” for the breath to simultaneously kiss her lover and speak her “dirty cleansing truth” (18). However, in two other stories, “Violence Against Women Begins at Home” and “Her Thighs,” Allison leaves behind the hope suggested by the final line of “River of Names” and continues to reflect on the dangerous alienation and impatience bred when the partitions separating “flesh,” “mind,” and “memory” are maintained out of fear of the “open fullness of passions, bodies, histories merged” (*Skin* 113).

In “Violence Against Women Begins at Home” Allison depicts the tension between her ownership of and taste for bodies considered “disgustingly predictable” by her lesbian-feminist friends and lovers. “Trash, that’s all you are,” they say while plucking her used *Playboy* magazines from the garbage “to verify just how sexist and salacious they are,” she mockingly thinks, thereby pointing up the hypocrisy bespoken by their “hidden fat lusts” as she does in “the women who hate me” (151). They deem her a “product of modern advertising,” calling into question her lesbianism by suggesting that her “trashy tastes” implicate her in the “patriarchal machine” (151). Indeed, while the narrator fancies herself a beholder of “behinds significantly larger than the social standard,” the leader of her collective, Paula, only dates “bodybuilders and

competition jocks” (151). Paula, who considers herself a “foremost expert on addiction,” calls Allison’s “fetish” a “compulsion of [her] class” and in the same breath accuses her, with a tone of “self-congratulatory evangelism,” of being an alcoholic (153). So sure of herself in her “state of disciplined grace” that nevertheless seems to be “hiding something,” Paula chastises the narrator when—gathered at a restaurant for a community meeting—Allison playfully flirts with the “flamboyant” waiter she admiringly calls a “queen,” but who Paula frowningly cuts down as one of “those queers” after righteously demanding to know if Allison is “drunk again,” hissing: “Christ, you really don’t know how to behave, do you?” (152). She implies, of course, that Allison is unable to control her appetites as a result of her ascribed “white trash” patterns of consumption figured as “gluttonous, compulsive, in poor taste, and couched within pathologizing narratives of addiction” (Sublette and Martin 24). Paula’s “caustic dissections” of her identity, the narrator explains, render her “unredeemed,” “not one of the saved” who are the “real lesbians” as opposed to “those queers” who fall outside the moral order of lesbian feminism that defines “a lesbian appetite” as “respectably middle class” and thus unmarked by any other identifying categories of distinction (155).

But this community of women, who shame each other into “wasting,” “getting skinny” and kicking “addictions” and “compulsions” through the tactics of “dirt,” “gossip,” “simple cruelty and self-righteousness,” also harbor dangerous “things never said” for fear of retributive shame that then erupt in acts of violence against one another (158-59). The narrator calls Paula and her co-director Jackie the “Lesbian Thought Police” for their aggressive crackdown on her enactments of what they deem “excesses” and “compulsions” befitting “trash”; however, as a former lover of Paula, Allison recognizes her contempt as “self-hatred disguised as self-righteousness” for the disorienting blend of desire and disgust that the narrator’s “trash ways”

inspire in her and that Paula vents as a constant stream of criticisms but that other women in the movement take to greater extremes (159). Indeed, the meeting in the restaurant that sets the story concerns the destruction of the house of another member, also deemed “trashy,” for drawing what Jackie calls “pornographic images” of women “fucking in the streets” (156). Such is the result of passions divided from politics and identities packaged and parceled, Allison suggests at the end of the story, as it is “all the things we refuse to show to each other” and thus suppression and abstemiousness that leads to “destruction rather than hoped-for deconstruction,” which she strives to reverse through her own “truth telling” (159).

The class-based assumptions of legitimate lesbian sexuality are made even more explicit in “Her Thighs” when Allison recalls a former lover, Bobby, who sought to tame her desire for passionate sex:

Bobby believed lust was a trashy lower-class impulse, and she so wanted to be nothing like that. Bobby loved to fuck me. Bobby loved to beat my ass, but it bothered her that we both enjoyed it so much. . . .

Bobby loved the aura of acceptability, the possibility of finally being bourgeois, civilized, respectable.

I was the uncivilized in Bobby’s life. (119-21)

Allison calls attention, in the title and the opening image of the story, to Bobby’s “anxious thighs” that in their “grinding impatience” with the desires she denied herself would rub the inseam of her jeans into a “fine white sheen” (119). Only in the dark, concealing “sanctuary of the bedroom” would Bobby agree to have sex with Allison, and then only after following a strict “diet” that rendered her in control of her appetites because it prevented her from indulging her

lust when and where it struck, and to instead wait until the “appropriate time in the appropriate location in the appropriate manner”: “Bobby wanted dinner . . . and at least two hours of television” followed by “a bath, bath powder, and tooth brushing, no exceptions” (120). Keeping such impulses hidden was Bobby’s method of self-preservation, and thus she rubbed her thighs together until the time allowed her to take Allison into her “dark sanctuary” and maintained a “carefully balanced display of appropriate liquors she never touched” while “emptying and replacing weekly on the same day” the bottles of alcohol she stored in cabinets and away from view (122). While Bobby tried to sanitize and sequester her appetites and indulgences into “unreality” so that she might achieve that “airily insubstantial” sexuality sanctioned by the movement, Allison remarks that she nevertheless reminded Bobby of “the taste of hunger, the remembered stink of her mother’s sweat, her own desire” and thus her “self-contempt and terror” which she “poured” into Allison’s soul like “poison” through her exclamations of “you’re an animal,” certainly “not a lesbian,” because “too wild, too uncivilized, too dangerous” (122-23). Thus, Bobby and Paula treated Allison as a proxy and mediator for the excesses of meaning and materiality that would otherwise invalidate their “respectably middle-class” lesbianism (*Skin* 119). Playing up and into the class and regional stereotype of uncontrolled consumption, they “force fed” Allison their “self contempt and terror” which became: “my contempt, my terror” that fueled “my willingness to always answer that question, ‘what will you be for me?, with ‘I will be sex for you’” until “I could no longer see my true self at all” (“Her Thighs” 122-23).

While “River of Names,” “Violence Against Women Begins at Home,” and “Her Thighs,” like much of the poetry in *the women who hate me*, weave together the permutations of Allison’s multiplicitous lesbian subjectivity by centering on and undermining the internalized shame displaced and deflected onto her “white trash” body and consumption by the

“homonormative” and “metronormative” members of her lesbian-feminist collective, the story “A Lesbian Appetite,” much like the poem “dumpling child,” diverts from this method. If Allison often found her lesbian identity invalidated as “queer queer” due to her “white trash” background, she ultimately uses the space of this story to build from such disintegration and denigration of her identity an amalgam of food, flesh, and fucking that in its amorphous composition is at once evocative of her class/region, race, sexuality, and gender from whichever perspective they are approached, rendering them as indivisible as they are infuriating. This is because it flouts the propriety of boundaries, thereby evading, resisting, and outraging what Patricia Yaeger dubs the “oppressive pleasantries of middle-class taste” (152). And indeed, “A Lesbian Appetite” calls to mind the “dizzy” feeling Yaeger recollects from her days as a youth watching her six-foot-tall, three-hundred pound “Virginia grandmother” knead dough for biscuits, her “puffy arms sw[inging] to and fro,” prompting Yaeger to question, “Which was arm and which batter? How to tell flesh from dough or rough skin from biscuit crust?” (150). The biscuits, Yaeger recounts, sensually and dangerously “reeked” of her grandmother’s body, and her ample table offered delights both “thrilling and scary” for the borders between body and food they blurred (152). Much as Meads sought to dissolve distinctions between the “homoerotic” and the “hillbilly” through his startling juxtapositions, Allison depicts her voracious “lesbian appetite” as being inclined as much toward women as “flour, fat, and salt”—and often all at once, as she claims to “remember women by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we’d made love for hours” and cheekily continues, “I’ve only had one lover who didn’t want to eat at all. We didn’t last long” (162).

The story opens with a paean to the “white trash” foods Allison would crave when away from home living in lesbian-feminist collectives. The first word of the story is “biscuits” which

she imagines herself “rolling out” with “flour-dusted fingers” that meld with the dough (161). She then turns to beans picked by hand and cooked “for hours” with pork fat and onions “until all the world smells of salt and heat and the sweat that used to pool on my mama’s neck” in an image that combines the “mind,” “memory,” and “flesh” as indivisibly as “what is the dream of flesh?” imagines they could be, thus setting the dreamy, visionary tone of the story (161).

Despite the idealism, however, throughout “A Lesbian Appetite” Allison is sure to acknowledge the shame she experienced when told by a girlfriend, Lee, that the “bad eating habits, poor diet” of working-class southerners is “among the worst in the world” (162). Indeed, her response is: “Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and am not worthy” (162). So, too, does she recount the time that in middle school and while living in South Carolina she was told by a teacher with a “twangy Midwestern accent” and hatred for those students wearing “badly fitting worn-out dresses sucking bacon rinds” that poor children “have a lack of brain tissue simply because they don’t get the necessary vitamins at the proper age” (167). As she recalls it, seventh-grade Allison—in the face of her teacher’s “disgust she didn’t bother to conceal”—demanded thereafter to be fed “milk” and “cream” until she learned, years later, that she had a “mild milk allergy,” the irony of which was not lost on her (167-68).

However, these confessions of “white trash” shame in the face of censure for her simultaneous lack of “taste” and excess of “appetite” are not where the story begins or ends. They constitute part of the “whole complicated truth” of her identity that Allison will not deny, but they ultimately act as catalysts for the queer, messy cream- and butter-slathered romps that punctuate the story. After learning that her efforts to erase the material evidence of her poor southern upbringing were for naught, Allison responds to her own question, “What do I have to do . . . to be able to eat pan gravy again?,” with a recollection of the time her butch girlfriend,

Jay, pinned her to the floor of their kitchen and coaxed her to eat the “thick cream,” “musky gravy” from between her legs that Allison “licks” and “sucks” with gusto until “drunk on it,” “moaning and whining, shaking like a newborn puppy trying to get to its mama’s tit” (169). In another instance when the same girlfriend who made her feel “not worthy” for eating “shit food” while encouraging her to “only drink hot water with lemon” in the mornings and chew “sunflower seeds and sesame-seed candy with molasses” for energy leaves Allison for a “macrobiotic cook,” the narrator eats Snickers bars, drinks Dr Pepper, and then meets up with a girl from Atlanta with whom she talks “Yoo-Hoo and beef ribs” and kisses until her mouth “tastes of sweet, watery chocolate” (170-73). Even Lee is not able to evade Allison’s alimentary-sexual charms, however. In a scene that precedes Lee’s demand for Allison to cook and serve “healthy food”—“vegetarian spaghetti sauce, whole-wheat pasta, and salad with cold fresh vegetables”—at the feminist conference she is hosting, Allison seduces her in the kitchen (170). After taking the eggplants Lee intended to cook “with no fat” and rubbing them between her and Lee’s legs until the slices are “slick” and “fat rich” with their own “oil,” Allison convinces Lee to let her bread and fry them (166-67). Thereafter they sit on the floor, doused in flour, their own juices, and the salt sweat from themselves and the eggplants while “push[ing] big bites” onto each other’s tongues with their hands, never managing to get their clothes back on in the process (167).

In “A Lesbian Appetite,” “eating *healthy* food”—in the southern sense of “dense” and “filling”—equates to oral sex between Allison and her lovers (174); “sucking” on “thick cream” replaces the dairy Allison consumed to ward off the “bigheaded, watery-eyed look” associated with “the Vitamin-D deficient poor” (167); and her dream of a barbeque dinner party hosted by her past and present lovers and attended by her mother, sisters, and aunts substitutes for the

altogether “lean” reality of the lesbian-feminist conference that earlier in the story leaves Allison “crabby” and “uninspired” whereas the barbeque finds her “for the first time . . . not hungry” (171, 178). In Allison’s dream vision she circulates from the porch and kitchen, back and forth, “hugged and kissed and stroked by everyone” as she passes continuously through, never stopping to stay in one realm or the other with only her lovers or her family. This fantasy is the “dream of flesh” made manifest, then, as Allison’s “queer” and “birth” families intertwine, “feeding each other” and “telling stories about the great meals they’ve eaten” constituted by food and flesh alike (178). And while “not hungry,” no one stops Allison from eating by suggesting that her appetites are too much—rather, “everybody insists [she has] a little taste” of their offerings (178). Thus, in contrast to the “politics of *they*” that forced Allison for the first decades of her life to choose from her multiple subjectivities which identity she could express at any given time, the dream in which “A Lesbian Appetite” culminates is a integrationist “politics of *us*” that refuses assimilation by encouraging the maintenance of differences and specificities, making room for the contradictions as well as the confluences that will inevitably erupt from their comingling in a productive confusion.

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

Henderson State University  
Bachelor of Arts, English  
Graduated May 2012  
Summa Cum Laude

### EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, University of Mississippi  
2012-2014

Instructor of Composition, University of Mississippi  
2014-2015