

‘TRASH ALWAYS RISES’: REGIONALISM AND VIOLENCE IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S *BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*

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Part autobiography, part fiction, Dorothy Allison’s first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) provides a graphic depiction of the domestic and sexual violence inflicted upon a twelve-year old girl by her stepfather in Greenville County, South Carolina, during the 1950s. Possibly the most demonised and scrutinised regional space within the national boundaries of the USA, ‘the South has long been that “other country” which is both part of, and differentiated from, the rest of the nation’ (Taylor 317). Its slave economy and violent, divisive history have led to its description as a regional space in which a sense of place is paramount and whose ‘refusal to engage with the wider world and its concerns has locked it into a morbid past’ (ibid). Often portrayed as insular and obsessed with its indigenous history and character, the South is repeatedly derided for the incestuous nature of relations, be they family members or religious and political alliances. At once testimony and denunciation, Allison’s text both disturbs and unsettles the reader in its exploration of this region and the ties between love, violence and loyalty in a so-called ‘white trash’ community.

The first child of unwed fifteen-year old Ruth Gibson, Allison was born in 1949 as a member of what she proudly terms ‘the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum’ (*Two or Three Things* 1). Sexually abused by her own stepfather between the ages of five and eleven, and the victim of physical abuse for a further five years, the act of writing has, according to the author, allowed her to not only reclaim her family’s pride and tragedy but also the embattled sexuality she had fashioned ‘a base of violence and abuse’ (Aldrich and Wotherspoon 11). The importance of self-narration is expanded upon on in Allison’s autobiographical *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1996). This text, which is, in many ways, a companion piece to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, was written for performance in the months following the completion of the novel and interrogates the art of storytelling as an act of self-formation. Describing the use of telling stories to effect change, Allison relays a heated exchange with her stepfather: ““you can’t break me”, I told him. ““And you’re never going to touch me again”. It was a story to tell myself, a promise. Saying out loud, “you’re never going to touch me again”, that

was a piece of magic' (*Two or Three Things* 12). The success of this self-authorship or "magic" is confirmed from the outset by Allison's decision to begin her account of the conversation with the line 'the last time my stepfather beat me' (ibid). As *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* continues she repeatedly returns to this story as evidence of her worth: 'In the worst moments of my life, I have told myself that story, the story about a girl who stood up to a monster. Doing that, I make a piece of magic inside myself' (68).

The narrator of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is twelve-year-old Ruth Anne Boatwright, referred to as 'Bone' by her family.¹ This first person narrative provides the reader with a chronological account of Bone's birth after a car accident and the declaration of her illegitimacy—she is the eponymous 'bastard' of the novel's title—to her mother's marriage to Glen Waddell and his systematic physical and sexual abuse of his step-daughter. For Allison, the ability to ascribe meaning to traumatic events appears to determine one's position as either a survivor or a victim of violence. The author distinguishes between subject positions in the following terms. She has argued that under patriarchal law women who are molested during childhood start out as victims and then 'victims become complicit with abuse and honour injunctions posed by perpetrators to dismiss the abusers' import or impact' (ibid). Survivors, by contrast, 'reject the demand to remain politely silent' (ibid). In the novel, the act of storytelling itself is a conscious act of self-definition which allows Bone to exert her influence retrospectively over events and construct her own independent survival narrative.

One may contend, however, that Allison's own history of abuse creates a problematic tension within the novel. The author's emphasis on the 'magic' of self-narration as evidence of survival and potential for recovery goes against the grain of the brutal reality of Bone's position and experience. Story-telling may offer a redemptive path towards self-definition, but it remains questionable to what extent the author's own experiences distort and magnify the significance of the girl's narrative position. Bone's testimony is subject not only to a slippage between public façade and private truth in that her position as narrator offers her the opportunity to revise and reinterpret events, but also to a shift between biography and fiction which prevents the reader from considering her narrative as either entirely autonomous or believable. Bone's responses, for example, are embedded in what Allison terms 'white trash' culture (ibid). While Glen's actions are specific to Bone, the language which details the girl's surroundings illustrate how larger social histories impose themselves upon an individual's bodily experience. Both the protagonist's immediate and extended family, for

instance, are repeatedly forced to move due to their extreme poverty, whereas her aunts' domestic spaces are referred to as 'warm, always humming with voices and laughter' (*Bastard* 80). Their rambling old houses contrast sharply with the 'small and close and damp-smelling...tract houses' that Glen selects in an attempt to imitate the style of his more prosperous brothers (79). His houses remain 'cold, no matter that we had a better furnace and didn't leave our doors open for the wind to blow through' (80). History is understood to be embedded in objects and spaces, which become an archive of social forces and structures of feeling.² The Boatwrights' economic and social position is reiterated in the description of their everyday experiences, in the smells and sights of the body moving through interior and exterior spaces. Bone's reactions, and arguably even Glen's attacks, are presented not as evidence of individual agency, but as an environmentally conditioned reflex.

The son of a local white patriarch, Glen yearns to win his family's approval, but he is repeatedly dismissed 'for his hot temper, bad memory, and general uselessness' (12). Rejected, he attempts to reassert his authority by defying the cultural expectations of his wealthy family and marrying white trash:

He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earle's baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers. He would carry a knife in his pocket and kill any man who dared to touch her. (13)

While Bone's mother Anney seeks to secure her economic and social position through their union, Glen attempts to endorse his masculinity. As the third man to have had sexual relations with Anney, but the only one not to have fathered a child by her, Glen is 'swollen with satisfaction' when she falls pregnant (43). But although Anney's pregnancy can be seen as a visible representation of Glen's virility, Allison's description covertly feminises him by creating an analogy between his growing sense of pride and the changing shape of a pregnant woman's body. By 'putting his ambition in a woman's belly' he is once more portrayed as seeking to advance his status through his wife (44). When Anney loses his baby and is rendered sterile, Glen is unable to provide a visible sign of his masculinity. He subsequently plunges into a downward spiral of anguish and humiliation that is triggered by his inability to pay for his aborted son's burial. Such instances culminate in frequent violence towards Bone and/or Glen's co-workers: 'Glen wanted a plot of his own but had no money to buy one, and that seemed to be the

thing that finally broke his grief and turned it into rage' (49). In illustrating the social and economic pressures that Glen faces, Allison is not seeking to mitigate his actions but to suggest that his behaviour must be read as a partial consequence of the wider forms of systemic violence.

While the familial unit may not facilitate Glen's aspirations, the vaunting of its patriarchal structure by the law actively prohibits Bone from articulating her experiences. Leigh Gilmore states that 'the disavowal of incest in Allison's novel partakes of a silencing collusion of subjects and legal discourse around the contravened sites of sexuality, law, shame, family and self-representation' (58). That is, in the novel, Bone is prevented from denouncing Glen by her desire not to compound her mother's sense of shame and the realisation that her stepfather inhabits a secure legal space from which he is structurally well positioned to continue his abuse: 'Mama wouldn't know. More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me, I would work as hard as he did to make sure she never knew' (Allison, *Bastard* 118). Inhibited by her love for one parent, Bone is seemingly prevented from exposing the other by both her sex and social class. According to Gilmore, the state's stewardship of children until they reach the age of consent 'makes fathers into surrogates of the law while the child is a juvenile, and also makes the law an extension of the father after the child reaches what is called "legal age"' (Gilmore 59). When Anney accepts Glen's marriage proposal, he rejoices in his acquisition—and it is an acquisition—declaring 'You're mine, all of you mine' (Allison, *Bastard* 36). Bone can, therefore, be said to be prohibited from giving consent by the legal presence of the state authority in the domestic space. If she is 'owned' by her stepfather, Bone cannot withhold consent since she does not possess the sovereignty to grant it in the first place.

Nonetheless, incest *is* a crime because of 'the threat it poses to middle-class notions of family that subtend the legal constructions of rape and property' (Gilmore 57–58). The problem, then, is how incest can be recognised as a crime given the contradictory legal construction of consent for women in rape law and children in incest law. Rape is forced sex; sex to which one cannot consent, a statement which presumes of course that there is sex to which one can consent. Incest, however, is sex to which one can never consent. This legally denies the child agency. She or he is property of the father and mother. Bone is thus confronted by several urgent questions. How can she report the crime of incest? How can she define what has happened to her? And who is she when she does this?

In the case of the child who can neither give consent to her violation nor is in a position to make it end, the law's circumscribed recognition of

the harm of incest derives from the debased status it accords children. That the child can be made to submit, can be held captive in and through legal construction of the family space, is especially ironic in a narrative that consistently links illegitimacy to incest. Bone can be harmed not only because she is outside the law as a bastard, but because her mother thinks that Glen would ‘make a good daddy’, that the legal familial relation would secure her legal, and thus social, position within society (Allison, *Bastard* 13). As a man, it is Glen who possesses the freedom of opportunity to not only ‘do anything’, but to reverse her classification in the eyes of the law as ‘a bastard by the state of South Carolina’ and by the community as ‘*No-good, lazy, shiftless*’ (23, 3). The abusive and unjust exercise of power of this law in its denigration of the mother and the vaunting of the father marks a crisis in legal subjectivity, for ‘it is not merely the law’s partiality that is at issue here; rather, its claim to universality lies in the codification of an unconscious violence toward the mother’ (Gilmore 55). Such a proposition relies on the belief that the American legal system attempts to accredit equal rights to both men and women, but that women will always be subject to unfair constraint. However, it is debatable whether Anney’s repeated failure to reverse the ruling at the court house is symptomatic of an unconscious judgement imposed by a paternal law on the power of mothers to protect children: ‘The look he gave my mama and my aunt was pure righteous justification. “*What’d you expect?*” he seemed to be saying’ (5). In Allison’s novel that judgement results in the creation of a legal status and identity for Bone: she is illegitimate.

The question is whether this judgment can be considered as an unconscious act. In many second-wave feminist critiques, such as Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), the patriarchal family is understood as a microcosm of the relations between men and women in a society in which authority and power are dispensed by the father and licensed by his name.³ The declaration of Bone as a ‘bastard’ by the state can be seen to directly reinforce this arrangement in several ways. Firstly, the term itself represents evidence of what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘symbolic’ violence (1). That is, the term ‘bastard’ incites and reproduces the relations of social domination by functioning as both a warning and a punishment. Just as Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is forced to wear the scarlet letter ‘A’ to represent the act of adultery that she has committed, the stamp of ‘illegitimacy’ on Bone’s birth certificate becomes a badge of shame for both mother and daughter. The use of these symbols recalls the pre-nineteenth *ancien regime* of punishment described by Michel Foucault in which the body of the condemned man remained an essential element in

the ceremony of public punishment. Writing in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault argues that the ‘body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade...the sentence had to be legible for all’ (Foucault 43). Whilst neither Hester nor Bone is physically harmed by the process, the letter and the stamp replicate the consequences of this process in several ways. According to Foucault, public punishment ‘made the guilty man the herald of his own condemnation. He was given the task, in a sense, of proclaiming it and thus attesting to the truth of what he had been charged with’ (ibid). After being certified a ‘bastard by the state of South Carolina’, Bone’s identity is established in opposition to the status quo and both she and her mother are repeatedly forced to reassert their outsider status (Allison, *Bastard* 3). When Anney returns to the courthouse to object to the stamp of ‘illegitimacy’ she is told by the clerk: “‘This is how it’s got to be. The facts have been established’” (4). While the ‘stamp on that birth certificate burned [Anney] like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy, shiftless*’, the term is transformed into both a mode of punishment and a warning (3). ‘Identity’s constitution’, Stuart Hall reminds us, ‘is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles...identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude and leave out, to render ‘outside’ (Hall 5). That is, Bone’s status provides the citizens of Greenville County with a visible reminder of the consequences of non-conformity and in doing so reinforces the righteousness of those adhering to the current patriarchal system: ‘she could see some of the women clerks standing in a doorway, their faces almost as flushed as her own but their eyes bright with an entirely different emotion’ (4). The use of symbolic violence thus presents Bone and her mother as a visible threat to the quintessential stereotype of American women in the post-World War II years.⁴ The state is consequently able to impose further forms of systemic violence upon its citizens by presenting these restrictions as a defence against the subjective violence represented by the lower classes. For women like Anney and children like Bone, justice becomes an ‘abstract name for the harm done to them in the name of the law’ (Gilmore 55).

The law and those associated with it are widely distrusted by the Boatwrights. From the hospital doctors to the sheriff, these men and their values are presented as alien to the lower-classes, incapable of understanding their plight and acting in a manner that will exacerbate rather than alleviate their situation. Denounced by Bone as simply ‘Daddy Glen in a uniform’, the promise of legal intervention is

considered a threat, unlike the unsanctioned retaliatory actions of the Boatwright brothers which are accepted (296). When Raylene discovers the marks of Glen's beating on Bone, she alerts her brothers who exact violent physical revenge whilst the sisters wait upstairs: 'There was a scream from down the hall, a loud crashing noise and Earle's voice shouting, "I'll murder you, you son of a bitch!"...We listened to the noises from the porch. Those thuds were Daddy Glen hitting the wall' (247). To Bone, these men are heroic figures who 'could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humour and understanding' (23). Allegedly modelled on Allison's own uncles, they are renowned for their drunken binges, rumoured affairs and 'hard-mouthed contempt for anything that could not be handled by a shotgun or a two-by-four' (10). Yet, ironically, it is this very capacity for violence which Bone fears in her stepfather.

The valorisation of certain types of male violence in the text creates a paradox. The law, for example, regards the felon as ignominious; it assumes the convict will be held in dishonour. Indeed, 'the stigma that is believed to flow from conviction of a particular offence is one factor that courts consider in determining whether *mens rea* shall be required for that crime' (Duncan 59). Yet criminals are not always the objects of opprobrium: 'Non-criminals', Mary Grace Duncan asserts, 'often enjoy, love even admire criminals, not in spite of their criminality, but because of it—or because of the qualities that are inextricably linked to their criminality' (Duncan 59). Violence, and in particular male violence, is thus constructed as a means of asserting identity and independence in the often repressive and competitive space of the Deep South. The Boatwrights' legendary tempers, for instance, are feared throughout the county and Glen's own vicious temper is initially considered by Anney's family to be 'the one thing that saved [him] from the Boatwright's absolute contempt' (100). Unlike the brothers, however, Glen's outbursts lack the characteristics of what Hobsbawn first identified as the 'noble bandit' or 'social bandit' (13). Based on his research into protest movements, Hobsbawn defined social bandits as 'outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice' (ibid). He proposed that their appeal derived from 'the longing for lost innocence and adventure and freedom, heroism and the dream of justice' (ibid).

Whilst it is clear that Allison does not portray the Boatwright brothers as selfless modern-day heroes, their violent acts are never directed towards those less able than themselves. Neither do they perform these acts of violence covertly. The majority of their actions are

relayed with a humour that detracts from the seriousness of their crimes: My aunts treated my uncles like over-grown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over...the sheriff would lock them up for shooting out each other's windows, or racing their pickups down the railroad tracks, or punching out the bartender over at the Rhythm Ranch, and my aunts would shrug and make sure the children were all right (Allison, *Bastard* 23).

The brothers' humorous capacity for violence is immediately transformed into a purposeful attempt to resolve situations if family members are threatened. When Bone is raped by Glen, it is the brothers, not the police, who are 'driving the county roads at night, searching' (304). Glen's acts of violence meanwhile are presented as deliberate, humourless acts which exacerbate the fragility of his family's economic position: 'Half a dozen times I came home from school to find Mama and Glen sitting at the kitchen table with that white-eyed scared look that meant he'd jumped somebody...and lost yet another job' (100). Moreover, the majority of his violent acts are also undertaken in secrets and directed towards a child: 'Daddy Glen was careful not to hit me when one of the aunts was visiting, and never much when Mama would see' (111).

In presenting such an obvious contrast between the productive violence of the Boatwright men and the reductive behaviour of the middle-class Waddells, Allison is, arguably, idealising her own class, mythologising them in just the way she says she is debilitating. Yet, the author does not make excuses for these behaviours; rather she contextualises them in the material realities of economic oppression. Whilst the Boatwright's undoubtedly claim a certain status from these acts, they are also frustrated and crushed by them. The coping skills they have developed for dealing with the drudgery of low-paid jobs, financial hardship and the frustrations of married life prevent them from ever achieving the role of the emotionally strong breadwinner. Their unreliability and their temper see their wives leave and their relegation to even lower-skilled, lower-paying jobs. Despite Earle's joking declaration that a 'working man just naturally turns up in jail now and then', the power derived from the Boatwright's violence is momentary (127). As Raylene asserts, the notoriety the men assume upon their release is negated by current and future economic sanctions: 'All you kids think your uncles are so smart. If they're so smart, why are they all so goddam poor, huh?' (217). For Earle, Nevil and Beau violence is presented as the catalyst for and the continuation of an escalating cycle of decline which confines both them and their families in the often repressive and limited social space of the white trash community.

While female acts of aggression do occur within the novel, they are notably less frequent than instances of male violence. Often depicted as a response to antagonistic behaviour or directed towards the self, it is the active re-working of these violent scenes by the woman to construct a safe interior space which is presented as essential to overcoming the abuse. As the novel progresses, the violence and frequency of Glen's attacks increase and, to her shame, Bone starts to masturbate to fantasises of being beaten by her stepfather. Convinced of her collusion in abusive sexual practices, she can be seen to internalise a negative self-image that leaves her helpless before an implacable aggressor. She comments: 'I hid my bruises as if they were evidence of crimes I had committed. I knew I was a sick and disgusting person. I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but *I* was the one who masturbated' (113). In deriving sexual pleasure from the fantasy, Bone perceives that she is guilty through identification since both she and Glen respond in the same manner to the same act, albeit that this occurs at different times. Unable to perceive that she occupies a separate moral space to that of her abuser, Bone does not dare to reveal the abuse to her family; Glen's secret has become hers. Whilst Allison is keen to impress that the relationship is neither asked for nor wanted, it does exist. Bone's frequent engagement in what she perceives as a variety of self-damaging behaviours strengthen her bond to her stepfather and, in doing so, reduce her capacity to expose him.

Yet Bone's fantasises also demonstrate an appropriation of violence that is productive, rather than merely defensive. Such fantasises are indicative of the protagonist's ability to construct her own representation of her body, one that counteracts and challenges its brutal appropriation in the reality of her experience. By staging the body as a territory on which Bone can experience sexual pleasure, she 'simultaneously makes it the site where she can, in imagination resist and defeat the father. In this way she is gradually able to empower herself and possibly work through her trauma' (Di Prete 110). This reading hinges on the belief that Bone actively dictates her sexual desires and that her erotic fantasies are not already predefined by the violence she has encountered. Such assumptions are rendered problematic by Bone's confession that 'I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it' (Allison, *Bastard* 113). Whilst Bone's fantasises do engage in a retelling of the trauma, they mimic and reproduce the perception of bodily invasion and dissolution that she has encountered: 'I would imagine being tied up and put on a haystack while someone set the dry straw ablaze...The daydream was about struggling to get free while the fire burned hotter and closer' (63). Although the protagonist's attempt to

liberate herself through these fantasies conveys a desire to overcome the powerlessness of her position, she does not necessarily achieve any symbolic ‘defeat [of] the father’, and admits that she was unable to recall whether ‘I came when the fire reached me or after I had imagined escaping it’ (63).

The violence with which Bone’s imagination resonates when she masturbates is, however, not the same violence that Glen inflicts upon her. She does not fantasise about beating, raping, and molesting those more vulnerable than herself. Instead she fantasises about fire—an image that connects Bone with her mother’s revenge–fantasy–come–true of the burning of the courthouse, the symbol of her illegitimacy—and about avenging herself on her abuser. These fantasies contain an articulate narrative which suggests that they are more than simply a by–product of her beatings. They represent evidence of what Judith Herman has dubbed ‘therapeutic recovery’ through the ‘remembering and telling stories about traumatic events [which] is essential both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims’ (220). Moreover, Bone reveals that she ‘imagined people watching while Daddy Glen beat me, though only when it was not happening’ (Allison, *Bastard* 112). The inclusion of the words ‘but’ and ‘though’ validates the horror of the real abuses which Di Prete asserts illustrates that ‘only desire at stake results from the father’s perversion and the constructive and assertive dimension of Bone’s retelling of that story’ (118). The distinction avoids attributing Bone with any direct, active responsibility for what happens to her and allows the real beatings stand in clear opposition to their mental simulacra.

The transformative powers of Bone’s fantasies are reliant upon her being watched. For Di Prete, it is ‘unimportant who is watching—just that someone is’ (ibid). One may argue, however, that the identity of the figure ‘trapped into watching’ defines Bone’s ability to reconfigure experiences which are a source of shame to her into events that she can dictate (112). In ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924), Freud proposes that the fantasmatic desire ‘to be beaten by the father stands very close to the other wish, to have a passive...sexual relation with him’ (26). In *Bastard Out of Carolina* that premise is reversed with sex only occurring against a backdrop of violence. When Bone is seriously beaten by Glen for the first time she is kept awake by the ‘sigh and creak of [her parents’] bed as he comforted Mama and she comforted him. Sex. They were making love, Mama sighing and sobbing and Daddy Glen repeating her name over and over’ (108). Her mother’s, and consequently her own arousal, is seemingly tied to male violence. For Henke, ‘the helpless daughter is doomed to desire the object of her

mother's sexual fantasies, to pattern her own filial affections on the model of Anney's conjugal hunger, and to be caught in a trap of flirtation and disgust laid by her abusive stepfather' (Henke 12). The incorporation of an unidentified girl into Bone's fantasies subverts this premise. This figure prevents Bone from simply conforming to the scripted roles of what Jung termed the Electra complex (a girl's psychosexual competition with the mother for possession of the father).⁵ Instead, the incorporation of a sympathetic female spectator defies the oedipal mandate of normative heterosexuality: 'Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street' (112). The inclusion of this unidentified girl directly contradicts what Jane Gallop describes as the victim's desire for her father: 'if the phallus is the standard of value, then the Father, possessor of the phallus, must desire the daughter in order to give her value' (qtd. in Henke 12). Bone's value, and consequently her desire, does not depend on filial recognition. They are accredited to her as a result of the heroism she displays during the beatings by the girl-voyeur 'who watched and admired me and hated him' (112). The inclusion of this unnamed female spectator serves another purpose. By positioning the girl in the room, Bone can read through the father to the female figure behind. The authority of the abuser and the violence of his actions are metaphorically diminished. Glen is no longer the focal point of the fantasy. He simply interrupts the gaze of the two girls. The female spectator thus enables Bone to objectify herself and avoid engaging with the violence of his actions.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the rape and the preceding sexual violation become less important than the gradual and active reworking of the scene over time by the female subject. As Bone stares at Glen's face, 'like it was a road map, a route to be memorised, a way to get back to who I really was' (288). She is aware that in order to overcome the traumatic experience she will have to tell the story of it to herself, her family, and in doing so the reader. Sharing with others is presented as a precondition for the resolution of a meaningful world. Such a process is dependent on assistance from not only those closest to the survivor, but also the wider community. Herman argues that restoration of the breach between traumatised person and the community depends upon public acknowledgement of the traumatic event, and second, upon some form of community action, for once 'it is publicly recognised...the community must take action to assign responsibility for the harm and to repair injury. These two responses—recognition and restitution—are necessary to rebuild the survivor's sense of order and justice' (Herman 70).

Indeed, although power is exercised and abused within the family, familial relations within the novel are never so mutable and convenient. In Allison's work, the future of the individual remains dependent upon their past. Writing in *Two or Three Things* she concludes: 'if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind' (Allison 12). Allison never simply reduces family relations to metaphors for power and status; instead, the family relations recall what Gayatri Spivak termed 'trace structures' (64). Spivak uses the term 'trace structures' to illustrate how in seeking to define their environment an individual's interpretation is always reliant upon the search for origins: 'Every origin that we seem to locate refers us back to something anterior and contains the possibility of something posterior. There is, in other words, a trace of something else in seemingly self-contained origins' (ibid 64). The trace does not, therefore, simply undermine origins; it disrupts any possibility of a unified and self-contained description of things. According to this principle, Bone is both inhibited and empowered by her illegitimacy. If, as Spivak states, 'no discourse is possible without the unity of something being taken for granted' then it is arguable that the protagonist's identity will remain in a state of flux (ibid). Bone is unable to produce her own individual discourse because she cannot assume the identity of her father, which she perceives to be integral to her own character: 'I don't look like Mama. I don't look like you. I don't look like nobody' (30). Yet although the protagonist may consider the absence of a father-figure as a constraint within the confines of the deeply patriarchal familial structures and community spaces of the South, Allison presents her illegitimacy as an opportunity to resist the expectations that her gender creates. Spivak reasons that the acknowledgement of paternity is a patriarchal social acknowledgement of trace. Through this acknowledgement, she writes that 'man admits that his end is not in himself. This very man had earlier accepted sonship and admitted that his *origin* is not in himself either' (ibid 65). Whilst this makes it possible for the man to declare a history, Bone's obscured origins allow her to choose a specifically female narrative. Rather than considering this as a symbol of exclusion from privilege, she chooses to associate with it: 'I was going to be someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman' (309). Her illegitimate status permits her to usurp the traditional male birth right by becoming the carrier of the Boatwright family name and the opportunity to construct, in time, a new specifically female space that is independent from the violence of man. The problem with this interpretation is that the author's own abusive history and the possible need to construct a redemptive narrative can be seen to disregard the reality of the situation. Whilst

Allison writes as if Bone's declaration is an independent affirmation, this is countered by a sense of inevitability produced by her words. As the novel concludes, Bone's position in society is not presented as a choice but as a preordained state. Although she inherits the Boatwright name, the name of her mother and her aunts, it is also the name of her male relatives and a name whose connotations dictate her economic and social status within the wider community. The bourgeois patriarchal culture embodied by Glen and his actions is not rendered accountable and will continue to project its darkest fantasy of the ultimate parental power and control onto an 'other' thereby distancing itself from its own desires and occluding the reality of abuse that pervades all social classes. The function of so-called white trash family will remain that of a scapegoat for which the incest and abuse that are endemic to the authoritarian household in which paternal rule goes unquestioned and unchecked.

NOTES

¹ The colloquial nature of the narrator's title depicts Bone as an individual whose existence will be defined by the informal pressures exerted by her family rather than any formal influence exerted by the state: 'I've been called Bone all my life, but my name's Ruth Anne' (1). According to Suzette Henke, this substitution of formal naming is representative of a passive child who 'has grown accustomed to being called out of name by other people who dictate the bizarre and inappropriate self-image evinced by the nickname "Bone"'. In her essay, 'A Child is Being Beaten', a direct allusion to Sigmund Freud's 1919 paper of that name, Henke proposes that the nickname 'Bone' suggests an 'ambivalent, if not demeaning epithet—possibly androgynous, but certainly skeletal and shockingly two-dimensional' (11–12). On a literal level, the text appears to support Henke's claim. The name 'Bone' portends the physical violence that she will suffer at the hands of her stepfather and the bones that he will break as he hits her and the toes that go 'flat and wide, broken within a few months of each other when [she] smashed into doorjambs, running whilst looking over [her] shoulder' (*Bastard* 111). This name is also works on a figurative level by evoking the biblical threat of patriarchal property: 'bone of my bones'. In naming her protagonist thus Allison prefigures the soon to be brutal consequences that the absence and subsequent replacement of a father figure will wreak upon the girl's existence.

² See for example Walter Benjamin's unfinished work *The Arcades Project*.

³ See Firestone's chapters ' (Male) Culture' (156–69) and 'Dialectics of Cultural History' (170–90) which discuss the formation and continuation of social attitudes and behaviours.

⁴ 'Domestic and quiescent, [American women in the 1950s and 60s] moved to the suburbs, created the baby boom and forged family togetherness. Popular since the 1950s, this tenacious stereotype conjures mythic images of cultural icons June Cleaver, Donna Reed and Harriet Nelson—the quintessential white middle–class housewives who stayed at home to rear children, clean the house and bake cookies.... In post–war prescriptive literature, women who defined sexual convention were vilified as deviants. Not only unwed mothers, but also women who performed abortions, women who sought abortions, prostitutes and lesbians damaged the dominant sexual order... popular and expert observers defined 'normal' heterosexual marital relations through surveillance, regulation and sometimes conflation of various forms of deviant behaviour' (Meyerowitz 9).

⁵ Carl Jung used the term 'electra Complex' to describe the feminine Oedipus Complex in order to demonstrate the parallel attitude of children of both sexes towards their parents. The attachment of the girl towards her father and hostility towards her mother was first identified by Jung's contemporary, Sigmund Freud. See Freud's 1909 paper 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five–Year–Old Boy' for further details.

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