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Finding the erotic, embracing ambiguity, and escaping extremes: unearthing the queer experience in Dorothy Allison's Cavedweller

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Finding the erotic, embracing ambiguity, and escaping extremes: Unearthing the queer experience in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*

by

Leah E. Wilson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Michèle Schaal, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2015

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DEDICATION

For my mother, Kristen Borre.
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ABSTRACT

Dorothy Allison’s second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998) continues her critique of Southern gender, sexuality, and class categories that her initial novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, began. However, despite the wealth of critical literature on Allison’s first novel and *Cavedweller*’s warm reception and recognition as a powerful LGBT work, scholarship on Allison’s second novel remains limited. My thesis addresses the mysterious lacuna of critical literature by unearthing Allison’s construction of gender and sexuality within the novel and presenting one of the novel’s main characters, Cissy Pritchard, as a gender ambiguous and queer “white trash” character who challenges extreme gender roles in the rural South.

I examine the American South as a patriarchal space that encourages hyperbolic gender roles that incite toxic masculinity in men and induce fatalism in women. These extreme gender portrayals are particularly damaging to “white trash” women. I argue that Allison uses Cissy, as a gender ambiguous character who adopts a queer perspective while caving, to temper hyperbolic gender roles that lead to violence and (self) destruction. Through gender ambiguity, I contend, Allison presents a means to end patriarchal physical and symbolic violence.

This thesis also explores how patriarchal society removes women from their internal knowledge or erotic power through compulsory heterosexuality that reduces them to mundane existences. While Allison demonstrates that all women are empowered through female solidarity and the discovery of their erotic guides, I emphasize the significance of Cissy’s discovery of her erotic self-knowledge. As a queer
character, I argue, Cissy presents a possibility that exists outside of the oppressive double bind and can confront the physical and social violence that removes women from their eroticisms, sexualities, and identities.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*, a collective story of a female family, centers its narrative on Delia Byrd and her third daughter, Cissy Pritchard. The beginning of the work opens with the accidental death of Cissy’s father, rock star Randall Pritchard, who crashed his motorcycle while intoxicated (*Cavedweller* 1). Prompted by the death of her ex-lover, Delia packs the ten year-old Cissy in their Datsun and they head to Delia’s hometown of Cayro, Georgia. A decade previously, Delia escaped the town and her abusive husband, Clint Windsor, but in doing so, she abandoned her young daughters, Amanda and Dede (14-17). Allison illustrates that returning to Cayro is not easy, as the town’s inhabitants loathe Delia for leaving her husband and her daughters and for becoming a famous singer; likewise, they also hate Cissy for being both Delia’s illegitimate daughter and a Cayro outsider (39, 137-38). Once in the small Southern town, Delia attempts to regain custody of her daughters and rebuild her Cayro life. While Allison writes the story of Delia’s redemption from the perspective of Delia and all of her daughters, I contend in this study that Cissy’s narrative emerges as the coming-of-age tale of a queer1 “white trash2” girl.

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1 In deference to Allison’s own description of her queer identity that means “not only a lesbian but a transgressive lesbian,” who lies far outside the heteronormative binary, I use “queer” rather than “lesbian” to describe both Allison and Cissy’s sexualities and identities (*Skin* 23). Furthermore, I use “queer” to emphasize the term’s reclamation as discussed by Suzanna Danuta Walters.

2 Allison uses the term “white trash” to describe herself and her literature as a way to subvert the harmful stereotype that marginalizes poor whites (*Skin* 29, 35). I use this term to respect her description as an empowering reclamation.
Allison creates a female world haunted by patriarchal violence in her 1998 novel, *Cavedweller*, and presents solidarity as a way to overcome the patriarchal oppression that binds women to mundane lives. Critics have largely ignored Allison’s second novel; yet it carries the same presence of rural Southern class, gender, and sexuality that make her first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a provocative work that scholars eagerly discuss. The popular reception and praise for *Bastard* and the conversation surrounding Allison’s position as a radical, pro-sex feminist who unearths oppressive patriarchal categories reflects the emergence of third-wave feminism in the 1990s and the importance of intersectionality in recent feminist theory. Although *Cavedweller* continues the themes that piqued scholarly interest in *Bastard*, critical literature on the novel remains limited, suggesting that where the novel differs from *Bastard* may also explain why critics blindside Allison’s second work. While Allison’s 1992 novel focuses on the story of Bone, a physically, emotionally, and sexually abused girl and presents the tale from her

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3 For clarity and brevity, citations for Allison’s texts are shortened and will be referred to as follows:

*Bastard out of Carolina: Bastard*

*Skin: Sex, Class, & Literature: Skin*

*Two or Three Things I Know for Sure: Two*

*Cavedweller* will remain in its unabbreviated form

4 The 1982 “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” Scholar and Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College unleashed a debate between anti-censorship feminists and anti-pornography feminists, or pro-sex and anti-sex feminists, respectively (“Pro-sex Feminism” 259). The term pro-sex refers “to a segment of the women’s movement that defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist ideals” (260). Allison, who participated at the Barnard College conference, identifies as a pro-sex feminist and uses “sex radical” as a synonym (*Skin* 102-08).
singular perspective, *Cavedweller* uses multiple viewpoint narration to depict the story of a complex female family and a confined rural community.

Although Allison’s debut novel propelled her to mainstream fame and her broad success with *Bastard* allowed a group of people outside of her lesbian and feminist readership to appreciate her work and examine how she uses her writing to challenge the categories of class, gender, sexuality, and race and “excavate [them] from the inside,” *Bastard* failed to win the Lambda Literary Award\(^5\)—an award *Cavedweller* earned the year of its publication (*Skin* 35; “Lambda Literary Awards”). Yet, despite *Cavedweller*’s recognition as an artful and masterful LGBT work, scholars who have studied the novel—namely Karen Gaffney and Sherryl Vint\(^6\)—steer most discussion away from sexuality and focus on Allison’s continuing critique of binding class and gender categories through her depiction of “white trash” characters and their bodily experiences. Additionally, while both critics provide a thorough analysis of Allison’s depiction of working-class life and its impact on white women, they avoid discussion of masculinity and the way constructed categories produce distinct masculine violence. Building upon Gaffney and Vint’s dialogue of Allison’s exposure of confining definitions, I posit

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\(^5\) The Lambda Literary Awards “identify and celebrate the best lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender books of the year and affirm that LGBT stories are part of the literature of the world” (www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/). *Bastard* failed to win this award.

\(^6\) Others have discussed *Cavedweller* only briefly. Joy D. Kennedy-O’Neill mentions the novel in her dissertation, “The Sacred and the Sublime: Caves in American Literature.” Carmen Burton-Hardee proves, in a two-page article, that Cissy becomes a classic hero through caving. However, I only mention Gaffney and Vint here to emphasize that, ultimately, only two scholars have extensively examined and published scholarship about Allison’s second novel.
"Cavedweller’s" setting as a patriarchal space that oppresses women. However, I extend their analyses to a specific discussion of the toxic masculinity that these categories create as well as how this problematic manliness induces a responsive, exaggerated and (self) destructive femininity that I call “female fatalism.” As Allison describes of the patriarchal, confining space of the rural South: “Women lose their lives not knowing they can do something different. Men eat themselves up believing they have to be the thing they have been made. Children go crazy” (Two 51). I argue that Allison presents Cissy Pritchard, an ambiguous “white trash” girl who develops a queer perspective in the caves of the rural Southern town of Cayro, Georgia, as a way to escape damaging hyperbolic gender roles by discovering—and utilizing—her erotic power.  

My analyses of Allison’s second novel and of Cissy’s identity builds on the tradition of “white trash” scholarship that surrounds discussions of Bastard but also contributes to a larger conversation of “white trash” studies that emerged in the 1990s. In their widely acclaimed work, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz explain that “white trash becomes a term which names what seems unnamable: a race (white) which is used to code ‘wealth’ is coupled with an insult (trash) which means, in this instance, economic waste” (8). As an identity, “white trash” demonstrates the intersection of race and class and shows that identities are always multidimensional. I use this term to demonstrate that the construction of race and class and their intersection are especially harmful to women. In *Cavedweller*, they are

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7 For my analysis of *Cavedweller*, I will be using Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic and erotic power. That is, the “assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55).
marginalized by gender, social class and a “whiteness” that is not, because of class, posited as a marker of privilege by Allison. Instead, all three intersections incarnate oppressive categories that seem inescapable. Thus, patriarchal violence perpetuates socially as well, and contributes to the fatalism toxic masculinity induces in women in Allison’s *Cavedweller*. Using a queer “white trash” girl as her main character, Allison shows that society must challenge all patriarchal categories and binaries that do not permit variability to create a more hospitable world.

The first chapter of my thesis, “Unearthing Ambiguity: Queering Identity to End Hypermasculinine Violence and Hyperfeminine Fatalism” discusses Allison’s American South as a space that limits women’s experiences through its hyperbolic class and gender categories. I discuss the South as a region that encourages extreme binaries that have their roots in antebellum patriarchy. As feminist scholar Pippa Holloway notes in her chapter “Searching for Southern Lesbian History,” the South’s gender binary is “marked by the ideal of white southern ladyhood and chivalric white masculinity. The South’s racial caste system, its primarily rural population, and its conservative and deeply held religious traditions have all been seen as combining to produce and uphold a different sex and gender system in the region” (264). This chapter focuses on Cissy and her development of an ambiguous gender identity and queer perspective amongst a community of extremes. In my discussion of the hypermasculininity and hyperfemininity Cayro instills in its inhabitants, I analyze how the rigid gender binary creates physical

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8 I use “hyperfeminine” throughout my thesis not only to describe performance, physical appearance, or the use of clothing, but also as applied to a specific and confining gender role socialization generated by the Southern patriarchal culture depicted in *Cavedweller*. 
and symbolic violence and how Allison uses Cissy to criticize restrictive dualisms and to
confront toxic masculinity and the fatalism it inspires in “white trash” women. I also
discuss how Allison critiques the violence of the patriarchal space, as seen in the
character Clint Windsor, and shows how patriarchal society transfers violence to women
which they internalize, resulting in self-destructive behaviors and despondent outlooks.
To escape the rigid binary, I argue that Allison places Cissy in the caves of Cayro, where
she can meld both her femininity and masculinity to form an ambiguous gender identity
and a queer perspective. Recognizing a queer identity at the novel’s close, Cissy can
emerge from the caves and confront patriarchal society and its hyperbolic gender roles.

In the second chapter, “Fleeing the Double Bind: Subverting the ‘White Trash’
Label through Female Solidarity and Erotic Power,” I consider how Allison’s female
characters must utilize the erotic and their sexuality as a way to empower themselves and
develop agency in a violent, patriarchal environment that places them in a double bind.9 I
also emphasize that women must bond with one another to realize their erotic power and
use it to challenge oppressive patriarchal categories and binaries. With the minor but
important characters, M.T. and Rosemary, Allison shows that strong, independent women
control—and enjoy—their sexuality. However, as the world Delia and her daughters
know encourages patriarchal violence that restricts female sexuality and identity, Allison
demonstrates that powerful female sexuality must emerge in a space free from male
dominance and in places where women can appreciate their eroticism. For her

9 Marilyn Frye describes that a talisman of oppression is the existence of the “double bind” in which the
oppressed is limited to two options that are both undesirable and subject them to either disapproval or
destitution (2). Women, regardless if they are (hetero)sexually active or inactive, are criticized by
patriarchal society (3). I utilize this definition throughout my second chapter.
heterosexual characters, Allison demonstrates that the erotic can be more easily accessible through conventional sources such as music, driving, and religion. However, for Cissy, with her burgeoning queer identity, the erotic is more difficult to discover. I investigate how Allison incorporates science fiction and the cavescape as modes for Cissy to approach the erotic and encounter sexuality. Particularly, Allison uses Cissy’s caving excursions to employ the aspects of science fiction that inspire erotic experiences and allow for her queer sexual development. Cissy, as a queer girl, symbolizes a third non-binary possibility, and therefore a way to escape the double bind women face in patriarchal society. Ultimately, I show that when all of Allison’s female characters embrace their sexuality and incorporate their desires into their lives, they can cultivate their own agency independently from the masculine-marked world and use their empowered solidarity to challenge patriarchal structures and form a new vision for their world that does not depend on imposed dualisms.

In both chapters, I argue that Cissy must develop consciousness of a confining society that imposes its harmful definitions that remove women from their individuality and agency. I also demonstrate Allison’s vision for a remade world that comes “closer to matching its own ideals” in which all people can thrive (Skin 210). As Cissy must become conscious of constructed patriarchal categories and the way in which they harm both women and men, so must Allison and her readers. Kathleen L. Komar discusses the important tradition of caves in women’s literature as the writing becomes a textual cave where they can “experience a rebirth into a world which has not yet been marked as male. . .the literary text thus provides a crucial space in which female authors emerge as individuals and as women” (498). Allison, like Cissy in the cave, cannot exist in the
female place of the text solely, she must use her writing as a way to create an identity that she can use in her own life. Using the cavescape as a setting for Cissy to explore her multifaceted identity, Allison challenges the binary world of the American South by creating a place where women, as well as women writers and Allison’s readers, can craft their individual experiences regardless of their gender, class, or sexuality, and emerge into a world remade.
CHAPTER 2

UNEARTHING AMBIGUITY: QUEERING IDENTITY TO END
HYPERMASCULINE VIOLENCE AND HYPERFEMININE FATALISM

Further exploring the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality that she had already posited in her first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller* unearths the reality of the “white trash” South that encourages violence in men and fatalism in women. Social and physical violence actually pervade throughout Allison’s work. As a survivor of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse herself, Allison uses her writing as a way to work through the violence of her upbringing. In a 1993 interview with *Kenyon Review* journalist Carolyn Megan, she discusses writing *Bastard* with the purpose of becoming aware of the violence she and her working-class family internalized and passed down from generation to generation. To end the cycle of violence, she explains how and why abuse occurred within her family and her need to develop awareness of the structures that enabled its perpetuation: “That everyday brutality that was visited on the men and women in my family came out in the children. . . . It is something you have to unlearn, but you do have to know you’re doing it; you have to become conscious. Writing, for me, is a way of making me conscious” (Megan 7-8). Allison, through writing, could make sense of her childhood and came to understand that the intersection of gender and class oppression was encouraged by a toxic, violent atmosphere where both men and women had internalized male brutality and female fatalism as “normal” identity patterns (*Two* 35-6). Her family, Allison’s quote suggests, never realized the role constricting, oppressive structures played in their suffering, and consequently, they generated and perpetuated violence themselves. Allison writes about
the rural South and working-class lives to make not only herself, but also her readers conscious of rigid categories that produce violence. In *Cavedweller*, she portrays a community that upholds binaries to emphasize that subversion depends on creating an in-between space that allows for gender ambiguity.

Scholars such as Kathlene McDonald, Ann Cvetkovich, Moira P. Baker, and Laurie Vickroy have analyzed the significance of intersectionality in *Bastard* and note how—because of the interconnectedness of gender and class—women’s lives and identities are particularly impacted by patriarchal violence. Although *Bastard* has been the object of several studies, *Cavedweller* has, thus far, only drawn little academic interest. For example, Joy D. Kennedy-O’Neill mentions the novel in her dissertation, *The Sacred and the Sublime: Caves in American Literature*. Carmen Burton-Hardee proves, in a two-page article, that Cissy becomes a classic hero through caving, and I find this explanation useful when discussing Cissy’s masculinity. However, only Karen Gaffney and Sherryl Vint have extensively examined and published scholarship about Allison’s second novel. This lack of critical literature is surprising as *Cavedweller* pursues Allison’s subtle depiction, initiated in *Bastard*, of how physical and social violence encourage paroxysmal gendered dualisms. However, in her second novel, the author also shows the spectrum of gender identity that rests between the hypermasculine and hyperfeminine binary and presents gender ambiguity as patriarchal subordination.

Unlike *Bastard*, a story narrated by the abused, self-loathing Bone, *Cavedweller* depends upon multiple female characters’ perspectives to show how extreme gender roles confine not just one girl, but a whole community. Piecing together her female characters’ stories, Allison shifts between women who, although of different ages and backgrounds,
experience a variety of gendered violence. Allison gradually shortens the multiple perspectives to make room for Cissy’s story. Hers emerges apart from the others to emphasize a character forming in-between two extremes. I argue that this ambiguity presents itself as queerness within Cissy. As an outsider to Cayro—she was born in California and relocated to Georgia—Allison already positions Cissy as a misfit within the novel. However, Cissy is also unusual because she bonds with men and takes on their masculinity to distance herself from women. Unable to fit into the bifurcated world of Cayro, she finds herself isolated from the rigid categories that do not permit variability. While Cissy does not understand her actual sexual orientation until her caving excursions, Allison shows that her character’s queerness extends beyond sexuality and that she develops a queer perspective throughout the novel. That Cissy develops a queer standpoint that does not just pertain to sexuality but the way she perceives a community of extremes, the author demonstrates that living outside of the gender binary does not have to limit itself to queer characters, as when Dede and Nolan decide on parenting roles that do not adhere to traditional patriarchal gender roles or when Delia and Rosemary resolve to begin writing songs together, without men, and are finally free to receive credit for their music at the novel’s close (Cavedweller 432).

10 Dede, Delia’s second daughter with Clint Windsor, dates Nolan, Cissy’s childhood friend and fellow Cayro misfit, towards the novel’s end (Cavedweller 303).

11 Delia and Rosemary, Delia’s friend and bandmate from Los Angeles, were both songwriters for Randall’s band, Mud Dog, but Randall and the record company would not list Delia or Rosemary’s names as the writers or pay them for their contributions (171-72). On their own at the end of the novel, Allison shows the two women deciding to write songs together, and I suggest that, on their own, they will finally receive credit for writing their songs.
Similarly to scholars who have examined *Bastard*, Gaffney and Vint continue the discussion of Allison’s critique of patriarchal categories through writing. Gaffney uses Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality to argue that Allison reveals the construction of class and gender through Cissy’s exploration of the caves (49), while Vint focuses on the bodily experiences of Allison’s female characters as battlegrounds for the social order (130). Although both critics provide a thorough analysis of Allison’s depiction of working-class life and its impact on white women, they limit their discussions of masculinity to its impact on individual characters’ relationships; they do not explore how constructed categories produce distinct masculine violence within a community. Their dialogue about Allison’s exposure of confining definitions proves essential for my argument that *Cavedweller*’s setting is a patriarchal space that oppresses women. Yet I extend their analyses to a specific discussion of the self-destructive masculinity also produced by an extreme binary system that creates hegemony. In the foundational study *Masculinities: Knowledge, Power and Social Change*, R.W. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity “can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). I argue that, in *Cavedweller*, Allison depicts how hegemonic masculinity oppresses women and that she also proves that this hegemony harms men as well. Thus, Allison’s second novel anticipates current discussions of “toxic masculinity” or how uncritically embracing or attempting to fulfill hegemonic

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12 I would like to thank Dr. Michèle A. Schaal for providing the definition of toxic masculinity.
masculine ideals generates not only violence against women but also self-destructive behaviors in men.

I use Gaffney and Vint’s analyses as well to continue the discussion of the oppressive realm of Cayro and the patriarchal structures that dominate the town and especially subjugate working-class women. However, I investigate these structures beyond these scholars’ focus on “white trash” stereotypes. Instead, I examine these clichés’ damaging effects on women and interpret them as sources of hypermasculine and hyperfeminine behaviors that perpetuate across generations. Those, in turn, encourage toxic masculinity in men yet also generate a symbolic\textsuperscript{13} and physical gendered violence that produces resignation in women that I describe as a distinctly female fatalism: women who are abused through patriarchal society by the intersection of class and gender oppression develop a defeatist and pessimistic outlook about their lives and opportunities that keep them from realizing their potential, demonstrated by Allison’s description of her female family as “predestined” to be poor, ugly, stupid, and abused (\textit{Two} 33-37).

Through this violence and resulting fatalism, patriarchal structures uphold an inhospitable binary system within the Cayro community. Launching from Allison’s critique of this gendered dichotomy, I also move away from Gaffney’s focus on patriarchal structures’

\textsuperscript{13} Pierre Bourdieu explains that “symbolic violence is instituted through the adherence that the dominated cannot fail to grant to the dominant. . .when, to shape her thought of him, and herself, or rather, her thought of her relation with him, she has only cognitive instruments that she shares with him and which, being no more than the embodied form of the relation of domination, cause that relation to appear as natural” (35). In \textit{Cavedweller}, Allison demonstrates symbolic violence’s impact on her female characters in how Delia and her daughters struggle to form individual identities outside of the “white trash woman” stereotype Cayro designates. Furthermore, they believe that they cannot escape this categorization as it seems inherent.
oppression and Vint’s focus on the girl character’s body. I prolong the conversation to establish Allison’s vision of an ambiguous gender identity formation and development of a queer perspective that allows for the subversion of patriarchal power structures and their oppressive institutions.

Section 1: The Harmful Consequences of (Southern) Toxic Masculinity

_Cavedweller_ opens with the dichotomy of male destruction and female vulnerability that haunts the whole of Allison’s novel. On the first page, Delia’s ex-lover and Cissy’s father, rock star Randall Pritchard, kills himself while riding a motorcycle drugged and drunk, nearly killing the girl with him (1). From the outset, Allison’s novel emphasizes male violence and female endangerment. The image of the fragile girl exaggerates female vulnerability and captures Allison’s readers as she launches them into a world marked by male-imposed destruction. However, Allison’s novel also begins on the first day of spring, March 21st, and so Randall’s death corresponds with an awakening (1). Delia leaves Los Angeles, where she had fled after leaving Cayro, her abusive husband, Clint Windsor, and her two daughters, Amanda and Dede. Karen Gaffney notes that Delia’s departure at the beginning of the novel foreshadows resistance to “white trash” stereotypes; yet, Delia and her daughter must travel to Cayro to encounter this very class-related stigmatization and enter Allison’s world of gendered oppression (45). In Cayro, Delia introduces her third daughter, Cissy, to the confining world of the American South (45).

Placing Delia and Cissy in the South, Allison draws on the cultural significance of Southern location that has its roots in antebellum patriarchy. Allison attributes the
severity in Southern class stratification to pre-Civil War notions of land ownership: “Let me tell you about what I have never been allowed to be. Beautiful and female. Sexed and sexual. I was born trash in a land where the people all believe themselves natural aristocrats. Ask any white Southerner. They’ll take you back two generations, say, ‘Yeah, we had a plantation.’ The hell we did” (Two 32). Explaining that her family’s reputation as “trash” made her, as a “white trash” girl in the American South, predestined for ugliness and worthlessness, Allison connects her gender and class stigmatization to regional history: the antebellum class system—even when mythologized—enacts an oppressive reality. Furthermore, explaining that people participate in the class system that lives on as a myth, Allison underlines the significance of the social construction of class and how it intersects with the creation of gender to shape what it means to be female in the South. She also shows the significance of the construction of class and gender as a part of a glorified (white) antebellum Southern identity: to perpetuate the gilded image of the Old South and white supremacy, white Southerners perpetuate pre-Civil War class and gender structures. In his book, White Masculinity in the Recent South, scholar Trent Watts also sees the connection between class, gender, and importantly, race, in maintaining the semblance of antebellum white male authority and that makes chauvinism implicit within Southern culture:

These days... notions of mastery in the South are more likely to manifest themselves in terms of gender rather than of race. Indeed, one can detect among many black and white southern men and some southern women a sense, expressed or tacit, that male authority is natural and benevolent, and sanctioned by history of
some higher authority. White male political, economic, and social power thus seems so natural and right. (8)

Watts’s use of “mastery” provokes the image of the plantation South and highlights that the past white land-owning men controlled African Americans and women to maintain their authority. Additionally, Watts’s explanation emphasizes the role intersectionality plays in upholding white supremacy: African American men have a “natural” authority that places them above African American women in a hegemonic, racist, and sexist system that allows white men to continue their seemingly divinely-conferred sovereignty. While white men can no longer rely on the slavery system to assert power over African American men, all (Southern) men can still create the illusion of mastery through dominating women and thus feed the illusion of antebellum patriarchy. As a consequence, Southern culture maintains sexism and a belief in the gender binary to hold on to the glory of the pre-Civil War South.¹⁴

Situating her characters in the repressive South, Allison exhibits the rigid patriarchal structures that produce paroxysmal gendered definitions where people describe others in absolute and mutually exclusive terms. As Southerners use racism, sexism, and classism to retain the fantasy of white superiority in the South, they vilify

¹⁴ Other scholars have also noted the South’s legacy of slavery and the antebellum culture as shaping prevailing gender roles. For example, Pippa Holloway notes in her chapter “Searching for Southern Lesbian History” that the “postbellum South had a unique sex and gender system, marked by the ideal of white southern ladyhood and chivalric white masculinity. The South’s racial caste system, its primarily rural population, and its conservative and deeply held religious traditions have all been seen as combining to produce and uphold a different sex and gender system in the region” (264).
anyone who presents a challenge to antebellum Southern values through the term “Yankee.” Allison describes the hostility towards foreigners and its connection to imposing outside ideas in her collection of autobiographical short stories, Trash. She dispels any myth that Yankees are solely above the Mason-Dixon line and explains that the definition extends past trivial identifiers: “not just northerners, but westerners, Canadians, black people who talked oddly enough to show they were foreign. . . All of them were Yankees, strangers, unpredictable people with an enraging attitude of superiority” (Trash 62). Allison’s grouping of diverse outsiders into one category, “Yankee,” demonstrates the bifurcated world of her Southern community and shows that the real transgression of a “Yankee” is their supposed attitude—Southerners assume that foreignness automatically entails that outsiders bring ideas that challenge the social structure of a Southern community. In Cavedweller, Allison makes this most apparent when Rosemary, Delia’s friend from California, visits Cayro. The white Cayro men immediately call her “‘Yankee nigger bitch’” and state that they should “‘run her ass back to New York City’” (157). When a man mentions that Rosemary comes from Los Angeles, not New York, the men reply with laughter because she is “‘Still a Yankee bitch’” (157). In Cayro, the townspeople disregard Rosemary’s actual identity or how she may identify herself: they will reduce her to not only her color but also her supposed northern geographical origin. In reality, Rosemary is African American and a foreigner, and therefore open to more speculation, but the men limit her identity to retain their Southern, white, and masculine domination.

In fact, Allison shows that Cayro imposes a reductive identity to all its female dwellers as a way to uphold the gender and class systems of Southern patriarchy.
Throughout the novel, Delia and her daughters awaken to the reality of their defined lives and begin to seek their own agency. However, they struggle to express a subjectivity that does not perpetuate the cycle of violence Southern patriarchy generates. Delia, her daughters, Amanda and Dede, inherit gendered defeatism from the Cayro community and their families that impose patriarchal values. Through Cissy, Delia’s illegitimate daughter and outsider to Cayro, Allison reveals the full impact of the rigid patriarchal structures and the way toxic masculinity transfers violence and fatalism to women. In *Cavedweller*, Allison draws on the South of her past: the fictional Georgia town enforces patriarchal categories that oppress “white trash” families like the author’s—a categorization that also generates physical violence. Thus, when Cissy first arrives in Cayro, her male classmates harass her, stating that they know all about her low-class mother and sisters (*Cavedweller* 137-38). Allison describes her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina as having a “medieval class structure” (Dietzel 48). This feudal social system that harkens to the plantation-owning days of the antebellum South stigmatized her working-class family and bred the brutality men eventually perpetuated (Dietzel 48; *Two* 35-6). In Allison’s fiction, Southern working-class characters are often categorized according to an identity structure that consists of stereotypical absolutes: people are either winners or losers, and as such, classify each other in a hierarchal system that largely depends on class (Whisnant 183). In *Cavedweller*, this particularly transpires in how Dede—Delia and Clint’s daughter—attempts to explain the town’s mentality to Cissy (her half-sister and Cayro outsider) when she describes her abusive, drunken father: “Worst thing was, everyone knew he was our daddy and they’d look at us like we were gonna turn out as useless as he was” (204). Dede’s perception of the town’s definition emphasizes that their
position as violent, worthless “white trash” is inherited, and thus inescapable, as in a feudal system. The absoluteness of definition creates a reactionary environment and produces resignation in Dede, her sisters, and Delia.

This reactionary environment and resulting definitions illustrate the process of Othering that marginalizes “white trash” women. David Reynolds, a Southern culture scholar who focuses on the “white trash” literary tradition, shares how class plays out in defining whites in Southern society. Indiscernible to the upper-class whites from the working poor, upper- and lower-class whites would “feel the need to define themselves by what they are not” and demonize the working poor as “white trash,” creating what Reynolds calls the “low other” (357). The patriarchal structure that creates a system where people describe each other in absolute terms—where individuals are either a Southerner or a Yankee—and by what they are not creates an antagonistic social system that produces extremes that lock people into binaries. The revolutionary feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in the Second Sex, also describes how oppression relies on making women—and other groups of people such as Jews and people of color—into “absolute Other[s],” (80). Both Beauvoir and Reynolds thus demonstrate how social classes and gender stem from a repressive process of Othering.

The intersection of gender and class as a marginalizing force encourages “white trash” men—who maintain dominance in patriarchal society because of their gender—to exhibit a hypermasculinity. Allison shows that her working-class male characters express a hegemonic masculinity that becomes harmful because it represents a way to assert power from their powerless social position. The constructed toxic masculinity distances men from femininity and ensures their dominant position within a system that otherwise
places them, the “white trash” men, as absolute low Others. In his collection of essays focusing on violence within American literature, literary scholar James R. Giles discusses the problematic Boatwright men in *Bastard* and explains that Allison’s male characters become violent as a reaction to submission that is “arbitrarily associated with the female and thus with weakness. Abuse of the female becomes, then, a mode of indirect rebellion against a vague, almost mythological authority that limits an imagined masculine freedom” (79). Giles explains that Allison’s toxic male figures perpetuate violence against women because of their own sense of feminization in a system that forces them to submit to the social order. Giles’s explanation builds off the theories of masculinity gender studies scholars such as R.W. Connell and philosophers like Pierre Bourdieu espouse. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell argues, constructs an oppressive hierarchy that insists that to be the most masculine means being the least gay and also the least feminine, therefore, association with femininity creates intense homophobia in patriarchal culture\(^\text{15}\) (78). Likewise, Bourdieu avers that as women are “sources of weakness,” masculinity “has its dark negative side in the fears and anxiety aroused by femininity” (51). Dramatically distancing themselves from femininity, men have, therefore, authority over someone in a hegemonic, patriarchal community. However, their toxic masculinity creates violence and recklessness and perpetuates violence and fatalism as the men become trapped in destructive cycles that may let them escape from their “white trash” definition only temporarily. Ultimately, and ironically, this behavior confines them to the very social stereotype they wish to escape, as I will discuss throughout this section. In

\(^{15}\) Scholars also discuss men’s need to form masculinity that distances them from the feminine in Kimmel’s “Masculinity” (1) and Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (7).
Cavedweller, Clint Windsor, Delia’s abusive estranged husband, is the epitom of toxic masculinity and violence—stems from separating himself from femininity as he explains that he beat Delia because she would not submit to him (180-81).

Toxic masculinity, as a defining force, also imposes a reactionary, extreme femininity that demands women become helpless, trapped, and completely subordinate to men and patriarchal values. Toxic male violence imposes fear in women and fear forces women to become despondent and fatalistic. As French feminist writer Virginie Despentes posits in her discussion of the connection between rape and masculinity, “a woman must remain open and fearful. Otherwise, how would masculinity define itself?” (45). Despentes’s question brings the mode of masculinity’s operation in a patriarchal system to the forefront. Power—which enables men to obtain the money, dominance, and control valued in Western society—relies on women’s subordination and creates a sort of inescapable feudal system where women are serfs (Wittig 34). If women were not fearful, masculinity would lose its societal supremacy, and therefore, its value as a dominant and defining force. Allison displays the privileges associated with masculinity throughout her novel and its presence plagues her female characters as well as her readers. However, unlike Bastard, where masculine violence against women is a virile force active until the end of the novel, Allison shows Clint’s violence in Cavedweller through recollections from Delia, Clint, and their daughters: it haunts the novel instead of driving it. To stress how toxic masculine behaviors endure through generations, Allison emphasizes Cayro as a place of extremes where hypermasculinity generates hyperfemininity—a gender expression that prevails over time. Allison submerges Delia and Cissy into the restrictive
structures of the fictional small town straightaway and purposefully in her novel. As soon as they arrive, Cissy sees a woman with “tightly curled hair” in a white uniform and assumes that she is a maid until she walks into the diner, immediately shifting her assumption to waitress (Cavedweller 36). While the woman’s uniform determines a specific reading of her potential profession, Allison pointedly illustrates that Cissy, indeed, sees only two options for the woman. Her assumption forecasts the limited options she, her sisters, her mother, and all lower-class women in Cayro have. While this supposition does not immediately imply that the waitress and Cayro women possess an exaggerated femininity, it does illustrate the narrowness of what it means to be female in the Georgia town as women can only express their identity through a constricted range of femininity. They are either maids or waitresses, cleaning up male destruction or serving the male realm; they seem to have no real agency or ability to act out their own desires. They are defined by a patriarchal system where men decide what kind of women they may be—or not.

The cook’s revelation of Delia’s identity when they are dining furthers Allison’s emphasis on the categorizing, confining world of Cayro that produces extreme gender roles. As they are eating, the cook recognizes Delia, stating: “I know you… You that bitch ran off and left her babies. . . You took off with that rock band. Did all right for yourself, did you? . . . Well don’t think people don’t remember. We remember. You the kind we remember” (39). Immediately, the female cook reminds Delia of the patriarchal town’s typifying structures and definition. Delia is “the kind” they do not forget, and the inescapable gendered categorization is Cissy’s first impression of the town. Furthermore, that Cayro remembers Delia’s transgressions despite the decade since her departure
shows the unrelenting nature of their patriarchal values. Feminist scholar Kathlene McDonald, writing about *Bastard*, observes that Allison portrays femininity as determined by masculinity—an analysis that may be extended to *Cavedweller* since Allison shows how the patriarchal structure categorizes Delia and her family as “white trash” women (19-20). Cayro men and the male-dominated legal and religious authorities they uphold, Cissy quickly learns, have the power to define anyone. Their characterizations prove to stem from absolutes; a process of Othering that creates a binary system that, in turn, generates extremes.

Allison depicts the Cayro community of *Cavedweller* in a series of rigid dichotomies and emphasizes the hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity that predominate the town and that reproduce violence. This brutality varies in its form and severity: the damage done is not always physical. Feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis, in *Technologies of Gender*, proposes an interpretation of violent representations in Western society that I would like to consider within the context of Allison’s work. For de Lauretis, violence is articulated in terms of subject/object: the offender is always gendered as masculine and the victim is always feminized in both language and in culture (42). I argue that Allison depicts Cayro in strict male/female terms to emphasize the gender binary that produces a culture where men, as authoritative figures, enact violence by appropriating women as their objects and, when women resist definition, men use physical violence to relegate them back to their expected subordinate position. However, the ways society controls physical violence—between men and women, as well as amongst men who are violent to one another when they vie to be the most dominant and least feminized—become institutions that create social violence against women (de
Lauretis 43). These institutions, like religion and law, are strongly upheld in Cayro, which indicates that the town is both socially and physically violent for women. In a series of studies that form the book *Culture of Honor*, sociologists Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen show that the South, as a whole, tolerates violence more than other American regions, especially as a means to keep and restore social order (25, 32). The institutions that maintain social order control the violence that emerges in the region, but they also encourage violence as they support male domination of women and, in many places, do not consider domestic violence a criminal offense (66). Socially acceptable violence that people view as a way to maintain order, or domination, emboldens toxic masculinity, and this becomes especially dangerous in a place like Allison’s Cayro where Delia remarks she can “get a gun as easily as a bottle of Cuervo Gold” (*Cavedweller* 42). Unrestrained access to guns and alcohol heighten danger in a place where the rigid gender binary sets both masculinity and femininity to extreme levels, as men must be the most masculine to gain authority amongst men, and they also must demonstrate this masculinity to women, enforcing a responsive hyperfemininity. Allison reveals that institutions that regulate violence, such as religion and law, perpetuate social violence as they do not assist “white trash” women and confine them to limited existences. For example, when Delia first escaped Cayro and Clint, she attempted to get custody of Amanda and Dede, but could not because of Clint’s interference. Despite Clint’s reputation as a violent drunk, the Georgia judge still gave Clint the girls, revealing that in the small rural town an abusive husband is trusted with family more than a battered wife—neither culture nor law condemns the violence. Furthermore, Clint—and the court—by preventing Delia from
being her daughters’ mother, create Delia’s identity as the “no-good,” “fallen” woman (73, 68-9).

Like Clint’s use of the legal system allows him to construct Delia’s Cayro identity, Allison shows that the fictional small town defines women and reveals patriarchy’s relegating power to Cissy through her introduction of Granddaddy Byrd. Granddaddy Byrd, Delia’s grandfather who raised her, is the first Cayro man Cissy meets, and is a symbol of patriarchy’s defining power and the trust the town places in classifications that encourage hypermasculinity. Allison demonstrates Granddaddy Byrd’s extreme masculinity through Delia’s recollection of her childhood with him as she tells Cissy, “‘Growing up, all I had was Granddaddy Byrd. . .Way he was, sometimes that felt worse than being alone. Man was just about the closest thing to a rock I ever knew’” (28-9). Gaffney notes Delia’s grandfather’s hypermasculinity in her article as well, briefly arguing that the extreme self-hatred felt by “white trash” people encourages hyper-gender roles and that Granddaddy Byrd has “internalized his self-hatred” to the point of demonstrating the hypermasculine response of becoming an emotionless rock and “dirt itself” (49). With his stubborn resistance and unrelenting control as an impervious character who is more rock than man, he embodies Cayro’s mentality, its lack of change and confidence in the powers that be. Similarly to the categories the town imposes, Granddaddy Byrd immediately limits Cissy’s experience and reduces her individuality. When Delia introduces her daughter, he barely acknowledges her and never calls her by her name, simply denoting her as “girl” with an “expression as distant and stern as any stranger’s” (Cavedweller 45). Granddaddy Byrd, as a masculine figure, upholds the town’s reductive perception of Cissy and Delia and he uses his position to
dominate his female family. Cissy is just “girl” and he is cold and distanced from her.

Granddaddy Byrd, like the town, focuses on Delia’s offense of abandonment and does not care about female individuality. He merely reduces them to the town’s patriarchal definition of women.

Through Clint and Granddaddy Byrd, Allison shows Cayro’s dependence on patriarchal institutions, like marriage, that confine women into a femininity that extreme masculinity decides. He refuses to help Delia recover her lost girls and insists that she talk to Clint, her estranged husband who nearly beat her to death. He even places the blame on Delia, stating, “Clint’s still your husband . . . He didn’t choose to divorce you, did he? No, he held on all the time you were gone. And he heard, everybody heard, what you had done” (50). Granddaddy Byrd’s statement shows the power male-dominated institutions—here, marriage—and by extension, men, have over Cayro women.

Although Delia escaped to save her life, Granddaddy Byrd—and the town—consider her the “fallen” woman and the person at fault because she decided she no longer wanted to live in fear of Clint. She could not divorce him. Granddaddy Byrd’s use of “choose” demonstrates the innate authority Cayro gives men: Clint, as a man, controlled their marriage, and, therefore, controlled how the town perceived Delia. Had he divorced her (and had he given her custody of the children she wanted) she would not be the “fallen” woman who abandoned her daughters. Delia arguably would have had more options—she could have articulated a different agency, albeit still limited by the town’s inescapable patriarchal structure. Because Delia could not make such a choice, she remains in Granddaddy Byrd’s mind—and in Cayro’s view—as the worst kind of woman and this categorization casts her as a worthless mother and wife. Confined and unable to work
outside of masculine power, Delia resorts to what Gaffney notes is a hyperfeminine response: she sits in bed and cries all day (49). The extreme dominance of patriarchal oppression, which may be equated to a form of gendered violence, spawns the hyperfeminine response—her identity is to be the “fallen,” sorry woman, and Delia succumbs to this definition when she goes through “crying season” (66, 70). The abuse of definition and of being so completely without agency creates an extreme despondency within Delia in which she becomes hyperfeminine in her definition: afraid that she will never be reunited with her lost girls, she embodies feminine passivity and cannot change her circumstances.

Allison places Delia and her third daughter in Georgia so that Cissy, as a gender ambiguous character, can come to realize the violence and fatalism rigid patriarchal structures inflict through the extreme dichotomy of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity it itself fosters. To emphasize how hypervirility functions in the fictional Georgia small town, Allison shows powerful, daunting men, characterized by stereotypical masculine traits. Granddaddy Byrd, for example, is an emotionless “rock” who “harrumphs” more than he speaks and depends on a woman to take care of him (46, 86). Allison further stresses the town’s respect for hypermanliness when Cissy hears from the cancer-stricken Clint, who comes to live with Delia and Cissy as part of a custody bargain, about Cayro youths going to fight in the Vietnam War. This passage highlights how the town perceives what constitutes masculine men. Clint remembers the conflict as a time that threatened the gender binary of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. As a result, masculine men were endangered. He tells Cissy that, “Everything went back to front. Women fell in love with boys who looked more like girls than the girls did. And
real men got treated no better than dogs’” (247). Clint, an abusive drunk, detests femininity and idolizes “real men” and sees the military as the symbol of genuine masculinity. Bourdieu explains that men’s military membership creates the image of the “real” man because of an environment that encourages male community: “Manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of ‘real men’. A number of rites of institution, especially in educational or military milieux, include veritable tests of manliness oriented towards the reinforcement of male solidarity” (52). Serving in the Vietnam War made a Cayro boy a “real’ man in Clint’s eyes and in the town’s because of the possibility of masculine violence. A man who could not enlist in the Army and was, therefore, omitted from the group, becomes feminized, and I argue that Clint idolizes soldiers as incarnations of authentic manliness as “real” men because a childhood injury prevented Clint from conscription: upholding hegemonic masculinity allows Clint to join the community of “real” men and to distance himself from femininity (Cavedweller 187-88). Allison continues to demonstrate Clint’s reverence through Cissy’s recollections of their conversations. Cissy goes on to describe the way Clint expresses himself, thinking, “‘Real men’ was one of his magic phrases. Every time he said it, even in his sunken whispery voice, it came out hard and strong. Real Men. Good Women. God and Righteousness” (247). Clint’s view of masculinity and femininity adheres to the gender binary the town upholds as he places these notions into the absolute realms of “real” and “good.” For men to be manly, they must embody the most powerful, stereotypical male traits and demonstrate both bravery and violence. Likewise, “real” women are “good” women, with men defining what makes a woman “good.” Cissy’s description of Clint’s
veneration for an absolute gender binary accentuates the hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity the town incites and allows Clint to join the hypervirile realm. Furthermore, her description parallels “Real Men. Good Women” with “God and Righteousness,” placing Real Men as the Gods, the creators and the controllers of women. In Cayro, this hyperbolic process of Othering generates the dangerous fatalism its female inhabitants (un)willingly adopt.

The burden of upholding the binary gender structures that Clint regales actually endangers women. When women do not act the way men have designated they should, men become violent to reinforce their own masculine control. Clint, as an abusive, reckless drunk, embodies toxic masculinity at its worst; however, as he nears death, he realizes he acted the way he did because of patriarchal categories and reveals the dangers of his insecurity and overcompensation to Cissy on his deathbed:

most girls. . .ones as young as Delia was, they’re soft in the middle. You get close to ‘em, you feel that softness turn to you. . .Like a clay center, you can make it into what you want. . .I got to where I expected a woman to make herself over for me. . . I couldn’t believe Delia wasn’t like that. . .I think I imagined she was gonna go soft for me once I really had her. . .Damn truth is I ruined myself trying to break the woman I loved. (180-81)

Clint’s remark to Cissy emphasizes the way he ties his own masculine self-worth to his ability to shape Delia. Furthermore, he places his description of Delia’s unwilling submission in the terms of clay—he sees Delia as a person who can be physically molded
to reflect his desires. When she does not shape herself to his preferred image, Clint beats her to possess her and to instill fear (188). He does so despite his own abusive childhood, and, in his own words, ruined himself in the process—thus implying that toxic masculinity harms men as well (188). Gaffney also connects Clint’s abuse to his hypermasculinity and that his gender role “provides no room for softness” (50). I would like to elaborate her point to include that Clint’s explanation of his violence links his own ideas of what men and women are supposed to be to the town’s expectations and hyper-definitions. Clint believes in strict gender roles and his domineering, fear-imposing position because of the society he lives in that imposes such ideals of “real manliness” and what makes “good women.”

The patriarchal structure they enforce through the gender binary are damaging to men, who, like Clint, lose themselves through alcoholism and domestic violence towards the women they love. Through these (self-)destructive behaviors, they attempt to recreate the masculine control and characteristics they believe themselves lacking when women do not behave in the unrealistic way the town demands. The source of Clint’s violence hinges on his inability to shape Delia and, even more so, the way he believed himself to bend for her. He explains that, “‘I was working so hard to seem grown-up and tough. I was afraid Delia would see the soft spot in me. . . I was the one who bent myself on Delia’” (180). Clint’s perceived lack of masculine control directly causes his rage: he believes—and fears—that his vulnerability feminizes him. That he considers himself feminized in his susceptibility and placed in an emasculating sexual predicament directly enrages Clint. In The Gendered Society, Michael Kimmel reports on a man he nicknames “Jay” who, while he has never committed rape, echoes Clint’s toxic logic as he shares the
situation that could turn him into a potential rapist. Jay explains that rape would be out of
desire, but more disturbingly, out of power, or as Kimmel points out, his feeling of
powerlessness:

it would be a very spiteful thing just being able to say ‘I have power over you and
I can do anything I want with you’ because really I feel that… Just the fact that
they can come up to me and just melt me makes me feel like a dummy, makes me
want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them. (The
Gendered Society 444)

Eerily reminiscent of Clint’s explanation for his abuse of Delia, Jay’s rationale for rape
depicts the close relationship between masculinity, power, violence, and sexuality. Rape, as Kimmel discusses, combines violence and sexuality where sex is the tool for
enacting violence (441). Both Clint’s and Jay’s approach to masculinity show how a
perceived feminization triggers a sense of emasculation that, in turn, prompts them to
(re)assert their virility through (sexual) violence against women. As Despentes explains,
masculinity feeds off female subordination (47). This rigid construction creates rape as a
unifying force in which men collectively proclaim their power over women and prevent
them from expressing their agency and encourage their despondency, as Despentes
elucidates: “Rape is a civil war, a political organization through which one gender

16 Rape as an act of power rather than sexual desire is something well established by feminist theory, see
namely Despentes (46); MacKinnon (171-83); and Vigarello. Although for MacKinnon, rape is inherent to
heterosexuality.
declares to the other, I have complete power over you, I force you to feel inferior, guilty, and degraded” (47). Rape, Despentes shows, is a source of solidarity for the male gender and this camaraderie enforces a reactive femininity. In Cavedweller, Allison illustrates how the patriarchal community imposes upon Cayro women a fatalistic femininity through physical and symbolic violence. While Allison never states that Clint raped Delia, his violence towards her allows him to express his authority over her sexuality and achieve both solidarity and recognition by fellow “real men.”

However, as Clint is considered a “white trash” man, he is already vulnerable to social class stigma and risks emasculation. To avoid feminization, he must parade his masculinity to create the appearance of domination. Like Bastard’s Boatwright men, Clint does not question Cayro’s social and gendered organization. Even worse, through his toxic male behavior, he perpetuates the violence done to himself and to women. Literary scholar Laurie Vickroy explains that despite the damage they do to themselves, “the structures of patriarchy and the related expectations are never seriously questioned by Allison’s men, perhaps because they gain a certain status from these but are also frustrated and crushed by them” (59). Where the intersection of feminine gender and low social class diminishes women in patriarchal society, “white trash” men can use their gender to gain agency: like Watts explains African American men’s perceived “natural” domination of African American women, “white trash” men’s authority over “white trash” women continues to uphold the illusion of white, land-owning, antebellum patriarchy. Because they become more dominant figures in their communities by displaying their toxic masculinity, Allison’s male characters do not question the system that labels and casts them in reductive identity roles. In a patriarchal system, Cayro
encourages unrealistic ideals of men and women and produces men like Clint, who in their extreme overcompensation, harm women they love through social and physical violence to maintain domination.

Section 2: The Development of Women’s Fatalism in a Community of Extremes

Allison demonstrates the limiting atmosphere of Cayro from the moment of Cissy’s departure from Los Angeles and continues to build this world and its restrictive binaries as Delia and Cissy arrive in Cayro. After Randall Pritchard dies in a motorcycle accident, Delia packs their daughter and their belongings into her Datsun and rushes back to Georgia. (Cavedweller 17-19). Cissy, resenting moving and meeting sisters she believes her mother to love more than her, imagines in her nightmares that “Cayro, Georgia, was a pit of red dirt and gray clay sloped so steeply that Cissy could not crawl free” (29). Cissy, whose only representation of Cayro is her mother, anticipates the despondency this small town produces in women even before she arrives. Although only fantasy, the nightmare indicates what she has learned about Cayro from her mother, a woman whose husband was so brutal that she escaped desperately with a rock star she did not know, abandoned baby girls she pined for, and spent most of Cissy’s Los Angeles life drinking to cope with their loss (14-17). Cissy’s impression of Cayro is one of desperate resignation—women so confined by physical and symbolic violence that the only escape is through drastic or destructive measures.

The rigid binary Allison portrays emphasizes that masculinity defines femininity, and masculinity produces violence that women internalize. Despentes discusses the role maleness plays in violence against women and how its operation generates victimization
so extreme that a woman cannot defend herself against toxic masculine violence even when she has the ability to do so. She writes that, “little girls are trained never to hurt men, and women are called back in line each time they don’t respect the order” as the “only acceptable response is to turn the violence inwards, onto yourself” (Despentes 44-45). Despentes articulates what Allison illustrates in Delia and what Cissy worries will happen to her once she is in Cayro. Cissy saw Delia drink to forget her abuse and her loss, and her hatred for her mother stems from Delia’s drunkenness (Cavedweller 16-17). Cissy’s imagined crawling becomes an act against the violence of fatalism and the internalization of male-imposed fear and shows how, according to de Lauretis’s definition of subject/object within violent representations, Cissy’s gender identity will become confused in a confining realm (de Lauretis 43-44). Envisioning crawling, Cissy becomes masculine as she tries to accomplish an insurmountable feat. Yet, her inability to escape the pit in her imagination reduces her back to the feminine, victimized position, where, if she stays, she will experience the violence of defeatism that occurs amongst Cayro’s hyperfeminine women. The integration of gender roles within her dream foreshadows the ambiguity Cissy develops in Georgia as she tries to distance herself from the female fatalism—or the idea that they are predestined to be afraid, desperate, unloved, and worthless—that dominates in her “white trash” family.

As soon as Cissy arrives in Cayro, Allison begins illustrating a world demarcated by binaries and depicts their limiting nature. However, she also shows that Cissy is out of place amid the people of Cayro and, thus, an outsider to the town’s hyperbolic categorizations. Allison describes Cissy’s first impression of the Georgia town as dismal: Cissy arrives dirty and travel-worn, and all she sees is a dollar store, a semi-truck driving
by, an exit sign for a Maryland Fried Chicken two miles away, and another traffic sign for Atlanta (36). She has arrived in the deep pit of Cayro, and Allison places her into the helpless, feminine position and she cannot yet crawl out despite her desire to take on the active, masculine role. Allison further portrays this gender ambiguity in Cissy’s attempt to imitate a Cayro woman, the waitress she has just encountered on the street, while she cleans up in the diner’s bathroom: “In the clouded mirror over the sink, with her hair wet, [Cissy] looked different—older, almost a teenager, a brunette with big brown eyes and a few freckles. ‘Honey,’ she said to the teenager, then laughed, surprising herself. She sounded like Randall” (37). Although she has just arrived in Cayro, Allison portrays Cissy as an outcast and misfit (and, indeed, Cissy, daughter of Randall, is half-Yankee) as she does not appear her age in the mirror and fails to imitate the waitress. In addition, placing a masculine voice into her female body, Allison foreshadows Cissy’s development of an androgynous identity as she cannot adhere to the strict, gender bifurcated sphere Allison depicts just as quickly within the diner. As Cissy’s character develops, the author shows that androgyny grants her a queer theoretical lens that permits Cissy’s critique of the rigid gender binary. In that sense, she becomes what Judith Halberstam perceives as a “queer subject” who “exposes the workings of dominant heterosexual masculinity” and “challenge[s] hegemonic models of gender conformity” (Halbertsam 4, 9). Eventually, Cissy understands that she can live outside the dualistic, normative culture. However, Allison illustrates that Cissy’s queer perspective must mature over the course of the novel as she realizes her sexuality, and so she shows that Cissy’s queer lens begins with the ability to see Cayro’s constructed binaries in the diner.
While eating, Cissy sees the men and women in separate, distinct groups that exaggerate their masculinity and femininity. She observes that: “the men had tired faces under pushed-down caps with sun bills peaked over their eyes. All the women seemed to wear their hair pinned up with little colored barrettes” (38). Cissy immediately notices the distinct binary Allison creates, and furthermore, Allison portrays this dualism as oppressive. Emphasizing that men and women all look the same, the dichotomy becomes extreme in its polarization: in Cayro, all men are fatigued and pushed down; all women are pulled back, restricted and confined. There is no variability. Furthermore, that Allison demonstrates that physical appearances illustrate hyper-gender roles shows the importance of Cissy’s androgynous identity and its connection to her developing queer perspective that allows her to see binaries as oppressive. Once the cook reveals Delia’s identity and remembers Delia as “that bitch ran off and left her babies,” Cissy thinks: “until the day she died, despair . . . would taste of ice chips and sweat. Fear would wear a pushed-down cap with a stained sun bill. Shame would sport bright-colored barrettes and a tight mouth” (39-40). Allison forces Cissy to associate fear and shame with men and women, respectively, demonstrating the way the town’s binaries transfer from oppressive power structures within the town to the townspeople. Men, in Cayro, are visibly oppressed and worn down, but they are also fear—the imposers of symbolic and physical oppression. Women are shame, an anxiety-inflicted feeling that restricts speech and the articulation of desires—they cannot assert themselves as human beings and must succumb to the violence of a fear-imposed, patriarchal society.

Allison’s visual signs discern the power structures in Cayro, but this signification also resembles the reality of the oppressive positions the rigid binaries impose on the
town’s inhabitants. As Gaffney asserts, Allison writes to portray the reality of “white trash” lives and to work against the stereotypes that have erased poor whites from American sight (49). These stereotypes are deeply rooted in visual cues, as scholar Katherine Henniger notes in her article on Allison’s autobiographical work. In “Controlling Images,” Henniger underlines the importance of visual legacy in Southern culture and the history of Southern men using race and gender markers as indicators of how much and what type of access they could have to African Americans and white women. Henniger illuminates these power dynamics by emphasizing the significance of the male gaze as a defining power over female bodies and shows how race, class, and gender’s visibility in Southern patriarchal society create “white trash” women. The particular power of this gaze descends from the pre-Civil War belief in white male supremacy. Henniger explains that Allison’s fiction utilizes this gaze as she is “heir to this visual legacy, and her work makes the full extent of its damage clear: under control of these ‘trash’ images, in the absence of self-representation, poor whites, especially women, can be denied access to the complexity of their own experiences” (92). Henniger highlights the intersection of class and gender, two patriarchal categories, as sites of a doubled oppression and ones in which whiteness does not necessitate privilege but rather confines women to restrictive or hyperbolic gender roles as “white trash” women. Allison depicts this lasting power of the Southern male gaze through her resigned female characters. For instance, Amanda—Delia’s eldest daughter—as a teenager, prays while staring at a mirror where she “looked long and hard at herself, her plain face, her barren heart. God, teach me love. . .Make me worthy. She was Delia Byrd’s daughter. Clint Windsor’s girl…She was one of the ones who would have to work to deserve the light”
(Cavedweller 213). Looking at her reflection, Amanda does not see her own definition of herself, but the town’s. As the ugly, “white trash” daughter of Delia and Clint, she is worthless and doomed to become despondent. Showing Amanda’s desperation, Allison uses “white trash” stereotypes of ugliness and insignificance to show a sad, vulnerable girl. The author’s exposure of damaging categories illustrates the importance of freeing “white trash” women from gendered and social class related clichés. They must become, like Allison, conscious of the violence of definition.

Allison depicts the difficulty of breaking from patriarchal oppression by demonstrating the lasting power of its institutions, namely religion and law. This particularly transpires in the process Delia must go through to obtain her daughters from Clint’s mother, Grandma Windsor. Delia and Grandma Windsor, estranged in-laws and bitter enemies, are actually both oppressed and abused by Cayro’s patriarchal powers and toxic Windsor men. When first in Cayro, Cissy sees how Delia must receive the townsmen’s symbolic approval to get her daughters: when Delia asks Granddaddy Byrd for help and he refuses, her next avenue is the church as she will not talk to Clint, who ultimately has custody (50). Through Reverend Hillman, the role men, religion, and law play in maintaining women’s subordination intersects. Allison uses this male character to show masculinity’s power within Cayro’s patriarchal structure. After Delia talks with Reverend Hillman and he agrees to help her, he speaks with his faithful church member, Grandma Windsor, repeatedly about allowing Delia to see her girls. When Grandma Windsor continually resists considering his request, he knows that he can force submission by placing the threat of family court and lawyers into her head while compounding religion: “Reverend Hillman . . . search [ed] out every biblical reference to
lawyers he could find. . .After ten minutes of that, Louise Windsor looked at him as if he were a snake” (105). As a powerful religious figure, and one the devoted Grandma Windsor needs to obey, Reverend Hillman manipulates her by using the threat of lawyers and the legal system to inspire fear. He knows that her husband and the legal system have beaten and threatened her to the point that she is a passive, cold woman (92). A lawsuit would only mean trouble for her, a woman with no money or husband. She has no choice but to acquiesce to Reverend Hillman’s request and agrees to Delia seeing Dede and Amanda. Allison truly demonstrates how Grandma Windsor internalizes toxic masculine social and physical violence to the point where she becomes hyperfeminine in her defeatism. As a “white trash” woman widowed to a man who abused her, she has limited agency within Cayro and within her home. Resigned to her life, she cannot even smile in front of others. Dede observes that her grandmother only smiles while she works in the garden, away from her home and community. Her smile disappears once she realizes Dede is watching her (203). Reverend Hillman also wonders why she never smiles, but then answers his own question with another, “what, after all, had she to smile about?” (92). Grandma Windsor must reserve her smile for isolated moments; she must adhere to her hyperfeminine fatalistic role as a woman resigned to a despondency that toxic masculinity inflicts. She has accepted her feminine role as one of powerlessness and maintains the patriarchal structures that work to oppress her. Connell explains that a male-dominated society encourages a defeatist attitude in subordinated women, something Allison portrays through her male and female characters (83). Connell explains that the “patriarchal definition of femininity (dependence, fearfulness) amounts to a cultural disarmament that may be quite as effective as the physical kind” and even
compares the social violence to domestic abuse, citing cases where women are capable of
caring for themselves, but have come to believe the “abusers’ definitions of themselves as
incompetent and helpless” and can therefore not become independent (83). Connell links
domestic violence to societal violence that work together to create defeatism and self-
perpetuating oppression in women, explaining Grandma Windsor’s fatalism and also
showing how it transfers from one generation to the next.

Delia’s daughters, Amanda and Dede, were raised by their hyperfeminine,
defeated grandmother and their father’s toxic masculine violence shaped their childhood.
Throughout *Cavedweller*, Allison shows that the girls have internalized the town’s
definition of them and how this process begets their gendered resignation. Because they
belong to the poor working-class, they have already been cast as “white trash.” However,
as women, they are also subject to the dominant male gaze, and are particularly confined
by their class as a holdover from antebellum patriarchy (Henniger 87). Although they are
barely teenagers when Cissy arrives, Dede already has the reputation of being rough,
volatile, and “no virgin, you can be sure,” and the town perceives Amanda as “this
century’s only Baptist Pentecostal nun” (*Cavedweller* 61-62). Assigned restrictive
destinies by Cayro, Dede and Amanda go on to fulfill them: Dede does have a
promiscuous adolescence and young adulthood, while Amanda marries a minister (263;
229). These self-fulfilling prophecies demonstrate the power of the town’s patriarchal
structures and how their process of Othering—making them absolute female Others—
prevents Dede and Amanda from realizing their abilities or potential. Cayro’s perception
of Dede as a “white trash” young woman and the community’s need to keep her in the
hyperfeminine, submissive, and fatalistic role becomes apparent when she cannot get a
job she desires. Dede, an occasional lawbreaker who dates dangerous boys, longs for an exciting occupation within Cayro. When she considers becoming a police officer, the sheriff, Emmett Tyler, dissuades her from the idea. In addition to referring to her past criminal record, he mentions the number of boys she has dated. The sheriff claims she would be bound to arrest a great number of her former boyfriends and be overwhelmed by the experience, thus he denies her the job for a lack of appropriate attitude (263).

Emmett Tyler’s refusal indicates how the patriarchal town—and its men—strip “white trash” women of any possible self-determination, confining them to the hyperfemininity it has established for them instead. In the sheriff’s—and by extension Cayro’s—eyes Dede does not have the “appropriate” attitude because she does not come from the “proper” social class: they perceive that she dates criminal boys both because of her class and because of the town’s casting of Dede as sexually promiscuous during her teenage years. Trapped in these oppressive definitions, she becomes fatalistic and uses drugs to escape her confinement (265). If Cissy witnesses Dede’s resignation and self-destruction, she also sees how toxic male violence and patriarchal structures induce fatalism in Delia and Amanda and thus she links defeatism with being female. However, as an objective outsider—the daughter of Randall and a California native—and someone who does not adhere to the gender binary, Cissy takes on a masculine gaze that dissociates her from the women in her family. To distance herself from the patriarchal “white trash” woman label and the fatalism toxic masculinity imposes, Cissy develops an ambiguous gender identity that allows her to eventually adopt a queer perspective.
Section 3: The Queering of Cissy’s Perspective: Melding Masculinity and Femininity in the Caves

I argue that Allison uses Cissy, as a queer and androgynous character who does not adhere to the definition of the town, to criticize structures that oppress women and victimize them through social and physical violence. Like Allison uses writing to make herself conscious of violence, Cissy explores and charts Cayro’s caves to work through the internalization of violence brought on by toxic masculinity and embraces an androgynous identity that incorporates both femininity and masculinity. Initially ignorant of the underlying causes of physical and symbolic violence, she perceives women as fatalistic individuals and as accomplices to their own restricted lives. She does not become angry with men or patriarchal structures and does not understand when her mother explains that sometimes women need anger, as when Delia listens to fanatical Christian radio stations while refurbishing furniture, suggesting that she uses anger to work through the self-destructive and fatalistic identity Clint and Cayro imposed (235). Unable to comprehend female rage or understand that women can use anger to move past fatalism and not just to perpetuate self-destruction and despondency, Cissy distances herself from her mother and sisters by bonding with Clint despite his history of physical violence against women (182).

Cissy, a misfit who sees what others cannot, also behaves in ways others do not. She befriends a man whom others detest for being violent and cruel. Yet, as an outsider, she does not see the violent individual Clint was, but the dying man he currently is. Cissy’s ambiguous identity allows her to connect with him: idolizing masculinity, she can bond with men more so than women. Allison actually illustrates Cissy’s ability to form relationships with men rather than women from the beginning of the novel by showing
how she venerates her father. Despite Randall’s perpetual drug use, drinking, and
recklessness, Cissy idealizes her father and prefers him to her mother, whom she loathes.
After Randall’s death, Cissy tells Delia “I believe in the devil. He’s the one made you
[sic]’” and Rosemary explains to Delia: “you know how she is about Randall. Child [sic]
thinks everything that happened is her fault, that he never done nothing wrong in his life”
(4; 6). From Cavedweller’s opening, Allison demonstrates that Cissy forgives men and
lethal virility more easily than she does women. I contend that Allison, similarly to
Halberstam’s vision of queer subjectivity in Female Masculinity, offers Cissy’s gender
ambiguity as a means to end toxic masculinity and women’s oppression. Melding
femininity and masculinity together, Allison shows how the Cayro community must
challenge its extreme binaries to end violence. Likewise, Kimmel articulates this
rationale in The Gendered Society: “the less gender differentiation between women and
men, the less likely will be gendered violence. This means the more ‘like women’ men
can be seen . . . and the more ‘like men’ women can be seen . . . the more likely that
aggression will take other routes besides gendered violence” (425). Kimmel’s
explanation clarifies that the distinct gender binary produces gendered violence; thus,
dissolving this dichotomy would put an end to abuse—whether male violence against
women or against peers. Kimmel’s solution echoes Allison’s vision in Cavedweller
which suggests that if more members of Cayro’s community became like Cissy and
opened up to diverse gendered identities, masculine physical and social violence would
diminish, as would female internalization of violence—thus creating a more peaceful
world. However, this fictional small town, just like American society at large, depends on
a gender binary that forces differentiation onto individuals, and does not embrace gender ambiguity.

Cayro youth uphold the binary through the friendships they form: as a misfit, Cissy has only one friend, the equally odd Nolan. Allison also presents Nolan as an androgynous character by feminizing him and depicting him as a softhearted boy who will “never make a man” (*Cavedweller* 252). Presenting Nolan as Cissy’s companion enhances Allison’s critique of a gender binary that produces violence. Nolan, as an effeminate boy, is not violent or controlling—he merely does what his family and friends ask him to do. However, as a fellow gender ambiguous misfit, Cissy connects with Nolan, and the relationship helps her become comfortable with her own indefinite identity. Nolan introduces Cissy to the caves, nicknamed Paula’s Lost and Little Mouth, where Cissy can escape the rigid gender binary and appreciate both her masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, she embraces a toxic, destructive masculinity but also she appreciates the fear and vulnerability masculine danger creates in a realm removed from patriarchal society. Approaching the cave’s opening, Cissy, dressed in blue jeans, flannel, and a tractor hat, appears as a masculine figure penetrating the cave’s opening (236, 240). Entering this space, she becomes a classic hero, embarking on a quest (Burton-Hardee 244) and de Lauretis explains that, as a hero, she must be masculine because the obstacle to overcome is always understood as female (43). Penetration makes characters active and masculine despite their sex; the object or space that they enter is, similarly, rendered passive and female (de Lauretis 43).

Thus, I argue that Cissy, emboldened by her masculine act, goes into the cave confident and fearless. On her first excursion with Nolan, Allison writes that Cissy
“could master the fear, ride it like a current in the Bowle River” (*Cavedweller* 242). Unafraid, Cissy defies constricting norms of femininity and claims an agency outside of hyperfemininity: she distances herself from her female body and dualistic patriarchal society that only presents either/or possibilities. Caving can queer Cissy’s perspective, and after Cissy claims that she can “master the fear,” she and Nolan shut off their lights to create complete darkness underground. Cissy cannot make sense of what she sees, but she enjoys the hallucination: “If white was all the colors, and black none, which one moved across her dry, aching pupils now? She smiled and relaxed. Nothing here would hurt her” (243). In the cave, Cissy sees that a spectrum of colors between black and white exist and she importantly questions this discovery and challenges the dichotomy of traditional perception. Being in an unknown, potentially dangerous environment that permits visual variability, Cissy feels more comfortable than she has in the bifurcated Georgia town that depends on visual cues to define and class its denizens. Furthermore, Cissy as fearless, becomes the master of Cayro’s men whom, as we perceived earlier during Cissy’s arrival to the town, Allison tells readers are fear—now she feels protected and powerful: “I am safe here. Nothing can find me that I do not want to find me. If I do not move, the dark will fill me up, make me another creature, fearless and whole” (243-44). Underground, Cissy knows the town cannot find or place her into their patriarchal definition of women. Even more importantly, however, as a whole creature, Cissy is no longer the open and vulnerable girl Despentes explains that masculinity needs to express itself: Cissy cannot be defined, but in turn, since she in non-responsive to its imposing fear, masculinity can no longer create itself, rendering the gender binary that patriarchy depends upon to maintain hegemony irrelevant. Although this is Cissy’s first caving
excursion, she already senses the place’s power as a space removed from Cayro’s patriarchal structure—here, even though she is a female, she is freed from the “white trash” label, the strict gender binary, and defeatism. She can be unmarked by fear, a whole person.

As a female, Cissy cannot entirely escape her gendered body, but caving provides her with a physical, bodily activity that grants her the opportunity to become more masculine. In the caves, Cissy can reconcile her masculinity and femininity to form an androgynous identity that Cayro’s hypermasculine and hyperfeminine sphere does not allow and can begin developing a queer perspective that challenges a dualistic, patriarchal society. Before she begins caving, Cissy feels isolated. She witnesses the fatalism generated by physical and symbolic abuse in women and, consequently, distances herself from femininity. For example, Cissy sees heterosexual intercourse as a mundane act (281, 325). Sex simply reinforces the definitions of the patriarchal town: men control and define women and women are passive, fatalistic creatures whom men mark. Once she caves, Cissy’s body experiences both masculine activity and female passivity, and this creates a sexual experience for Cissy. Caving with Nolan’s queer female friends, Jean and Mim, Cissy’s excursions become orgasmic:

Every time Jean shouted at Mim, the rock would reverberate and Cissy would straighten her body to take that shout into her belly, to let it shake her inside and

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17 Here, Allison does not seem to challenge the gendered dichotomy that associates masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity. However, through Cissy and her queer, melding subjectivity, Allison renders this initial, dichotomous gendering irrelevant. To escape toxicity and fatalism, one needs to become androgynous for Allison.
Cissy opened her mouth and felt the echoes resound against her teeth. For their open, unafraid shouts, Cissy loved Jean and Mim completely. Love heated her blood, speeded her heart. For the first time in her life, she did not feel alone.

(278)

Caving with the queer girls, Cissy, masculine in her activity, conquers the cave, but she is also vulnerable and subject to fear. The shaking rock forces Cissy’s body into uncontrollable motion as she surrenders to the female position, placing her in an unprotected role as her body moves out in uninhibited gestures. However, Cissy embraces her position as the passive female while extending in masculine action. As both active male and passive female, Cissy can appreciate femininity and bond with women—she is no longer isolated in a lonely, bifurcated realm. Receiving Jean’s shout, she enjoys a sexual sensation that she compares to love and acknowledges a queer identity. Unlike Cayro’s rigid society, the caves seem the space for uninhibited possibilities. As an androgynous character, Cissy develops a unique, queer identity distinct from the ones Cayro imposes on men and women. Vint argues that Cissy becomes comfortable with her body in the caves and that this feat is momentous because discomfort in the body stems from discomfort with the social order. Apart from Cayro and its defining structures, Vint emphasizes that since Cissy separates herself from her female family and does not enact the “white trash” label, she forms a whole, authentic identity (151). I would extend this point by highlighting that caving removes Cissy from male physical and social violence that enforces female fatalism. She escapes the mundane existences imposed by
patriarchal definition and can thus imagine other possibilities for herself—she does not have to become the fatalistic woman or even stay in Cayro.

Cissy’s new queer friends and the caves provide her with a venue to explore masculine action that is dangerous in the hyperbolically gender differentiated Cayro but becomes essential to her queer development. In “Throwing Like a Girl,” feminist scholar Iris Marion Young analyzes women’s physical movement and discovers that the way women carry themselves and approach activity imitates their position within society. Young writes that while the anatomy of females and males certainly impacts what kind of physical activity they can do, women’s ability to accomplish bodily feats has less to do with physicality and more with perception:

Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscle coordination, position, poise, and bearing. (33)

That a woman’s physical ability to accomplish a feat is less determining than the perception of her strength attests to patriarchal culture’s influence on women, like those in Allison’s Cayro, who are encouraged to take on vulnerable, passive roles. Furthermore, Young explains, women are cautious and protective of their bodies and they are apprehensive when moving themselves in a decisive action because they see their bodies as objects instead of subjects. They do not believe they are capable of becoming fully subjective beings that can embrace and survive danger (Young 44). She explicates that
“Women tend to project an existential barrier closed around them and discontinuous with the ‘over there’ in order to keep the other at a distance. The woman lives her space as confined and closed around her, at least in part as projecting some small area in which she can exist as a free subject” (Young 45). By relegating their physical movement to small actions that do not flow from the whole body, women keep themselves safe. Caving, as a full-body activity, does not allow for (female) inhibition—to survive caving, the body must be in tune with itself and move in any way the cave demands.

As a caver, Cissy moves physically and metaphorically outside of the confinement patriarchal society imposes through violence and definition. Caving forces Cissy’s female form into the “squeezing, grasping, or twisting” positions Young describes as challenging for women in a male-defined world, and Cissy loves the risk involved as she reflects: “Caving is not a sport but a dare, more a trial than an excursion. A dark, deep, pitched hole is the perfect place to test the nerves, the muscles, the survival instincts, but the risk is awful, the terror primeval. . .Cissy knew she loved it” (Cavedweller 250). Cissy realizes that her hobby allows her to act at the most human level—she is not constructed as a woman or a man, but as a person who needs to survive the feat. Not thinking of herself as male or female, Cissy does not perceive her body as a passive object, but as an active subject. Therefore, she can put herself through dangerous exploits and sees opportunities for herself outside of the oppressive sphere of the small Southern town (308). She does not have to be the hyperfeminine, passive girl who becomes fatalistic and internalizes toxic male violence. Her gender ambiguity and queer viewpoint permit her to escape the rigid binary.
Through caving, Cissy can experience both masculine and feminine positions that make her an active, shaping force as well as a passive, receiving being. The caves, although dangerous environments where Cayro boys have died, are ultimately fragile places that Cissy can shape. When Cissy leaves a handprint on the cave’s wall she becomes the male Clint longed to be, one who could shape the clay he imagined was Delia. However, Cissy also becomes the dirt and filth of the cave, a clay center that can be changed and molded. She wears the cave’s mud with pride and relishes the wounds she receives in her activity. Furthermore, caving allows Cissy to not only transform physically, but mentally as well. Allison explains, “Consummation, the slow alteration of what people thought they knew, that was what Cissy saw in the cave” (308). Allison’s word choice places Cissy’s mentality change in the realm of sex and implies that Cissy’s bodily experiences are sexual. The carnal nature of her activity becomes necessary for Cissy to embrace both masculinity and femininity.

Ultimately, Cissy finds the physical feat and mental alteration powerful and inspiring as she becomes androgynous. She realizes that gender does not need to be restricted to an extreme binary and that she can form a queer, ambiguous identity. Cissy gains power through this understanding as she can take the position of both masculine and feminine, subject and object, hero and victim. Through the combination of these identities, Cissy emerges with strength—she is gender ambiguous and a survivor:

Cissy did not feel wounded but more powerful. She could take damage and keep moving. She was stronger than rock. . . . .Every time she crawled up into the light again, she knew herself different. It was as if her passage through the dark offered
Cissy what she had always wanted, confrontation with God in the imagined body of a woman, the mama-core, the bludgeoned heart of the earth. (*Cavedweller* 308)

As both a masculine and feminine character, Cissy derives power from her malleability: she sees that being female does not necessitate passivity and fatalism—it can be empowering. Furthermore, she transforms the righteous male God into a female one, and as such she realizes that women can have this creative power within their own bodies. Even though the “mama-core” is bludgeoned and battered, it retains its strength and its ability to shape life. Feeling strong even in vulnerability, caving intoxicates Cissy as her submersion into a non-binary realm separates her from Cayro’s destructive hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, allowing her to be both. Appreciating masculinity and femininity, Cissy crawls out of the nightmarish deep pit of Cayro and escapes female fatalism.

However, Allison shows that Cissy’s intoxication makes her careless, which suggests that keeping her gender ambiguous identity and queer perspective self-contained in her head and within the cave can harm her. She must express the empowerment and freedom she experiences as a gender ambiguous character within patriarchal society. Like Allison must remain conscious in her writing to work through the internalization of violence, Cissy must remain conscious of caving and the intertwining of her masculinity and femininity, but she must embrace her gender ambiguity outside of the caves to move past toxic masculine violence. Otherwise, Cissy risks succumbing to the dangerous binary and becoming a self-destructive female. Indeed, Cissy retreats to the caves after her sisters fulfill their assigned patriarchal prophecies: Dede is in jail for shooting her
boyfriend and Amanda is seemingly going crazy after being hospitalized for severe
gallstones (375-76). Wishing to escape gendered fatalism and violence, Cissy joins Jean
and Mim on a mission to find the connection between the caves, Paula’s Lost and Little
Mouth. The girls are determined yet distracted by each other’s company, and they get
devastatingly lost. Dehydrated and hallucinating, Cissy envisions the underground
labyrinth in a series of sexual images that ignite sexual possibility: the protruding rocks
are phalluses, the bumps in the rocks “were warm breasts sweating in the cool, damp air”
and Cissy imagines that she could “put her mouth to one of those bulges” and that “that
tit would taste sweet” (414). Cissy becomes distracted by the physical representations of
hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity that surround her and she distances herself from
the danger of their situation as she drifts into her imagination. Focusing on this
sexualized binary imagery or projection, Allison suggests, will only keep Cissy and the
girls from escaping alive as Cissy becomes a frozen, passive character (416). Seeing that
Jean has become immobile and that Mim is hysterical, two hyperfeminine characteristics
that trigger defeatism, Cissy takes on the masculine, active role. Once more, Allison
illustrates her switch from passivity to action in sexual terms. To warm the hypothermic
Jean, Cissy takes sand and “scrubbed hard, rocking her whole body against Jean’s passive
one” (417). Cissy becomes fierce and authoritative in her action, and she resumes a
masculine role, demanding that the girls move and follow her out of the cave. In her
action, however, Cissy recalls her mother and when she speaks, she hears her mother’s
voice—vastly different from her initial visit to Cayro, when she heard her father’s
“honey” come from her lips (418). Channeling her mother’s strength, Cissy can be the
active, masculine character who fights to save herself and the girls, and as they emerge
from the cave, Cissy believes she can go anywhere and be anything. She recognizes herself as a multifaceted character and sees the possibilities this identity brings (420).

Cissy’s decision to live forces her to unearth her masculinity and femininity and bring them together, and in doing so, she fuses the gender binary and makes her human body one multidimensional entity rather than resigning herself to the position of the fatalistic Other. The uniting of binaries through abstraction, Monique Wittig argues, is necessary to move past victimization (57). In Cissy’s case, this means moving past the destiny of violence against women or female self-destruction. Wittig espouses that “we can renounce only what we have,” and in the caves, Cissy casts off the idea that hypermasculinity must provoke violence and that hyperfemininity entails fatalism (57). As she breaks her concentration from the stalagmite phalluses and the stony breasts to focus on her dangerous situation, she does what needs to be done: neither violent in her action nor fatalistic in her passivity, she becomes a queer hero-ine. Emerging from the peril of the caves, Cissy as queer hero-ine, embraces her female family. Recognizing her gender ambiguous identity, she can finally understand the masculine violence and female fatalism that have defined her sisters and mother.

Aware of how violence begets self-destruction, Cissy’s queer perspective permits her to finally talk with Delia at the novel’s close and she demands her family’s illuminating history. Sitting in the diner they first visited upon their arrival to Cayro, Delia tells Cissy about the violent and mysterious disappearance of her parents and siblings: “It’s one of those stories people can’t keep to themselves, but I couldn’t tell it. I couldn’t think about it” and asks her daughter, “You sure want this?” to which Cissy continues to request the story (Cavedweller 424). When, after hearing the account, Cissy
tells her mother that she loves her for the first time in the novel, Allison’s readers understand that even in Cayro society and away from the caves, Cissy is no longer afraid of a fatalistic future and ceases to see her mother as a despondent person she must distance herself from to avoid becoming (429). Cissy, realizing that things that endure, like social structures and tragic experiences, do not have to control the future and demark who people become, can take in the information her mother gives her at the novel’s end—that arguably influenced Delia’s self-destructive choices and habits—and move forward and out of the self-destructive cycle of “white trash” women.

In Cissy’s final emergence from the caves, she becomes conscious of toxic masculine violence and hyperfeminine fatalism as two extremes that define Cayro, but realizes that they do not need to define her. As a character who melds masculinity and femininity together, Cissy exists outside of damaging extremes. Embodying difference, she resembles possibilities outside of confining binaries. With queer characters like Cissy, Allison shows that gender ambiguity opens up limiting patriarchal society. Demonstrating Cissy’s ambiguous identity as powerful and understanding, Allison depicts characters who can achieve her revolutionary mission to “remake the world so that it [comes] closer to matching its own ideals” (Skin 210). As a hero-ine, Cissy can pull fatalistic “white trash” women from their self-destruction and move past toxic masculine violence. Allison, creating Cissy, makes a space in the world where her readers can see that they can exist, whether they are male or female, outside of the extreme binary. They do not need to succumb to hypermasculine violence or hyperfeminine fatalism: they can embrace both masculinity and femininity and unearth a more peaceful world.
Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller* exposes imposed gender roles and reveals gender ambiguity as a means to escape destructive and confining lives. However, Allison’s second work depicts more than the operation of patriarchal structures and their creation of restrictive gender roles and violence against women. The author shows how this system also strips women from their sexual agencies through “compulsory heterosexuality,” or the “cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives” (Rich 133). While Allison illustrates how a violent childhood may trigger a masochistic sexuality in *Bastard*, she presents a more subtle approach to the development of one’s sexual desire and practices in her second novel. In *Cavedweller*, she portrays sexual fluidity as well as erotic diversity that not only pertain to women’s sexual desires, but also to their creative forces and deepest sensual feelings. Together, this sexual fluidity and erotic multiplicity make up the way in which Allison’s female characters define their sexualities and themselves. In fact, I argue that Allison exposes both her female characters’ complex sensual identities, as well as the physical and social violence that disconnects them from the erotic—as Audre Lorde understands it—that forces them into mundane existences. Of particular significance is the recurring scholarly focus on queer sexuality deployed in *Bastard* although *Cavedweller* is the work that won the Lambda Literary Award following its publication.18

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18 See note #4 on page 2 for a description of the Lambda Literary Awards.
In addition, the little scholarship on Allison’s second novel, such as the articles by Karen Gaffney and Sherryl Vint mentioned in my first chapter, focuses less on sexuality and more on the author’s ongoing critique of confining class and gender categories through her depiction of “white trash” characters and their bodily experiences. I extend Gaffney and Vint’s conversation by analyzing how Allison portrays the development of Cissy’s queer “white trash” identity as a path for women’s subversion of patriarchal violence and discovery of erotic sources outside of a heteronormative binary where women oppose men and homosexuality counters heterosexuality.

Recent feminist and queer scholarship stresses the necessity to differentiate the notion of gender from sexuality while recognizing that both categories intersect. In her foundational queer studies text, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the importance of distinguishing the two terms as it allows, from a scholarly perspective, to avoid essentialist definitions of both notions. More interestingly for my argument, Sedgwick argues that the differentiation of sexual orientation and gender highlights the flexibility of sexuality—and sexual agency—that cannot be reduced to the gendered body: “The most dramatic difference between gender and sexual orientation. . .seems if anything to mean that it is, rather, sexual orientation, with its far greater potential for rearrangement, ambiguity, and representational doubleness, that would offer the apter deconstructive object” (34). I would like to consider Sedgwick’s distinction

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19 In fact, there has been a developing “queer feminism,” that, according to queer feminist scholar Mimi Marinucci in *Feminism is Queer*, “brings both a queer orientation to feminist theory, and a feminist orientation to queer theory” (105). Queer theory and feminism both rely on the recognition of intersecting categories of race, gender, and sexuality, just as, together, they highlight the distinction of gender and sex but also their close relationship.
between sexual orientation and gender in my analysis of female sexuality. Demonstrating sexual orientation’s flexibility encourages discussion of possibilities within sexuality—which differs from sexual orientation in that it incorporates both orientation and sensuality that can exist outside of intercourse itself. Because of its deconstructive potential, sexual orientation, as a part of sexuality, permits discussion of variability within female sexuality and triggers the undermining of compulsory heterosexuality.20 This distinction assists my analysis of Allison’s female characters’ sexualities: I emphasize that the ability to escape a gendered oppression through the discovery of erotic sources that lie outside of conventional—and societally-imposed—avenues permit sexual diversity. An erotic source—or the depth of internal knowledge and sensual feeling that lies outside of patriarchal society’s definition of what it means to know or feel—allows for women to find and create their own sense of pleasure, not only in sexual relationships, but in their individual experiences as well (Lorde 54). Finding these erotic sources in spaces outside of a male-dominated realm encourages women to subvert patriarchal physical and social violence that defines what women can be and what they can do—sexually and in their lives at large. Furthermore, women’s personal, sensual liberation—thus using their internal guides—challenges the androcentric confiscation of the erotic; in

20 I would like to note, however, that I do recognize that there is significant scholarship that addresses the social construction and fluidity of gender and sex, as demonstrated in the first chapter. For example, scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling in “The Five Sexes” argue effectively that there are at least five sexes that occur biologically and that the gender binary conceals these occurrences (21); while Myra J. Hird’s “Gender’s Nature” addresses the consequences of adhering to the socially constructed gender/sex binary, such as the use of traumatic sex assignment surgery on intersexual infants in which doctors determine the baby’s sex primarily on their genitalia’s physical appearance (350-52).
the possession of women, the term distances itself from the male-created “pornographic” or “plasticized sensation” that removes women from their own subjectivity and becomes an empowering way of knowing oneself and shaping one’s life (Lorde 54). The discovery of the erotic and the subversion of compulsory heterosexuality allows for women to challenge patriarchy’s imposed gender roles and defy the seemingly intrinsic right of men to define women’s sexualities and lives through social or physical violence. I discuss the emergence of diverse sexualities within Allison’s work that demonstrate her vision for a future in which the oppressed can thrive despite systemic violence (Skin 209-10). In a patriarchal society, masculinity begets femininity, and masculinity’s authority removes women from their personal desires and, consequently, thwarts any female sexual agency. However, in Cavedweller, Allison shows that women’s erotic sources produce a sensual subjectivity that resists patriarchal domination.

Allison channels Lorde’s power of the erotic, which the late poet defines as a distinctly female source of inspiration and feeling, as well as a “creative energy” (Lorde 55). She explains that patriarchal systems must inhibit women’s erotic sources to dominate and remove them from their personal, powerful feelings: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (53). In other words, if women could access their own, individual feelings that are not dictated by patriarchal society, they could change the system itself. I use Lorde’s theory to argue that Allison creates her own space where varied erotic identities are represented and respected. Indeed, the author shows that Cissy, one of the novel’s main
characters, must isolate herself from the oppressive patriarchal Cayro community by retreating to the caves—named Paula’s Lost and Little Mouth—to discover her erotic power before she can embrace her queer sexuality. Depicting this important self-removal form society, Allison enacts Monique Wittig’s call for the abolishment of a heterocentric world where women “tear [sic] themselves away from the heterosexual order only by running away one by one” (34). Retreating to the caves, Cissy rebels against the wittigian “social contract”—or how language and the corresponding heterosexual social system make women a subordinate class—that requires women to remain a monolithic group confined by the violence of patriarchal definition. While compulsory heterosexuality and male violence remove all women from the erotic (Rich 130-33), I demonstrate that Allison’s heterosexual female characters form intimate relationships and access their erotic powers more easily than Cissy. Through Cissy, Allison shows that women must embrace their full, complex sexual identities to gain agency and become free individuals. With her protagonist, the author also illustrates that for queer women the erotic may be found in more unconventional spaces further removed from society, like in reading science fiction and caving. Allison’s depiction of erotic sources that lie outside of typical, heteronormative sexuality, is, however, not limited to queer or atypical characters: all misfit or “white trash” women who (un)willingly defy society’s notions of acceptable sexuality are stripped of their agency yet they too may access the erotic in isolated or determined spaces. Ultimately, Allison reveals that all women are endangered when patriarchal society stigmatizes them and prevents them from creating their own identities free from binding categories.
Section 1: Silencing the Erotic through Patriarchal Physical and Social Violence

A novel centered on the stories of four women, social and physical brutality haunts *Cavedweller*: much of the work illustrates the way different female characters respond and cope with the impact of compulsory heterosexuality and resulting violence that has controlled their existences and defined who and what they are. *Cavedweller* is the tale of Delia Byrd’s return to Cayro, Georgia, ten years after escaping her abusive husband, Clint Windsor. After a decade of a dissolute life in Los Angeles, the death of rock star Randall Pritchard—her ex-lover and father of her third daughter—prompts Delia to leave California with her miserable child, Cissy. She decides to return to Georgia so that she can reunite with the daughters—Amanda and Dede—she had left behind (*Cavedweller* 17-9). Through the limited choices Delia and her three girls have in expressing their own identities and desires, Allison displays how patriarchal control depends both on access to female bodies and men’s social empowerment to determine women’s lives.

The wide breadth of compulsory heterosexuality’s impact emerges throughout the novel and shows how male supremacy in patriarchal society depends on being able to shape women’s lives through the control of their sexuality. Male sexuality, Adrienne Rich avers, depends on a responsive female sexuality and, for her, this patriarchal regulation implies that “It seems more probable that men really fear . . . that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional—therefore economic—access to women only on women’s terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix” (134, italics in original). Men must regulate women’s sexuality to remain powerful, and male control emerges in a variety of ways
throughout *Cavedweller*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Allison shows how men’s toxic masculinity materializes from a patriarchal system that promotes hegemony amongst men who must distance themselves from the feminine to become “real men.” This need to assert power manifests itself in controlling and defining female sexuality, as well as by removing women from their erotic sources and self-knowledge. Allison demonstrates the toxic masculinity that controls female sexuality through Delia’s estranged husband, Clint, and Delia’s reflections of their marriage. Talking with her daughter Dede, Delia explains why she wore Grandma Windsor’s veil at her wedding even though she detested it because Clint had asked her to: “‘That should have warned me I was making a mistake, how quick I gave in on something I felt so strongly about. There could have been signs and wonders everywhere, there could have been burning bushes all around me speaking in tongues screaming ‘Don’t do it,’ and I would never have known’” (*Cavedweller* 390). Although Clint’s request does not imply extreme masculinity, Delia’s reflection does indicate how Clint’s position as husband—from the very beginning of their marriage—inhibited her internal guides; a fact she now recognizes foreshadowed the suffocation of her erotic knowledge during her abusive marriage. Indeed, Delia’s recollection also tells us how ingrained the notion of marriage—and resulting submission—was to her as a young woman: even religious and other worldly warnings would not have derailed her from marrying Clint. She even acknowledges that she would not have been even able to recognize these occurrences as signs, thus, demonstrating that heterosexual romance and marriage overshadow even religion, making them a powerful force to constrain a woman’s self-knowledge. While Allison purposefully waits to reveal Delia’s discussion of her marriage to Clint with her
daughters until the end of the novel, she demonstrates the extremity of Clint’s control and brutality within their relationship. Through Delia and Clint’s remembrances at the beginning of *Cavedweller*, Allison already illustrates how men’s need to control women’s sexuality can result in physical violence.

Crafting Clint as the most obtrusive male figure in the novel, Allison uses him to depict the root of masculine brutality and its connection to defining women through male sexuality but that this heterosexual arrangement harms, in the end, both men and women. Clint’s viciousness in *Cavedweller* appears through Delia’s flashbacks or Clint’s own retelling. As I discussed in the first chapter, since Cissy and Delia do not get along and do not speak freely about the past, Cissy discovers Clint’s abuse through the memories he shares with her on his deathbed. After Delia retrieves Dede and Amanda, she agrees to nurse the dying Clint until his death (*Cavedweller* 115). While Amanda, Dede, and Delia avoid Clint as much as possible, his presence and connection to Delia’s mysterious past draws Cissy to him. Cissy’s conversations with Clint reveal that his perceived lack of control of Delia—which he believed his innate right—made him violent (179-81).

Furthermore, through Clint’s reflections, Allison emphasizes that compulsory heterosexuality’s dependence on male control makes men insane and abusive: “You know, I think I might have killed Delia if we’d gone on. I was working up to it. So full of rage, you can’t imagine. I wonder at it now, how I let myself get that far into it. A craziness. A literal, dry-eyed madness. . .Every time Delia looked at me—that way she had, all sad and hurt and stubborn—I got crazier” (179). Clint’s quote discloses how male violence stems from the inability to control women which compulsory heterosexuality designates as their innate right: getting “into it” means obsessing over the
supposed superiority of the husband in the power dynamic of marriage. The slightest signs of Delia’s agency—her look, her judgment—provoke Clint and seemingly threaten his authority as husband. As mentioned earlier, Rich believes that what patriarchal, heterosexual society makes men really fear is losing power and becoming sexually—and economically—irrelevant (134). Clint’s belief that Delia controls him—and his sexuality—arouses fear that she can dictate not only his sexuality, but also his life. Moreover, Clint realizes, as he nears death, that this need to control becomes madness and destroys him as well. Abusing Delia, Clint distances himself from his own identity and defends the authority of the heterosexual order and the power it grants men by silencing Delia’s erotic guides through violence.

If male physical brutality haunts the book with flashbacks of Clint’s rage and abuse of Delia, social violence also dictates women’s bodies, eroticisms, and sexualities. While some men, like Clint, show brutal responses as ways to proclaim their patriarchal rights, Allison displays the impact culture plays in the power dynamics of normative heterosexuality in *Cavedweller* too. Jackson Katz, in *The Macho Paradox*, discusses male power and its relationship to female sexuality. He writes about the paradox girls face: they are simultaneously pressured to be “virgins” and “whores,” and how this “contradictory story is not just about female sexuality—it is also about the power of boys and men to shape how women see themselves . . . masculinity is constantly equated with power and entitlement, including power over women and entitlement to their bodies” (Katz 152-53). Katz’s statement equates admission to women’s bodies with the power to define women as sexual beings, creating girls and women who respond to male sexual desires by becoming what men desire. The contradiction this construction generates also
exposes oppression and what feminist theorist Marilyn Frye calls the “double bind.”

Girls know that their worth in a patriarchal, heterosexual society depends on their ability to attract boys and men with their figures. To have value and male-sanctioned power, they must acquiesce to men’s demands and provide admission to their bodies. However, adhering to this demand also allows men and boys to sanction women and girls for expressing their sexuality.

Allison depicts the consequences of Frye’s double bind particularly with Dede, Delia’s second and teenage daughter. As Dede wants to learn how to drive, some of her classmates—the Petrie boys—offer her lessons as long as she lets them touch her body. However, their access is minimal, and so is Dede’s contact with the truck—she remains wedged between the boys and manages the stick shift, and in turn, the boys only graze her skin (Cavedweller 129). To drive the truck, Dede must grant them more admission, and she realizes the predicament of the trade-off. If she succumbs to their desires, she knows that they will control and socially label her as a “whore.” Allison writes that Dede “had been yielding steadily as she coaxed more and more driving time, and sooner or later, the situation was going to get out of hand” (129). Dede knows that full use of the truck means relinquishing the control of her body to the Petrie boys. As a result, her reputation, or patriarchal definition, is entirely to the boys’ discretion. In fact, Dede’s excursions have already led the town to speculate and bind her to the definition of “whore,” as Cissy’s classmates tell her that her half-sister “an’t [sic] no virgin, you can be sure,” an assumption made because she slips away from her religious, domineering grandmother to drive with boys (63). From this quote, given earlier in the text, we can

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21 See note #8 on page 5 for a description of Frye’s term.
assume that Dede’s classification would only become more exaggerated should she submit fully to the Petries. The town sanctions Dede regardless of the decision she makes. Whether she submits or not to her classmates, they label her as “whore,” as Marty Parish\textsuperscript{22} reveals when he harasses Cissy: “‘You know stuff, I can tell. . .Women in your family supposed [sic] to be good. . .Real good. I heard your sister Dede is real hot’” (61). Showing how a Cayro youth assumes ten-year old Cissy has sexual experience because of Dede’s supposed promiscuity underlines how the community creates and perpetuates their label—they can define Dede and, by extension, Cissy—simply because of what they hear about Dede from other denizens. Furthermore, Allison also implies that all of this talk is just that—talk—by explaining that Cayro youth are right about Dede slipping out with boys but wrong about her sexual experience (128). She is, as Frye explains, “confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (4). Regardless of whether or not Dede has sex with the Petrie boys and gets to drive the car, she will still be bound to the town’s patriarchal stigmatization of sexually active teenage girls, as well as her imposed social position as “white trash.” Furthermore, through gossip, the Cayro community encourages Dede’s classification and reinforces the male capacity to regulate women’s bodies, eroticisms, sexualities, and lives.

The physical and social abuse Allison’s female characters endure in \textit{Cavedweller} ultimately confines the women to heteronormative roles, themselves patriarchal in

\textsuperscript{22} A Cayro youth who goes to school with Cissy (\textit{Cavedweller} 61). It is worth noting that I discuss the harassment his older brother, Harold, commits later in the chapter.
essence. Men designate female behavior, reflecting their ability to create identities and sexualities for women that prevent them from asserting their own agencies or discovering their own eroticisms and sexualities. Lorde describes what happens when women live such constricting lives: “when we live outside ourselves . . . when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s” (58). The connection to individual subjectivity and sexuality persists in Cavedweller, with the most abused and oppressed female characters—Delia, Cissy, Amanda, and Dede—struggling to find their own erotic power and to enact their desires. As long as they cannot escape patriarchal definition and control, society diminishes them and removes them from their erotic sources and sexualities. Allison illustrates that women who are in control and subvert male definition and authority embrace their sexualities. Accessing their erotic guides that are separate from male-imposed desires becomes vital in developing individual agency.

Section 2: Social and Sexual Empowerment through the Subversive Forces of Erotic Power and Female Solidarity

Cavedweller relies on multiple perspectives from various characters so as to tell the collective story of being female in rural Georgia and demonstrate how a patriarchal system generates both physical and symbolic violence against women. The female characters must subvert this authority by developing solidarity and using their erotic power. Living for men, as Delia did with Clint until he nearly beat her to death, women become distanced from their erotic power, their individual agency, and from other women (Cavedweller 182). In this position, Allison’s female characters turn out to be
fatalistic and face another double bind: to either destroy themselves or be destroyed by patriarchy, as Allison exhibits with Delia’s alcoholism and Dede’s drug abuse (42, 265). To combat patriarchal violence and self-destruction, Allison shows that her “white trash” female characters must acquaint themselves with their erotic power to gain control of their lives and define themselves. Lorde explains women’s comprehension of erotic sources within themselves as an enabling, patriarchy-challenging force:

Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (57)

Once women recognize their internal desires and the knowledge they gain about themselves through the realization of these aspirations, they must demand more for themselves and from the patriarchal system. They can no longer be complicit in their oppression and the erotic becomes a powerful, creative source in which women employ their self-knowledge to build lives that allow them to act upon *their* aspirations rather than desires dictated to them by the patriarchal system. This transpires in the novel when Delia, M.T., and their friend Steph take over the local beauty parlor, Bee’s Bonnet. The women create a place that is “an approximation of a fantasy” where they empower women by making them feel confident in their appearance and by extension, confident in themselves (*Cavedweller* 102). Furthermore, Allison demonstrates that when girls and
women are broken-hearted, the women of Bee’s Bonnet nurture them and make them feel
beautiful once again (100-04). While some may argue that the women exploit their
customers for the male gaze, I would like to consider that power exists in the community
of women who both care for their clients and see them through their trouble and failed
relationships: they support women, not exploit them, and the salon becomes a place
where patriarchal authority remains absent. Moreover, the power to create and challenge
dominating patriarchal structures becomes stronger when shared amongst women, and
especially women who have also achieved their erotic self-knowledge, as seen in the
beauty parlor (59). This, in turn, allows them all to share the empowerment found
through their consciousness and escape patriarchal-imposed sexualities and lives.

I argue that Allison weaves in the stories of minor characters, namely Delia’s best
friends, M.T. and Rosemary, into her multiple standpoint narration as examples of
women who defy social sexual control by expressing their erotic power and enjoying a
relatively free heterosexuality. These female characters who embrace their sexuality have
control over their lives, and they become strong individuals who can empower other
women as well. For example, M.T. and Rosemary come to the aid of Delia and her
daughters once they settle in hostile Cayro. Through female friendship, Allison suggests,
women can escape male oppression and the wittigian social contract. Allison introduces
M.T. purposefully in the novel to highlight that women cannot break from patriarchal
society, access their own eroticisms, and develop agencies by depending on men. In my
first chapter, I discussed Granddaddy Byrd’s trivialization of Delia and his unwillingness
to help her as residual of his faith and support of Cayro’s patriarchal structures. Allison
juxtaposes Granddaddy Byrd’s coldness with M.T.’s warm welcoming, showing her
readers that, in Cayro, surviving patriarchy’s binding forces depends upon female solidarity, otherwise women cannot act upon their internal desires within this male-dominated realm. Allison demonstrates that M.T. has actually chosen to develop an independent (sexual) agency before Delia finds her. In the scene that follows Granddaddy Byrd’s scolding of Delia, M.T., fed up with her husband’s philandering, destroys the flower bed under the kitchen window that was “now, legally, Paul’s” and gets her revenge by annihilating the domestic scene (53). Allison’s mention of the legality of divorce further demonstrates how M.T.’s retaliation helps her empower herself in a system that does not benefit her. Although Paul procured the house in the divorce and M.T. and her daughters have to move, M.T. gains satisfaction from the act and it helps her regain control of her life: “‘Man got twelve years off me. Thinks he got the best of me . . . Stupid man. Show his ass’” (53). M.T.’s mutterings as she destroys the garden emphasize the toll her marriage took on her and she uses the small act as a rebellion against Paul and his ability to define her and her feelings in a society that reveres heterosexual institutions. Furthermore, Allison follows M.T.’s destruction with her speculation about Paul’s lovers and she questions: “If a legal wife could be done so badly, what could a girlfriend expect?” (54). Realizing the law does not protect her from male harm, M.T. understands that she must take care of herself and seek her own justice. Allison shows us this powerful female character welcoming the crumpling Delia who “was childlike and broken,” as a protective, caring mother (54). In the company of her oldest friend, Delia can finally surrender to her exhaustion and defeat, as she knows M.T. will take care of her in a place as inhospitable as Cayro.
Throughout the novel, Allison portrays M.T. as a joyful, enthusiastic woman who appreciates her sexuality as a liberating, enabling force so that readers associate her empowerment with her use of her erotic guides or her internal knowledge about what she desires. When M.T. greets Delia, she is as warm and happy as Granddaddy Byrd is cold and emotionless. Free from her husband and somewhat from patriarchy, she can find her own joy, an effect, Lorde’s theory suggests (56), of discovering and acting out her desire (*Cavedweller* 54). Granddaddy Byrd, as a symbol of patriarchal authority, makes Allison’s contrast of his coldness to M.T.’s warmth particularly powerful, as Allison implies that the patriarchal realm remains hapless. Conversely, M.T.’s consistent, optimistic attitude despite Delia’s “crying season” and Cissy’s resistance pulls Delia through her depression and shows the importance of female solidarity (66). Acting upon her own desire, M.T. feels an uninhibited joy that she can share. One of the erotic’s most important functions, Lorde explains, is spreading joy: sharing one’s self-derived satisfaction with others encourages women’s discovery of their erotic guides and challenges patriarchal authority (56). Because M.T. does not confine her emotions, like Granddaddy Byrd, Delia, and Cissy, she is a powerful woman who can take care of others and provide an atmosphere where Delia can realize and enact her internal desire to mother her lost girls.

Likewise, Allison depicts Delia’s Los Angeles best friend, Rosemary, as another powerful female figure who can utilize her erotic power and can thus decide what she does despite patriarchal definition. Embracing her own conception of beauty and identity, Rosemary expresses her erotic identity through her elaborate dress that defies Cayro’s conventional customs and goes against the rural patriarchal town’s idea of an acceptable
woman. Although she covers the long, jagged scar that runs along her neck, she does so elaborately with either a scarf or a gold necklace, displaying her personal style despite a disfiguring injury (Cavedweller 159; 167-68). Dressing outrageously, Rosemary expresses her elaborate, unconventional identity that demonstrates her comfort with her own individuality despite a binding society. Her erotic power and uninhibited individuality allow Rosemary to become an active, strong character who helps Delia and her daughters. Lorde writes that “when we begin to live outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense” (58). Rosemary, with an outwardly outrageous physical appearance, makes her internal identity her outward identity. Allison demonstrates Rosemary’s individuality in both appearance and behavior when she first arrives in Cayro to help Delia with Clint and the girls, only to be met with contempt from Amanda: “Once, when she saw Amanda staring at her as she was washing dishes in the kitchen, Rosemary confided that she was thinking of outlining the scar with eye makeup and glitter. . . ‘It adds character to have a flaw in a precious stone’ . . . ‘Don’t you think I’m a character?’” (Cavedweller 159). Allison emphasizes Rosemary’s ability to startle Amanda, who, as Grandma Windsor’s pious granddaughter, has internalized Cayro’s values. Delia tells Rosemary that she “shake[s] up her [Amanda’s] simple notions of how the world is supposed to be” (160). Indeed, Rosemary, Allison illustrates, does not permit societal conventions—fashion or innate male authority—dictate her life. Not only does she help Delia take care of Clint, but when they lived in Los Angeles she encouraged Delia to get her share of earnings from Randall and the record company when they would not pay
Delia for her song writing. Randall refused to pay Delia but gave Rosemary his yellow convertible, and Rosemary passed it along to Delia and subverted Randall’s authority, demonstrating that Rosemary’s sense of self allows her to advocate for women who do not advocate for themselves (170-71). Her erotic power permits her to live outside of patriarchal expectations and the double bind, as she does “that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde 59). Living her life as she chooses, Rosemary can be a heroine for Delia, who desperately needs help when she becomes the primary caregiver of her dying estranged husband. Rosemary, true to herself and aware that Delia needs support, enacts female solidarity as she helps Delia resist returning to alcoholism that would destroy the family she begins to recover. When Delia takes in the cancer-stricken Clint as part of a custody bargain, the caregiving and parenting of three spiteful girls wears her out and drinking becomes a tempting release. Instead of whiskey, however, she realizes she needs Rosemary, and so desperately reaches out to her friend who immediately responds to her call (153-54). Showing that Delia can rely on a female friend rather than returning to alcoholism, Allison illustrates that women must help each other escape the double bind patriarchal resignation produces. Drinking will destroy Delia, a recovering alcoholic, but Rosemary will rescue her. As Delia explains to Dede, “If you’re very lucky, someday you will have a friend like that, a woman you can trust with your life. . . . No woman is safe who doesn’t have one” (154). Delia knows that her female friends, M.T. and Rosemary, have kept her alive despite Clint’s physical violence and her resulting self-destructive behavior. Through their erotic power or internal knowledge, women can challenge patriarchal society, as Allison demonstrates with Rosemary.
While Rosemary accesses her erotic power and keeps Delia alive, she also uses it to challenge the town’s domineering male gaze. In her foundational study “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explains that in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact. (11)

Mulvey’s explanation underlines that in a patriarchal, heterosexual society, women’s bodies are displayed for the visual—and erotic—pleasure of men. However, although Allison highlights Rosemary’s outrageous appearance, even describing her as “A fantasy creature. . .a chimera from a noir classic,” she clearly makes Rosemary’s character an active one—she is a person people notice, but not one that will be objectified by the sexualizing male gaze (Cavedweller 154). Rosemary’s erotic power allows her to assert her own agency despite Cayro’s restrictive categories. The small town finds Rosemary, a beautiful African American woman, offensive. The men try to reduce her to epithets (“‘Yankee nigger bitch’”) while simultaneously sexualizing her (“‘High-priced tail’”) (157-58). In addition to the sexualizing effect of the male gaze that Mulvey identifies, Rosemary’s name-calling and sexualization emphasize the specificities of the Southern male-gaze. In “Controlling Images,” Katherine Henniger elucidates the importance of the visual legacy in Southern culture and its relationship to power dynamics by underlining
this gaze as a defining power over female bodies (92). She writes that the Southern male gaze, with the South’s role as the “representational repository of national racism, class exploitation, religious fanaticism, and gender/sex oppression” makes “women, girls, sexual transgressives, and blacks of all ages and genders represent the low other, the source of disorder” (Henniger 93). Henniger’s explanation of how the Southern male gaze objectifies not only women but also people of color stresses the intersecting categories of race and gender, and shows how Rosemary, as an African American woman, would be particularly subjected to it. However, Rosemary, in touch with her erotic power, subverts this gaze. Instead of visibly reacting to Harold Parish’s flirtations, for example, she responds with a “carefully blank look,” emphasizing that she denies him his patriarchal entitlement of definition and, instead, actively retains her subjectivity (Cavedweller 158). Rosemary even reverses the gaze and sexualizes Harold Parish: “There was something in the look Rosemary gave him that made him feel not only big-shouldered but handsome and appreciated” (158). While not as demeaning as the patriarchal gaze—after all it has a positive effect on Harold Parish—Rosemary’s reversal still makes him dissuade other Cayro men from objectifying her through their foul talk (158). Retaining her own agency, Rosemary can act—and use her body—in the way she wants. Doing so, she challenges patriarchal society’s ability to bind women to its restrictive definitions.

Actually, both Rosemary and M.T. feel free to use their bodies on their own terms which indicates their capacity to move outside of Cayro’s rigid society that harms women

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23 Harold Parish is one of the minor characters Allison uses as an example of male attitude toward Rosemary in Cayro (157).
and who, consequently, struggle to discover their erotic guides. Rosemary, although she helps Delia care for Clint by cooking and cleaning, refuses to touch him, denying the abusive man access to her body (155). Allison also portrays M.T. as a character comfortable acting upon her bodily desires; like Rosemary, she refuses to position herself physically near Clint (114). Additionally, she enters healthy sexual relationships and does so without worrying about her potential stigmatization. Dismissing her reputation, M.T. subverts the wittigian social contract, or the language and resultant heterosexual social system that demarcate women as a lower class (Wittig 34). M.T. fascinates Dede in particular, as Cayro stigmatizes Dede as “whore” as a preteen and sex engrosses her (63). To gain her secret, Dede asks M.T. how she attracts so many men; a question that Allison tells us preoccupies most of the town (318). However, Allison implies that M.T.’s power does not derive from her sexual availability as much as her thoughtfulness that seems to come with her age: she knows that what she wants and what men want are the same thing (Cavedweller 317-18). According to Lorde, the erotic power of sharing joy leads to a greater understanding, and I suggest that M.T.’s ability to communicate with others and enjoy her sexuality makes her desirable (57). Her sexual activity does not derive from fulfilling male desires but instead stems from asserting her own sexual agency, notably through communication and empathy with her male lovers. This generates mutually enjoyable sexual relationships. Dede, however, does not understand M.T.’s deployment of her erotic guides and reduces her appeal to pure physicality: “You got some exotic skill only possible for a woman of size? You half smother them or something?” (Cavedweller 318). Dede reduces sexuality to the physicality of intercourse and
attractiveness demonstrating, in turn, that, since patriarchal society casts her as a “white trash” girl it marks her body, and by extension, her sexual identity, with its values.

With Dede’s definition of sexuality, Allison demonstrates that the intersection of sexuality and class imprint “white trash” women’s bodies and further remove them from their erotic guides. Patriarchal society typifies “white trash” as sexually immoral: Allison expresses her own female family’s reputation as licentious, “invariably pregnant before marriage” (Skin 18), and Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz highlight the prevailing stereotype of “white trash” women as sexually unrestrained that began with the rise of “eugenic family studies” (Wray and Newitz 2). Wray and Newitz explain that even though “the adoption of eugenic theory and practice by the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s did much to discredit eugenics in the United States, the stereotypes of rural poor whites as incestuous and sexually promiscuous. . . remain with us to this day” (2). Wray and Newitz’s research reveals that the traits of “white trash,” beginning with the study of eugenics, were originally thought to be inheritable; despite knowing that this is not the case, the myth persists, and American culture continues to designate poor white women as inherently sexually deviant. Allison shows us that Dede internalizes this intersection of class and gender as her character becomes infatuated with sex. Dede, in her “white trash” body—a barrier she cannot escape—also sees her sexuality as an inherited, inescapable trait. Likewise, she links her sexuality and class to her confined social position. Like Allison, Dede’s class shapes her sexuality, and the stigma prevents her, and her low other female family, from using the erotic as M.T. and Rosemary can and thus indicates

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24 Refer to “A Question of Class” in Allison’s collection of essays, Skin, for her discussion about how her “sexual identity is intimately constructed by [sic][her] class and regional background” (23).
that women’s erotic power must come from within. Dede’s fixation with the physical body reflects her confined position within Cayro society as a lower class girl whom the town labels in childhood, and her sisters feel this social discomfort as well. Amanda, as the daughter of Delia and Clint, believes in her social stigmatization since she considers herself ugly and, by extension, worthless (213). Cayro relegates her, like Dede, to a binding identity in childhood and she inherits the “white trash” label from her parents. Likewise, Cissy expresses discomfort in her body and longs to feel the contentment others do, which, Vint argues (151), reflects her discomfort with the social order, and also, I would add, her social position (Cavedweller 279). Confined to their low other bodies and their social position, patriarchal society further removes the women from the erotic: they cannot discover their internal self-knowledge because they have internalized Cayro’s definition of them as deserving of their imposed “white trash”—and hence worthless—identities.

The girls focus on their bodies because Cayro reduces them to their labeled figures and confines them within the category of “white trash women” and the concentration on their regulated bodies inhibits the discovery of their erotic guides. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Iris Marion Young discusses how a body’s capacity for physical movement indicates the body’s ability to move safely within their society and I would like to consider this in relation to the defining male gaze. Young writes that a woman keeps her body inward and does not extend her throw like a man because a woman “lives in her body as an object as well as a subject” which illustrates the male gaze’s power to objectify and that “An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as
shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention” (Young 44, italics in original). Young illustrates women’s position in a heterosexual, patriarchal society inhibits the discovery of her own needs or desires. As a woman is both object and subject, society keeps her from gaining the full agency of a man, who can move freely as an uninhibited subject. Thus, Young continues, a woman’s limited physical movement becomes indicative of her social movement, as society perceives the world as more dangerous for a woman as subjective males can objectify her body through violent acts like rape (45). The threat of patriarchal violence keeps women relegated to their bodies, but it also consigns them to restricted social movement because they feel confined to the narrow social space and scope of experience patriarchy designates as safe. Allison expresses this when Dede insists on getting a job in Cayro despite the inadequate prospects because “she claimed that outside the city limits lay chaos and bad drugs” (Cavedweller 262). Dede, focused on the well-being of her physical body—believing she will succumb to her self-destructive drug habit outside of Cayro—restricts her social mobility by insisting on staying in a town that not only has limited opportunities, but also denies her access to her own erotic guides and prevents her from moving outside of her designated social position, such as when Emmett Tyler25 dissuades her from becoming a police officer (263).

Due to Cayro’s patriarchal definitions that create a confining realm, Delia and her daughters struggle to discover their own erotic power and to move outside of their designated social space. In Cayro, they are subject to the “white trash” label that

25 Cayro’s deputy who is infatuated with Delia and has arrested Dede numerous times (217-19; 263).
mentally, physically, and socially binds them to the town and the community’s definitions. Showing that M.T. and Rosemary can access the erotic, however, Allison reveals that even women whom patriarchal society and its resulting compulsory heterosexuality marginalize can remove themselves from their definition and lead self-fulfilling lives outside of the double bind. However, because the small town’s rigid structures reduce them to the markers of their bodies, Delia, Dede, Amanda, and Cissy must move past their bodies to acquaint themselves with their own erotic power. Physically constrained in Cayro by limiting stereotypes, they must utilize female friendships for survival.

Section 3: Unearthing the Erotic and Voicing Desire

Dorothy Allison’s “white trash” female characters evolve in a society that does not allow them to thrive. In Cayro, they enact their labeling, and as such, are caged into the lives the town designs for them. This pressure to adapt to established identity patterns strips Delia and her daughters from their individual desires and, thus, they are removed from their erotic guides, or powerful “internal knowledge and needs” and become vessels that “conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need” (Lorde 58). Preventing women from realizing their internal knowledge and becoming aware of their individual aspirations, patriarchal society reduces working-class women to mundane existences in which they may occupy their bodies but may not govern them. Allison illustrates this through flashbacks of Delia’s life with Clint. Delia’s desperation speaks to the survival of the body; patriarchal physical and social violence has completely removed her from her desires and she cannot leave her position:
When people asked her why she had run, why she had left Clint and her girls behind like that, Delia was never able to explain . . . She would remember the despair that flooded her when little Amanda began to sob and Delia couldn’t pull herself up to go to her. She had left her children long before her body left. She had been gone long before she climbed on Randall’s bus. (*Cavedweller* 147-48)

Delia, after years of physical abuse that exacerbates the social violence that limits her to a mundane position of “white trash” woman, occupies her body as an object, and cannot become the subject, the active character who can reach for her child. She sees her non-presence in her children’s lives as the same as if she had stayed and been a visible mother, which highlights the extremity of her removal—her oppression has “become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” and she cannot act on her own accord (Lorde 58). Like the “white trash” women in Allison’s family, she does not believe she has agency or that she can change her circumstances (*Two* 33-38). As a lower class woman, Delia becomes trapped into the mindset of survival, one that Allison calls a “conditioning of being despised” and warns that it destroys people (*Skin* 36). The internalization of self-hatred makes the basic need to survive the greatest desire. Delia passes this down to her daughters, who, like their mother, struggle to move from their designated positions as low others who survive in their bodies to women who can thrive by acting out their own sexual agencies.

Allison shows her readers that Delia survives with the help of M.T. and Rosemary, both once she leaves Cayro for Los Angeles and when she returns to Georgia.
Yet, Allison also emphasizes the importance of thriving, which women must gain through accessing erotic power and which Lorde claims cannot come from solidarity alone, but through acting on one’s individual desires. In her collection of essays, Skin, Allison writes that, “we must aim much higher than staying alive if we are to begin to approach our true potential” (209). Like Lorde insists on the necessity of women’s application of their erotic power, Allison beseeches her readers to move past survival and imagine a life where they can realize and act upon their own desires. Delia begins enacting her own aspirations once she returns to Cayro to reconnect with Dede and Amanda. While her daughters cannot recognize their mother’s decision as a desirable choice, she nonetheless makes an effort to create the fantasy she dreamed of in California—mothering her lost girls (Cavedweller 172-73). Dede, Amanda, and Cissy, however, cannot see how Delia works to turn her dream into reality; they only see her struggle and assume she succumbs to the “white trash” label. As Rosemary chastises Cissy: “You think Delia doesn’t know what she threw away? . . .Saddest thing I know is that there isn’t anybody who knows who Delia is, not even her girls. Saddest thing I know is that she is in there with that evil man, burying herself alive to save you and your sisters, and not a one [sic] of you knows what she is doing” (173). Rosemary admonishes Cissy for what she has observed of the girls since her arrival: the daughters do not see Delia as a complex woman; they reduce her, like the town does, to only being what she appears to be, a working-class mother. Wanting to avoid their mother’s fate, Dede, Amanda, and Cissy delve into their own fantasies to survive a town that relegates them to their “white trash” bodies. Delia’s daughters, bound to their social stigmatization, cannot realize their erotic guides either or imagine opportunities to thrive in their small town. Dede and Amanda, in particular,
doubt their self-worth and ability in a way that Cissy, as Randall’s daughter and outsider, does not. Dede attempts explaining how the town views her and Amanda after Clint’s funeral as she tells Cissy that it is “Like being some criminal’s child or something” (204). When Cissy tries relating by saying she experienced unwanted attention as the child of Randall and Delia, Dede responds, “That was because they were famous . . . It’s not the same” (204). Dede’s explanation of her “white trash” experience in her small town illustrates that Cayro demonizes low class individuals as criminals and as inherently felonious. As the daughter of Clint and Delia, Cayro sees Dede as incapable of breaking out of the inherited stereotype, an image scholar David Reynolds discusses in his article. Reynolds explains the myth of “white trash” as a visual legacy that highlights the worthlessness of poor whites, evolving from the image of people who were “lazy, stupid, and depraved, occasionally ceasing their incestuous rutting to shamble outside and eat a handful of dirt” to more current visuals of “slothfulness and stupidity… though dirt-eating has been… replaced by a steady diet of junk food” (360). Describing the visual legacy of “white trash,” Reynolds displays how American society makes caricatures of poor whites and locks them into a social position that they believe inheritable and inescapable and so it persists across generations (360). Dede cannot escape the portrait of her social position as the daughter of Clint and Delia and the image that keeps her tied to her body and removed from her individual erotic power.

However, Allison illustrates that Amanda and Dede, through their relationships with women, utilize sources of imagination and fantasy where they can access their erotic guides. This, in turn, permits them to begin imagining lives outside of their “white trash” social identities. As mentioned previously, Dede loves driving; however, until Dede
moves in with Delia she must rely on the demanding Petrie boys, who want access to Dede’s body in exchange for driving lessons. Once Dede moves in with Delia, Delia offers driving lessons as she senses the boys’ motives, and Allison tells readers that Delia’s driving lessons foster a relationship between the mother and daughter (*Cavedweller* 130). The rekindling of Delia and Dede’s relationship is important as the women bond and Dede gains the confidence and independence to exercise her individual desire. The car becomes, to Delia’s disdain, Dede’s self-expression, an uninhibited place that offers independence from the confines of a “white trash” identity. When Delia warns Dede that she should use caution while driving and that driving is “‘no reflection of your soul, nothing you can use to prove who you are,’” Dede responds, “‘Yeah, I know. But I was wondering, how fast can this thing go?’” (130). Despite Delia’s warning that driving does not define Dede’s identity, Dede clearly disregards this philosophy, and uses her new freedom as a chance to express herself and experiment with the limits of the car and herself. If the opportunity to exhibit an unfettered identity in the cave-like shelter of the car intoxicates Dede, Allison shows that this unadulterated freedom has dangerous consequences. Driving, Dede can imagine a life outside of the “white trash” stereotype and can escape Frye’s double bind where “one can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation” (3). In Cayro, a girl like Dede, bound by the wittigian social contract, can only express her sexuality as either being a “virgin” or “whore.” In the car, however, Dede imagines a sexual identity that the people of Cayro cannot contrive, even developing sexual fantasies of reversing patriarchy’s control of women’s sexualities:
Helpless. It would be nice to have him helpless. She would like to touch that boy any way she wanted, to stroke him and get him as disturbed as the brothers had managed to get her. She wondered if it would ever be possible to have sex with a boy, not get pregnant, and not have him tell everybody and their cousin you had done it. (Cavedweller 222)

In this excerpt, Dede fantasizes about having sex with an unconscious Craig Petrie. Within the liberating space that represents the car, Dede creates a sexual identity outside of the submissive role that Cayro sees suitable for women, and the car becomes a cave-like space. Like Sedgwick describes sexuality’s ability to break from the essentialism that often traps discussion of gender, I would like to suggest that, with the car’s function as a removal from society (its ability to isolate Dede’s thoughts about sexuality and its use as a space where new sexual possibilities emerge within Dede’s consciousness) Allison makes the Datsun—and Dede’s fantasy—a cave, defying the essentialist thought of what a cave is—and sexuality is—by creating a space that generates other possibilities for sexuality that deviate from imposed sex and gender roles. In this new conception of the cave, Dede dominates the boy, reversing the process of Othering Beauvoir posits in the Second Sex: where “essentially . . . the male [is] a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex. . .He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (6). Like Rosemary turns the male gaze back upon itself when she sexualizes Harold Parish, Dede Others Craig Petrie and challenges the mode in which masculinity—and compulsory heterosexuality—operate: she makes herself the subject and objectifies him to create her sexual identity. Additionally, enacting her erotic power allows her to have sex without
the consequences that would chain her to fulfilling her “white trash” destiny: becoming a pregnant teenager that the town condemns. However, this fantasy cannot last as Dede’s speed excels and she loses control of the car, nearly killing her sister, Cissy, and herself (*Cavedweller* 223-24). That Allison ends Dede’s fantasy with near-death suggests that her character must learn to channel her erotic energy and use it outside the space of the car and within society, regardless of how problematic or discriminative the latter is.

As Dede’s sister, Amanda suffers similarly from social class stigma. Allison illustrates Amanda’s desperation to escape “white trash” shame after she tells her grandmother that she has seen God. Entrenched in the image of herself and her family as worthless, Amanda cannot believe she deserves to see Him. Allison writes Amanda’s prayer as she looks at herself, “God, teach me love, she begged. Make me worthy. She was Delia Byrd’s daughter, Clint Windsor’s girl. She was the child no one had loved enough to keep with them. She was one of the ones who would have to work to deserve the light” (*Cavedweller* 213). Amanda struggles to find her own self-worth and sees herself merely as a body produced by Delia and Clint, like her sister Dede. She believes herself incapable of acting out her deepest desires because, as their daughter, she is fated to become a “white trash” girl. However, like her sister, Amanda also accesses an erotic source and finds support for it and individual power through a female relationship.

Amanda, who believes herself unlovable, searches for love and acceptance through God and the Church as she cannot find it within the Cayro community. Amanda becomes obsessed with religion under the care of her devout Grandma Windsor and sees it as a way for her to cleanse herself from the sin she believes she was born with (213). Raised by her pious grandmother, Amanda aspires to be a faithful Christian and preacher’s wife.
She spends her adolescence protesting against abortion, forming prayer groups, and volunteering at the church all to go “about it, the pursuit of a love she only dimly imagined” (135, 124; 213). Allison’s emphasis that Amanda can imagine this love suggests that Amanda can picture a life outside of her “white trash” label and the curse of being Clint and Delia’s daughter through her religious practices. However, this envisioning fades away because of the restraints of the “white trash” label, and because the woman Amanda learned religion from—Grandma Windsor—internalized the oppressive patriarchal definitions of Cayro and upholds the oppressive binary that produces them. Grandma Windsor, for example, so incarnates the image of the somber religious woman that she does not even smile in public—she keeps her life enjoyment secret and does not even let her granddaughters see her smile. As Dede describes her grandmother, “‘Seemed like the only time she was happy was when she was alone. You’d come on her out in the garden or somewhere where she didn’t see you, and she’d be smiling and relaxed, big old smile. Then she’d spot you and get all stern-faced and sad’” (203). Growing up with this example of a religious woman, Amanda internalizes the idea that women experience joy in limited and controlled terms: women keep visible happiness private. Allison shows readers Amanda’s philosophy as a teenager when she assembles a mass of vanilla wafer and peanut butter cookies and only eats one, to Cissy’s disbelief (121).

However, Amanda’s highly-controlled erotic energy becomes almost as catastrophic as Dede’s lack of control. When Amanda marries Michael Graham, an aspiring preacher, and has two sons, her position as devoted Christian and preacher’s wife enthralls her to the extent that she enters a dangerous fantasy, much like her sister
Dede does when driving (229). Amanda submerges herself in a cave-like delusion where she can express her desire through her roles as wife, mother, and homemaker. After her second son is born, Amanda compulsively cleans and maintains her home in pristine condition. While cleaning, she listens to Christian radio and prays, fusing her religion with her home maintenance. As Amanda believes that she must serve God to imagine a realm where she is worthy of love and free from the “white trash” label, cleaning manifests itself as the physical process that can absolve Amanda from the stigma of her class (331). Gaffney notes that Amanda’s sister Cissy becomes obsessed with cleaning as well and argues that this “middle-class housewife” habit becomes a way for Cissy to rid herself of the “white trash” label, and I would like to extend this argument to include Amanda, who ferociously cleans and maintains her home to fit into her religious ideal and distance herself from the stigma of being her parents’ child (51). Channeling her erotic energy towards her role as preacher’s wife and diligent mother, Amanda’s intense fixation makes her ill. Intoxicated with religious devotion, Amanda fantasizes that her pain derives from God-given cancer. Allison writes of Amanda’s belief in her impending death, “When she was gone, she thought…they will know who I was” (Cavedweller 332). Amanda must believe her godly destiny requires death from cancer because if she becomes a martyr, she will have proof that she has distanced herself from her “white trash” body—and identity—by becoming a child of God. When she does not die, but is hospitalized for gallstones, Allison illustrates Amanda’s morphine-induced state to illustrate the happiness she feels when removed from society (by believing that she is dead) and Amanda, “this century’s only Baptist Pentecostal nun,” (62) enters a sexual fantasy:
God was speaking, that was what she felt. She could hear him in her bones. It was like the moment when she and Michael had made their sons. Not sex but prayer, Michael’s lips on her breast, his teeth touching her skin, his gasps feeding her own, and her name an invocation in his mouth. There had been that moment when every muscle in Amanda’s body had tightened and throbbed in a psalm of joy . . . This feeling brought that moment back, all trembling tenderness and impassioned satisfaction. (337)

Allison shows that Amanda connects her erotic release—the acknowledgement of her desire and pleasure—so closely to God that she can only think about her desires when she believes she is intimate with God. Her fantasy, like her sister’s, serves as a cave-like space of isolation that inspires new sexual possibilities and the formation of a new identity away from defining society. Her delusion of cancer and death, maintained through obsessive cleaning and homemaking, kept her in her envisioned realm of God, where she was distanced from a dictated “white trash” identity that made her unlovable and worthless. The erotic hospital fantasy emphasizes that Amanda’s joy is most evident when she believes she is dead. When Amanda realizes that she is not dead, and therefore still bound to society that upholds the wittigan social contract and social class stigma, Allison forces Amanda to question her faith and destiny, and in doing so, suggests that, like Dede, Amanda has experienced a rebirth and a new consciousness, but must exercise her erotic guide within Cayro society and not just internally (338).
Section 4: Queer (Cav)escape

Through Dede and Amanda, Allison illustrates that girls must connect with women to entertain fantasies and explore their erotic guides and individual identities that can exist outside social class stigma and the demands of a patriarchal society. She utilizes Cayro-outsider Cissy to further this illustration by showing how the inability to bond with women prevents fantasy and discovery of erotic power. Furthermore, because Cissy, like Allison, is queer, she represents a third possibility that lies outside of the double bind that Cayro upholds and that Dede and Amanda embody. Thus, Cissy does not want to simply escape the oppressive options of either “virgin” or “whore,” but the society that only offers two choices for women. Cissy, as the illegitimate daughter of a rock star and a “white trash” woman, is a misfit to Cayro immediately upon her arrival there. The town Others Cissy, like Beauvoir explains: insular communities Other the newcomer (6).

However, Allison demonstrates that Cissy’s outsider status also connects to her parentage since she is the “living embodiment of Delia’s sin” and this exacerbates her status as Other (Vint 150). Likewise, Cayro channels the hatred they feel for Delia and her departure toward Cissy, which enhances her status as a social outsider (150). Yet, Allison informs her readers that the community labels Cissy as an outcast for more than her being Randall Pritchard and Delia Byrd’s illegitimate daughter. Unable to bond with her female family, Cissy lacks the support system to develop her erotic guides. Allison exemplifies Cissy’s misfit status within her household with how she views religion. On the morning of Amanda’s wedding, the girls get in an argument in which they decide that Cissy is the one who is damned:
At heart, Delia’s first two girls were believers. Amanda worried about her own worth, but not about the possibility that there might be a Nazarene to judge her. Dede’s faith was seasonal but there was no blasphemy in her, while Cissy picked at the idea of God like a prickly abrasion on her soul. It was Cissy, they all agreed, who was the heathen. ([Cavedweller](#) 228)

The two supposedly dichotomous sisters in union emphasize how separate Cissy is from the family. Like the town ostracizes Cissy, her sisters form “the One,” or absolute, and Cissy becomes the Other again, against the sisters ([Beauvoir](#) 6). Dede and Amanda might fight with each other, but they are still whole, complete sisters, even if the double bind confines them, with one of them being “no virgin” and the other a “nun.” Cissy is the sister who does not belong and is removed into a lonely, heathen realm that harkens to her former California life ([Cavedweller](#) 8).

Besides being separate from her sisters, Cissy also harbors hatred for her mother that keeps Delia from helping Cissy like she does Dede or supporting her like she does with Amanda. While Cissy’s hatred for her mother stems from directly witnessing her addiction and because of her forced move to Cayro, Cissy’s resentment does not fade as she grows older. Allison portrays Cissy’s social position and status as an outsider during her teenage years by emphasizing her abhorrence of her mother and by describing her tastes and dislikes: Cissy “loved folk music. . . and science fiction books featuring orphan girls with amazing hidden powers. She hated . . . Amanda, and the entire congregation of Cayro Baptist Tabernacle. . .And Delia. In a completely matter-of-fact-way, Cissy hated Delia and tried to make sure she knew it” (236). Portraying Cissy as hateful of Amanda,
Delia, and the community’s religion, Allison highlights Cissy as a girl who does not belong in the Southern town and her description of her interests also indicates her outcast status. Furthermore, the description also hints at an erotic source for Cissy and a hobby she acquires that allows her to envision a realm that is hospitable to outsiders, especially as, in the rural community, Cissy cannot realize her queer identity—she can only recognize her difference. Allison describes in an interview with journalist Laura Miller that Cissy is “In the dark in more ways than one. In this decade there is a lot of information about lesbians. But there wasn’t before this, especially not in small towns. And so what happened is that you couldn’t quite get it. It didn’t quite register. You knew you were weird” (84). Unable to understand her queerness, Cissy remains a stranger and can only bond with Nolan, a fellow misfit, who also finds an enticing escape in science fiction (Cavedweller 64).

Cissy is acutely aware that she does not have a place in the Cayro community or in her family, even if she does not yet realize her actual sexual orientation. When she first arrives in Georgia, she adjusts by reading works such as Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea series, which she borrows from Nolan (64). Through science fiction, Cissy can travel outside the confining world of Cayro, explore identities outside of the “white trash” stereotype, and separate herself from her low other female family. Similarly to her half-sisters’ erotic spaces, science fiction allows her to inhabit a cave-like dimension where she can, as scholar Thomas Dunn describes, “transcend barriers of a closed society” (106). Furthermore, Allison purposefully selects the science fiction that Cissy reads, such as the works of Le Guin, Robert A. Heinlein, Vonda McIntyre, Kate Wilhelm, and James Tiptree, Jr., as these authors belong to the New Wave of science fiction that emerged in
the 1960s and 70s and which portrays women as realistic, strong protagonists, as well as exploring gender roles and alternate sexual identities outside of the heteronormative binary (*Cavedweller* 64, 67; Reid 74-77). While Cissy cannot bond with women or find a space within Cayro to discover an erotic source, she does find that place within reading science fiction. This literary genre allows her to escape the town’s patriarchal, heterosexual society that encourages physical violence against women as well as the oppressive double bind that confines heterosexual women like Cissy’s sisters. Through reading, Cissy finds an alternate way to discover the erotic, and through science fiction she finds a place to exercise fantasy. I would like to argue that Cissy’s initial fascination with science fiction makes caving enticing for her and also gives her the opportunity to make the important connection to women.

Before introducing Cissy to the caves, Allison emphasizes that she does not belong in Cayro and that she will have to find a place outside of the patriarchal sphere to discover her erotic guides and develop her identity. She will have to become like Wittig’s political lesbians who “tear themselves away from the heterosexual order only by running away” and break the social contract that demands she adhere to a limited female position (34). On her fourteenth birthday, her friend Nolan introduces her to his family’s caving haunts and a place where Cissy can escape the heterosexual order. In the caves, Allison’s readers see that, for the first time, Cissy feels safe in a place where she can be herself and explore her identity (*Cavedweller* 242). Furthermore, Allison shows us Cissy’s initial sensual experience in the caves, and it resembles the pleasure of Amanda’s hospital fantasy:
Instantly she could feel the open space above her expand as synapses fired and sparked. A bead of colored flame lit as she clenched her teeth. Every sound made color. Sand shifted beneath Cissy, and that sound became a streak of sky. . .Cissy turned her head again, and the sound of her breath was a blood-dark ruby moon. She held her breath and a diamond glint of ice yellow bloomed behind her neck. Cissy laughed, pleasure rising in her throat. (242)

From her first excursion, Allison tells us—and as I demonstrated in the first chapter—Cissy feels safe and like she can be a whole person when removed from the small rural town. This safety also permits a sensual, erotic experience for Cissy, who can appreciate sensation apart from Cayro and discover pleasure. Furthermore, Allison connects Cissy’s comfort and sensuality to her feeling something similar to Amanda’s connection to God, as she continues, “This must be what Amanda feels when she prays so hard, like being held close in the hand of God” (244). Comparing Cissy’s initial caving experience with Amanda’s fervent faith, Allison implicitly ties Amanda’s erotic space, religion, to Cissy’s realization of hers—the caves.

From the beginning of Cissy’s caving voyages, Allison portrays her explorations as if she were in an adventure novel and a heroine in one of her science fiction books. Carmen Burton-Hardee in her brief article, “Red Dirt Girl as Hero,” demonstrates that Cissy’s adventures under the earth make her a Mythic Hero (244). I would like to explore this assertion by considering that Cissy’s caving becomes more like the novels she has grown up with. The similarity between Cissy’s activity and her readings become more pronounced when Nolan introduces her to Jean and Mim, two queer girls who share
Cissy’s passion for caving. Jean and Mim, as fellow cavers, permit Cissy to further her exploration of Paula’s Lost and Little Mouth since Nolan can no longer go with her, and caving alone is too dangerous (250, 270). Smitten with the couple, Cissy describes her first encounter: “her first thought was that they did not look like they were from Cayro. They looked like those heroines in the science fiction books she used to share with Nolan” and she further asserts that the girls’ “exotic” looks make them appealing, as they are drastically different, in both appearance and behavior, from other girls in her small town (272-73). Jean and Mim, as likened to science fiction creatures, entice Cissy and their familiarity encourages her to bond with them. They even become Cissy’s first female companions in Cayro, with whom she may experience female solidarity. Consequently, this friendship enables Cissy’s development of an internal erotic guide, like Dede finds while driving, and Amanda finds through religion. Like her sisters’ erotic spaces engross them, the caves become completely intoxicating as Cissy can explore an identity outside of Cayro’s patriarchal structure and heteronormative social contract. Gaffney discusses Cissy’s caving as a process for her to confront the “white trash” label and realize its construction, as well as where she begins to realize her queer sexual orientation and the complexity of her mother’s “white trash” identity (53-55). While I agree with Gaffney’s points, I would like to further her argument and place it within the context of Lorde’s description of the erotic. Lorde emphasizes that the power of the erotic is about self-knowledge, and of understanding ourselves and our desires and what we require for personal satisfaction (54-55). Cissy finds personal satisfaction within the caves, as Allison tells us, “They were four hours down into Little Mouth, and she felt completely loose and happy in her body. . . I love it down here, Cissy thought. Down
here, I know who I am, what I can do. . . . This is where I belong” (Cavedweller 307). In the caves, Cissy finds the joy Lorde explains is necessary for women to experience to escape their imposed oppression and for their bodies to become more than vessels for the patriarchal system. Furthermore, she comes to understand herself and her desires through the sensations she has caving with Jean and Mim: “A vibration rippled out from Mim’s gentle contralto and echoed in the belly bowl of Cissy’s pelvis. The feeling was small, wonderful, and secret. It made Cissy want to smile” (309). Cissy, although she conceals her sensation from the girls, still recognizes it herself and comes to understand her internal desire of being sexually attracted to Mim. With this self-knowledge, Cissy can embrace a multifaceted identity that does not adhere to Cayro’s heteronormative binary and that can exist outside of the oppressive double bind.

Yet, Allison also stresses that Cissy cannot stay in her cave, and that remaining tied to the source of erotic energy without employing its power within patriarchal society can lead to danger and self-destruction. Like Dede and Amanda’s erotic sources, caving becomes dangerous and life-threatening for Cissy. With her new friends, Cissy becomes determined to find the connection between Paula’s Lost and Little Mouth, a venture that has never been completed. She is confident in her self-knowledge, especially after finally realizing that Jean and Mim are lovers and that she might be queer as well (Cavedweller 409). In her newfound assurance, Cissy proclaims, “I don’t care who I am. I can go to Los Angeles in the fall. I can be anybody” and decides to pursue the connection between the caves despite the severe trouble her sisters are in—Dede is jailed for shooting Nolan and Amanda appears to be suffering a mental breakdown (409). She experiences what Lorde describes as the benefit of her personal erotic power: “In touch with the erotic, I
become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such a resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (58). Lorde stresses that her erotic power enables her to not only move outside of an imposed patriarchal identity but that it also permits her to become a self-satisfied, joyous person comfortable in her own, self-created identity.

However, after Cissy’s announcement, she, Jean, and Mim become so intoxicated by their adventure that they become terribly lost. Allison’s creation of the near-death experience indicates that Allison believes that, although Cissy’s ability to feel that she can be anybody is important, it is also vital that she takes care of her sisters, Amanda and Dede. Through the girls’ peril, Cissy realizes the importance of her female family and solidarity above the ground and within society. In their danger, she channels her mother’s determination and sees Delia’s strength and reason for dragging her across the country to Cayro, as Cissy thinks that her voice sounds like her mother’s and that “Delia had talked like that when she had dragged them all the way across the country. She had pushed and prodded and forced Cissy to do what had seemed like sheer craziness . . . It had not mattered that there had been no reason to believe they were going somewhere safe” (418). In danger, Cissy can see that her mother was using her desperate, erotic guide to pull them out of a dangerous situation and return to a place where they could move past survival and where they could possibly thrive. Using her mother’s example, Cissy becomes the determined heroine, similar to that of one in her science fiction novels, and finds the way out of the caves, where Allison places her back into Cayro society. Bringing Cissy out of the caves a final time, Allison intends for her to begin moving past exercising her erotic guide through caving and to begin sharing her internal knowledge
and self—like M.T. and Rosemary do—rather than keeping it private. If unexpressed, as Allison shows through Cissy, Dede, and Amanda, erotic power leads to disaster and self-destruction.

Despite illustrating the realization of her female characters’ erotic guides and understanding that they need to live these identities within patriarchal society, Allison’s novel ends not with an image of sisterly harmony, but of the sisters being themselves. Each daughter, having experienced the power of the erotic—and of near-death—begins to live their identities outward, and they each challenge the compulsory heterosexuality that removes women from their internal knowledge and needs. Dede and Nolan are expecting a baby but not getting married, with Dede planning on taking a truck-driving class while Nolan parents, Michael, Amanda’s husband, sings to their child, permitting Amanda, who has relaxed her intense parenting and homemaking, to argue with Cissy. Cissy, although still not certain about her sexual identity, has decided to move to Los Angeles and go to college. All of the family members, despite their differences, are under the same house, with the final scene depicting Rosemary and Delia watching Delia’s grandson and deciding, “it’s time for some new songs” (432-34). Showing that Cissy reemerges to Cayro’s society to interact with her mother and her sisters, Allison stresses that female erotic power remains useless if women internalize their desires and remove themselves from the challenges of patriarchal society. If erotic guides are kept internal, like Dede’s during driving, Amanda’s during devotion, and Cissy’s during exploration, patriarchal society remains unchallenged and oppressive. The double bind persists and women—and other marginalized people—are kept divided and continue to perpetuate oppression through social and physical violence. In an interview with Michael Rowe, Allison
discusses “The Carol Vance One-Third Rule,” and this philosophy appears to be a concept the author applies to *Cavedweller*:

[Vance] Used to say that in any sexual experience, one-third of your audience is going to be titillated, one third is going to be appalled, and one-third is going to be bored. And until you acknowledge that dynamic, you are going to be in trouble . . . If we had the kind of wide open society that I’m working for, that I want to exist, we would allow those thirds to get along with each other. (Rowe 65)

Although erotic power and sexual experience are considerably different, Allison makes her mission apparent in how she depicts Amanda, Dede, and Cissy, who cannot appreciate each other’s erotic guides. While their differences go unaddressed, their fantasies and erotic guides lead them to peril. However, when they acknowledge each other’s erotic guides and internal identities they can form solidarity. In this community, they defy the restraints of compulsory heterosexuality and understand that “women. . .exist on a lesbian continuum. . . whether [sic] [they] identify. . . as lesbian or not” and, doing so, resist patriarchal domination (Rich 136). Furthermore, with her final imagery of Delia and Rosemary talking amongst themselves while the family carries on and with the young boy at their feet, Allison illustrates that women in solidarity—and who use their creative erotic forces—will maintain their family and pass along the power of the woman-defined erotic to a future male generation that will permit patriarchal society to move past social and physical violence.
Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller* addresses the oppressive forces that trap women and men alike in a patriarchal society. Although the novel depicts the ramifications of extreme masculinity and resulting (self) destructive femininity, it also provides remedy through its depiction of the strength and importance of erotic power and female solidarity. Collectively, empowered women and supportive men can combat the civil war of gendered violence patriarchal society creates and encourages through masculine hegemony (Despentes 47). Furthermore, in a culture where toxic masculinity abounds and culminates in the murder of women because of men’s internal fear of powerlessness and sexual inadequacy—as when Elliot Rodger shot and killed six women in Isla Vista, California in May 2014 (Decker 27-29)—it is imperative that our society considers how we think about gender and sexuality and the binaries and extreme gender roles that encourage violence and fatalism. As I have presented in my thesis, Allison’s *Cavedweller* provides both a critique of patriarchy and a vision for a more peaceful and joyful future through gender ambiguity, erotic knowledge, and an empowered community of women.

Setting her novel in the oppressive American South that emboldens extreme binaries, Allison demonstrates that even places entrenched with patriarchal values can be sites of feminist revolution. The South, as Henniger notes, is the “representational repository of national racism, class exploitation, religious fanaticism, and gender/sex oppression,” and as such serves as a symbol of hyperbolic patriarchy (93). Ultimately, illustrating that a queer, “white trash” gender ambiguous character like Cissy Pritchard can develop and use her queer perspective amidst this toxic environment that condones
hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, Allison suggests that all places in which patriarchy dominates can experience the queering of their communities and the way they view gender, sexuality, class, and race.

Yet, gender ambiguity alone cannot address the complexities of patriarchal oppression that continue to silence women’s—and minorities at large—desires and thwart their agencies. As Allison demonstrates with all of her female characters, each woman, regardless of their specific gender or sexual identity, must access their erotic guides that patriarchy does not demark to develop their own agencies and to break from the wittigan social contract. To escape physical and symbolic violence, women must acknowledge—and use—their erotic power. Furthermore, this empowered community of women can challenge patriarchy and instigate societal change. As Lorde proclaims, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (59). To move past oppression of a (hetero) sexist, racist, and classist society, women must recognize their desires and form friendships and community with other women. Recognizing that compulsory heterosexuality has not only removed women from their internal knowledge, but from their community, will be an important, but possible, initial step. As demonstrated by Cissy, Dede, Amanda, Delia, M.T., and Rosemary, through the discovery of erotic power and communication, women can move from oppressive, isolated positions and challenge the structures that attempt to silence their internal desires.

When Allison’s female characters discover their erotic power they can create their own identities, and their sense of themselves becomes key in escaping the patriarchal
double bind and challenging patriarchy itself. Allison, however, acknowledges the struggle of maintaining this created identity in a fear-imposing society, writing “I try to live naked in the world, unashamed even under attack, unafraid even though I know how much there is to fear. . . . Trying always to know what I am doing and why, choosing to be known as who I am—feminist, queer, working class, and proud of the work I do—is as tricky as it ever was” (Skin 250). Allison’s quote highlights the struggle of maintaining one’s erotic power and one’s identity in a society that condemns so much of who she is. However, Allison’s survival—and her ability to thrive—comes from continually renewing her personal purpose: “I have to try constantly to understand more, love more fully, go more naked in order to make others as safe as I myself want to be. I want to live past my own death, as my mother does, in what I have made possible for others—my sisters, my son, my lover, my community” (250). Despite the challenges of living in an oppressive society, Allison maintains her erotic power by continually using it—attempting to understand, to make herself vulnerable so that she can come closer to realizing her identity and what her purpose is, which is ultimately to help others thrive as well. Like M.T. and Rosemary share joy and the erotic with others, so does Allison with her readers. Writing Cavedweller, Allison exposes her own identity so that she may share her erotic power and creative force by emboldening other women through advocacy and illustrating to men the wonderful and inspiring energy of the woman-defined erotic.
WORKS CITED


