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Distorted Voice, Perverted Gaze: the Ambiguous Figure of the Child-Victim in Dorothy Allison's Incest Story

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Dorothy Allison was born in 1949 in South Carolina, the daughter of a fifteen-year-old poor white waitress. Raped from the age of five by her stepfather and repeatedly beaten until she left home when she was a teenager, she broke the silence surrounding physical and sexual abuse when she began to write about her experience in semi-autobiographical works where the reality of incest is bluntly described. Allison sets her stories in the poor white Southern background of rural South Carolina and makes the child tell the bleak experience of abuse, which often goes unacknowledged. She thus gives a voice to a traditionally voiceless and invisible individual, and allows the child-victim to speak directly, as is the case in her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a fictionalized testimony which gives the girl a central place.

Although the plot derives from Allison's experience, the author distorts her life in the incest narrative, which combines fact and fiction: "I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth," Allison asserts (*Two or Three Things* 3). *Bastard* indeed contains invented yet plausible episodes claiming a "degree of resemblance" to reality (Lejeune 22), and thus raises the issue of ethics. Paul John Eakin suggests that life writers who do not tell the truth violate a "moral imperative," yet wonders whether the authors' "imaginative interventions" should be considered as "lying or fictional heightening" (2-3). Commenting upon the hybridity of her works, Allison explains that even though what she narrates did not always happen to her, "it is absolutely true to [her] experience" (Fuchs 144). She further states that she "craft[s] truth out of storytelling," thus suggesting that fictional parts indeed heighten her testimony (Allison, "Shotgun Strategies" 55).

Allison's decision to write about children's lives, and more specifically about the abused girl's experience, originated in her understanding of the very peculiar status of children in Southern poor white families. In an interview, she explained:

> My family was really loving and enormous, but there was a conviction about children in my family that's very destructive and dangerous. I don't think any of us believed in children. It's a normal thing to backhand a child, to hit a child. [My family] thought children were really powerful, strong adults masquerading in these little bodies. Which is a vicious thing to believe [...] I made Bone [the heroine in Bastard] so that I could see a child and believe her and inhabit her, live inside her. (Megan 7)

She defines her own childhood as "that long terrible struggle to survive, to escape my stepfather, uncles, speeding Pontiacs, broken glass, and rotten floorboards, or that inevitable

death by misadventure that claimed so many of my cousins" (Allison, *Trash* 1). Childhood is thus inseparable from violence, accidents, and the consequent danger of physical disappearance.

Historically and socially, the child is considered as an inferior, incomplete, dependent being. Children were further demeaned in the antebellum South, where the strict racial hierarchy promoted by pro-slavery apologists reinforced the hierarchy of the patriarchal family, according to which "women belonged below the patriarch in the hierarchy, along with blacks and children" (Jones 46). Children thus occupied an inferior place and were subjected to the authority of men. Commenting upon the workings of the patriarchal southern society in the mid-19th century, Fitzhugh explains that women should be delicate, dependent and submissive to their husbands, for fear of being severely punished. He argues: "Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness [...]. In truth, woman, like children, has but one right, and that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey" (Fitzhugh 214). Establishing a connection between the antebellum South and the contemporary period, Gwin remarks that Southern ideology "has historically emphasized the importance of property (owned place) and has manipulated women's bodies to that end" (Gwin 419). Patriarchal power thus rests upon the submission and objectification of women and, by extension, girls.

The perception of children is also shaped by feminist discourses on incest which tend to promote the image of a sexually innocent, physically powerless child-victim (Doane and Hodges 115). In response to certain social discourses—namely psychoanalytic discourses on the seduction of the father by the child—scholarship on incest "hopes to challenge an oppressively gendered discourse about seductive children and adolescent girls that traditionally obscures the notions of powerful men" (115). However, the result of the feminist enterprise is "'monster talk' about monstrous adults and innocent children" which "implicitly works to censor a child's sexuality as deviant and provocative" (115). Dominant feminist discourses thus place assaulted girls at the bottom of the power structure and define them as vulnerable and sexually pure.

In the light of these studies, this contribution studies the ambiguous figure of the child in Dorothy Allison's fictional testimony. In opposition to mainstream feminist representations of the powerless, innocent, assaulted child, Allison refuses to depict passive incest victims relegated to the space of inferiority. *Bastard Out of Carolina* subverts both the literary model of life narratives and the social model of the weak child, as the incest victim actively develops a perverse sexuality in which trauma and liberation are inextricably linked. Considering that life writers may write "counterstories" which help damaged people resist demeaning discourses (Nelson xii), it will be worth considering whether Allison's novel gives the

assaulted heroine a sense of agency and worth, for the author asserts that fiction allows the victim to resist master narratives, and remarks that "if you can step back from your life and look at it as a story, you can revise it. […] You don't have to be that thing they tell you you're going to be" (Lewis 140). The girl occupies an ambiguous position, at the frontier between weakness and power, childish ignorance and adult maturity. The ambiguity of the girl's status is conveyed thanks to the depiction of the girl's gaze on herself and the world, and of her disturbingly mature voice.

In order to study the perversion of the girl's voice and gaze by the brutal experience of abuse, this essay first focuses on the modalities of survivor speech to explore how the child takes hold of the power of representation to make her innocent voice heard. It then explores how the inability to speak and denounce is conveyed in the narrative of incest, and how the child's gaze makes up for silence. Thirdly, an analysis of the child's tales and fantasies reveals the disturbing sexual maturity of the traumatized victim who tries to cope with violence through storytelling. Finally, we shall study the incomplete subversion of the incest story and focus on how the child's fantasized agency fails to translate into action and resistance, thus making her an aberrant being, situated at the frontier between weakness and power.

Seizing the power of representation

Traditionally, women's and children's capacity to contradict or denounce the actions of men has been seriously restrained, and testimonies on domestic violence have belonged to the sphere of excluded speech (Alcoff and Gray 265-267). Consequently, survivor speech has either been silenced or "categorized within the mad, the untrue, or the incredible" (Alcoff and Gray 267). Indeed, it is socially destabilizing because it questions the conventional organization of speech according to which women and children have no authority. Besides, it breaks secrecy by lifting the veil on domestic violence (Alcoff and Gray 269). A victim of incest, Dorothy Allison recounts how her family perpetuated the process of silencing the victim:

> I had been taught never to tell anyone outside my family what was going on, not just because it was shameful, but because it was physically dangerous for me to do so. I had been repeatedly warned throughout my childhood that if I ever revealed what went on in our house, they would take me away. […] It did not matter that what was being done to me was rape and that I had never asked for it. It did not matter because I was who I was, the child of my family, poor and notorious in the country where we lived, poor and hopeless. (Allison, "Shotgun Strategies" 52)

Allison establishes a link between her social background and relentless abuse: presenting herself as "the child of [her] family," "poor and hopeless," she reveals that class-related

exclusion places the child in an even more vulnerable position, as it entails the impossibility to denounce and find witnesses outside the family. The child is made invisible and mute, an object of representation rather than a speaking subject controlling representation; the girl has no legitimate voice through which to convey the reality of experience.

Furthermore, even years after the abuse ended, it may be difficult for incest survivors to break the silence, when they do not find appropriate confidants or institutional sites to share their story (Naples 1153-1154). However, fictionalized testimonies seem to provide a possible solution to the problem of imposed or self-imposed silence. As fictions, they are not seen as discourses of truth, and thus escape social evaluation; regarded as invented stories and no longer as confessions, they provide the authors with a new space to denounce abuse, thus challenging dominant conceptions. In such writing, the status of children is reinvented, their social position reconfigured, and children-narrators can take hold of representation. Commenting on Sapphire's incest novel *Push*, Michlin explains that the teenaged female narrator "begins her story in a move of aggressive self-empowerment," creating a distorted version of traditional first-person beginnings: "My name is Claireece Precious Jones. Everybody calls me Precious. I got three names—Claireece Precious Jones. Only motherfuckers I hate call me Claireece." This "brutal variation," Michlin argues, "goes with a commitment to the truth" (Michlin 171). The opening of Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* is quite similar, although less aggressive: "I've been called Bone all my life, but my name's Ruth Anne. I was named for and by my oldest aunt—Aunt Ruth" (1). The girl places herself at the heart of the narrative process from the very beginning, an act of self-empowerment which contradicts traditional positions of authority. In this realistic account of child abuse told by the victim, the heroine starts by telling the anecdote of her turbulent birth, and the novel opens with the birth and the voice of a child who controls her life story.

The narration throws the reader into the dramatic immediacy of incestuous violence, from the girl's early years to just before her thirteenth birthday. The heroine's age is relevant, as the end of the novel reminds us one last time that the story is that of a little girl, through the eyes of whom we witness unthinkable abuse. Dialogues and silent recollections provide formulations and expressions which bring to mind the figure of the unknowing, innocent child: the first pages are sprinkled with childish words and phrases, as if they had been dictated by a six-year-old. Bone mentions "a carful of my aunts and uncles" involved in a car accident; a cousin "on his way back from playing soldier" (Allison, *Bastard* 1); her mother's coma is mentioned through the fact that she "didn't wake up for three days" (4). However, the endearing, innocent and yet asserted voice encountered at the beginning of the novel quickly changes, and will bluntly describe scenes of physical and sexual violence.

Conveying the inability to speak, writing about incest

Suzanne Keen remarks that reading about another person's emotional state or condition may provoke empathy, "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (4). Responses vary from one reader to another, yet an internal perspective, such as first-person self-narration, facilitates empathy (3; 96). Thanks to the absence of other narrative voices in *Bastard*, the girl's experience is narrated from her exclusive point of view, so that as she narrates her ghastly experience and describes her distress, the readers who respond empathetically may feel trapped in the disturbing narrative of child abuse. Indeed, when Bone's single mother meets the brooding Glen, things accelerate and the child is thrown into a vicious cycle of violence, which she tells in her own words throughout the story, as if to make up for her inability to voice accusations and call for help.

A shift is noticeable in the girl's innocent voice from the first scene of abuse, which establishes her new child-victim status. When Glen masturbates against Bone and inappropriately touches her in the confined space of his car, the narrative conveys the unknowing child's pain, helplessness and lack of vocabulary to account for this particular form of violence: sperm becomes "something strange and bitter," penetration translates into the acts of "rocking" and "digging in," and Bone explains that Glen "[holds] himself in his fingers" (Allison, *Bastard* 46-47). The child openly yet clumsily describes sexual violence, her language becoming a powerful medium to convey the horror of incest.

Furthermore, the use of fairy-tale imagery, traditionally associated with children's imaginative universe, conveys how difficult it is for the girl to comprehend the violence she suffers. As the two protagonists settle in their roles of victim and abuser, Bone refashions the world of fairy-tales to become a part of it: she casts herself as the anti-princess against her books' "princesses with pale skin and tender hearts" (206), and describes Glen as an ogre or a grotesque monster whose hands make her think of "gorilla hands, monkey paws, paddlefish, beaver tails" (70). Bone explains how she fractures her bones "when [she] smashed into doorjambs, running while looking back over [her] shoulder" (111), and constantly pictures Glen as a huge beast chasing her around the house, a carnivorous plant or a dragon always reaching for her: "I felt as if the grass had turned into ammonia and was burning in my throat, as if Daddy Glen's skin was radiating red heat and waves of steamy sweat. [...] I watched the muscles in his shoulders roll and bunch. I knew he could easily break my arms as methodically as he was cracking his knuckles, wring my neck as hard as he was wringing his hands" (75). Seen through Bone's eyes, Glen is characterized by toxicity and superhuman strength, a monstrous figure threatening to break every bone in her body. The image is reinforced when, recapitulating several instances of abuse, Bone depicts Glen as an autonomous pair of gigantic hands: "I became even more afraid of Daddy Glen, the palms

that slapped, the fingers that dug in and bruised, the knuckles he would sometimes press directly under my eyes, the hands that shook and gripped and lifted me up" (109). This representation further establishes the power relationship between the almighty abuser and the powerless, fragile child victim.

Bone doesn't have access to the language that would allow her to account for the abuse (Hart 293) and is thus condemned to silence. The transcription of her thoughts and memories hence quickly become paramount for the reader, who has exclusive access to otherwise undisclosed information. For instance, as she gets used to Glen's inappropriate hugs, Bone recalls: "If I went home when he was there and Mama wasn't, he was always finding something I'd done, something I had to be told, something he just had to do because he loved me. And he did love me. He told me so over and over again, holding my body tight to his, his hands shaking as they moved restlessly over my belly, ass, and thighs" (108). The narrative paradoxically lifts the veil on the secret act, explicitly stating that the abuse happens in the absence of Bone's mother. The girl's incomprehension is rendered through the repetition of the pronoun "something," while the detailed description of touching forces the reader to position himself as a witness of perversion, reinforced by the enumeration of sexually connoted body parts. Similarly, when her aunt Alma directly asks her if Glen abuses her, Bone bluntly answers "no," but thinks: "I remembered his hands sliding over my body, under my blouse, down my shorts, across my back-side, the calluses scratching my skin, his breath fast and hard above me as he pulled me tighter and tighter against him" (124). The narrator thus formulates thoughts that the character keeps hidden from others. The contradiction between her loud concise answer and the silent, weaving thoughts which take us into the maze of sexual violence powerfully denounces the slow silencing of the child. The issue of empathy is also raised here, as readers may feel particularly involved in the girl's hardship if, as Richard Kearney suggests, the narrative voice succeeds in drawing them out of "the narcissistic enclosure of the ego" (qtd in Lauritzen 23). As they read the silent denunciations formulated in the first-person narrative, readers may feel that they are the only witnesses of abuse.

In the first beating scene, the readers follow Bone's gaze, hear her screams and read her thoughts. The text bears the marks of distress, and what is most striking is the loudness of the episode, as noises and screams multiply over the two pages depicting how Bone is caught, beaten, and released: "[the belt] hit me and I screamed. Daddy Glen swung his belt again. I screamed at its passage through the air, screamed before it hit me. I screamed for Mama. He was screaming with me, his great hoarse shouts as loud as my high thin squeals, and behind us outside the locked door, Reese was screaming too, and then Mama. All of us were screaming and no one could help" (106). The repetition of "scream" emphasizes the girl's

pain and fear, as she finds herself a powerless target in the locked bathroom. The characters are paradoxically united in shared senseless screaming, yet it is the only connection the potential helpers have with the victim. The readers are metaphorically locked in the bathroom with Bone. As her mother washes the blood off her striped thighs and asks her what she did to deserve this beating, Bone thinks: "I wanted her to go on talking and understand without me saying anything. I wanted her to love me enough to leave him [...] to kill him if need be. I held on to her until she put me to bed, held on to her and whimpered then. I held on to her until I fell into a drugged, miserable sleep" (107). The carefully crafted repetitive text lays the stress on the child's helplessness: the repetition of "I wanted her" and of "I held on to her" emphasizes Bone's powerlessness, as the child compulsively formulates vain wishes and makes the most of her mother's presence.

Hurt and silenced in the plot, Bone finds a voice in the narrative, as she collects her thoughts and documents the abuse page after page. She does not remain the expected powerless victim of abuse. Indeed, her identity is complicated by her reinvestment of violence in the development of her traumatized, transgressive sexuality. This leads to another shift in tone, as the girl's attempt at emancipation confers an uncanny maturity to the child's voice.

Tales and fantasies: the traumatized child's troubling maturity

In their introduction to a volume on rape narratives, Gunne and Brigley Thompson explain that they intend to "break the mould of the victim/perpetrator binary that dominates patriarchal discourse and much of the subsequent feminist debates" (3). Similarly, Allison disrupts the binary by creating a female heroine whose subversive subjectivity is characterized by agency, the tortuous reclaiming of power, and tortured sexual awakening.

As violence becomes routine, Bone's personality is troubled, and she finds refuge in the sphere of imagination, where she cultivates her darker side. The stories she tells point to the trauma she suffers and paradoxically help her cope, but they also situate her further and further away from traditional childish behavior. Bone finds her voice when she starts telling violent tales to her gathered younger cousins and becomes a captivating adult storyteller for them. The contents of the stories betray the harsher gaze she casts upon the world:

> My cousins loved my stories—especially the ones that featured bloodsuckers who consumed only the freshly butchered bodies of newborn babies, green-faced dwarfs promising untold riches to children who would bring them the hearts of four and forty grown men. [...] My stories were full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives. Witches cut off the heads of children and grown-ups. Gangs of women rode in on motorcycles and set fire to people's houses. The ground opened and green-black lizard tongues shot up to pull people down. (118-119)

The scary, gloomy tales are filled with monsters, accidents and painful deaths, apocalyptic visions and hopelessness. The brutal change in Bone's conception of the world is inscribed in the text, which reveals the contamination of language by violence and suffering. Bone stands out against the crowd of cousins and captivates them thanks to her newly found, disturbing voice.

Bone's activities also single her out from other children. One day, the group splits, as the cousins cannot agree on which game to play:

> Patsy Ruth ran off to get Grey's old broken plastic rifle. All afternoon she pretended it was a sawed-off shotgun like the one on "Wanted Dead or Alive." Reese finally got into it and started playing at being shot off the porch. I took Aunt Alma's *butcher knife* and *announced I was* Jim Bowie's mean sister and no one was to mess with me.
> *I practiced* sticking Aunt Alma's knife into the porch and listened to the boys cursing in the backyard. *I was mean, I decided*. I was mean and vicious, and all *I wanted to be doing* was sticking that knife in Daddy Glen. (212-213, emphasis mine)

Bone's cousin and sister turn to games tinted with violence, yet they remain in the sphere of childhood: they "pretend," "play at" and "play with toys," thus preserving the frontier between game and reality. Bone, as for her, gets a real butcher knife in order not to play, but to practice: she does not pretend to be a villain, as a child would, but anchors her scenario in real life, as she trains herself to kill an actual person. The world, as seen through the eyes of the traumatized child, leaves no room for childish games. Instead, Bone reveals her capacity to scheme and respond.

Furthermore, after the first scene of sexual abuse, Bone acquires a sudden, disturbing sexual maturity, conveyed through her indulging in solitary sexual acts. The narrative voice unexpectedly uses the precise lexicon of sex, and the girl tells herself twisted tales which bear the mark of abuse: "I imagined being tied up in a haystack while someone set the dry stale straw ablaze [...] I am not sure if I came when the fire reached me or after I had imagined escaping it. But I came. I orgasmed on my hand to the dream of fire" (63). Creation and destruction, suffering and pleasure mingle, thus suggesting the complexity of the abused child's personality. The child's earlier ignorance is replaced by knowledge of the vocabulary of sex, which creates a tension between two versions of the child—one unknowing, innocent and passive, the other sexually aware and active. The child suddenly appears determined and self-confident when she reclaims control of her body in violent fantasies, yet the intricate, violent plots signal a forced sexual awareness which perverts the child's conception of the world. Sexual trauma disrupts the girl's development, and Bone becomes indefinable: not yet a woman, but no longer an innocent child; she thus illustrates Allison's answer to Renée Klorman, who tells Allison she is "very good at showing the adult in the child. Showing a

child's mind," to which Allison answered: "I don't think I was ever a child. [...] my experience is that girls that grow up in difficult to impossible situations *are* very grown up, much more so than children who grow up in protected safe environments" (Klorman 99).

Henninger remarks that despite the "physical trashing" that she suffers, Bone "manages to salvage some pleasure from pain, some power from powerlessness" and is able to reclaim access to her body through storytelling (99). Indeed, Bone starts to see the world as a space of endless possibilities. Even though, as several critics argue, Bone's sexual awakening is intrinsically linked to her feelings of shame, despair and fear (Horvitz 44; King 131), it can also be read as evidence of the child's ability to go beyond childish passivity and submission and experience glorification (Friedel 29; 39). Fantasy allows the passive, submitted girl to experience theatricality and reconfigure her sexual experience. When describing her fantasies, Bone makes a distinction between two victim positions:

> When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. [...] They couldn't help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I'd stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

As the child's status changes in her imagination, so does her state of mind, as shown by the introduction of positive terms to describe herself. The opposition is reinforced by the parallel established between two ternary constructions ("I screamed and kicked and cried" and "no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging"), which allows Bone to firmly oppose her real self to her fantasized self. In her fantasies, Bone is beaten for somebody else and gains responsibility, elevating herself above those she protects. In the midst of violence, a more mature and self-possessed version of herself emerges, which nonetheless remains confined to the imaginary sphere: "There was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery," Bone confesses (113).

Resistance, agency, and impossible subversion

Thanks to her fantasies, Bone finds the strength to defy her abuser in real life. In the second beating scene, Bone remains impassive and silent, seemingly unfeeling, thus showing her determination not to let violence destroy her. This time, everybody screams except her: "No, I thought. I won't. Not a word, not a scream, nothing this time. [...] Beyond the door, Mama was screaming. Daddy Glen was grunting [...] I would not scream. I would not, would not, would not scream" (234). Bone refuses to be a powerless victim and to submit to Glen;

fantasy gave her resilience and determination, and the obsessive repetition of "I would not," although it is reminiscent of a childish way of expressing disagreement and stubborn refusal to obey, is here perverted and conveys Bone's unequivocal refusal to show any sign of weakness. The screaming, terrified child encountered in the first scene now makes room for a determined, rock-hard person.

The same process of empowerment runs through the rape scene, which the girl describes in painful second-by-second details. Glen visits Bone at her Aunt's, after the girl has been sent away to escape violence; before he arrives, Bone is engaged in a very childish activity, making herself a peanut butter sandwich and playing with puppies: "I gave them each one teaspoon of peanut butter and dragged them out on the porch to watch them chew and yawn and try to lick the tops of their mouths. I was giggling with them when a Ford pulled up into the yard and Daddy Glen climbed out" (280). Away from her stepfather, Bone seems to have settled back into carefree childhood (she is twelve at that point), which makes Glen's arrival all the more ominous. As Glen tries to act like a powerful father, Bone refuses to obey his orders, asking him to leave: "I'd rather die than go back to living with you," she says (282). This is the last straw for Glen, who grabs Bone, beats her up and rapes her. However, this time the girl actively fights back: "I went hard, stiff, metal-hard, as hard as the butter knife I found I had grabbed without thinking. He kissed me wetly, his teeth grinding into my mouth. I jerked that knife up and rammed it into his side as hard as I could. It slid along his belt, smearing peanut butter on his shirt, not even tearing the material but hurting him anyway" (283). Glen still appears as the powerful abuser in the scene, as he throws Bone around, kicks her, hits her, pulls her up and drops her like a puppet (283). However, Bone's attitude questions her status as powerless child-victim: the phallic imagery unfolded in the description of her resistance questions not only her gender, but her very humanity, as it conveys the idea of an unbreakable robotic figure. The wish to kill Glen, formulated during her practice with the butcher knife, seems on the verge of coming true, yet the effect is deflated when the knife proves to be a butter knife, of the kind children are allowed to use because it is harmless. Bone is silent in the plot, yet screams and voices her silent curse on the page: "'You'll die, you'll die,' I screamed inside. 'You will rot and stink and cave in on yourself. God will give you to me. Your bones will melt and your blood will catch fire. I'll rip you open and feed you to the dogs. Like in the Bible, like the way it ought to be, God will give you to me. God will give you to me!'" (285). Language and values are perverted in Bone's appropriation of the wicked witch's words: using a spell which brings to mind the one traditionally addressed to children in fairy tales, the child here reverses the roles and curses the powerful adult. The violence of the curse again serves an interrogation of Bone's status: her previous tales fuel her unrelenting fulmination, the gruesome invades her speech, so that reality seems to have caught up with imagination, promising Bone a victory.

Despite the hopes, Bone does not get to kill Glen. She does not manage to escape, and only after the rape does her mother arrive, calling Glen a monster until his moaning apologies make her forgive him once more (287). After the climax, Bone becomes a child again: her mother calls her "baby" repeatedly after she takes her away from Glen; her Aunt Raylene, who visits her at the hospital, tells the police officer: "She's just twelve years old, you fool. Right now she needs to feel safe and loved, not alone and terrified" (298). She calls Bone "my girl [...] my poor little girl" (298), thus forcing on Bone the child-victim position the girl had tried so hard to free herself from. The victim/abuser binary ultimately remains untouched. However, Allison has successfully scratched it thanks to her elaboration of a complex heroine who strives hard to cope with trauma and transform herself into a fighter. In her imagination, Bone smashes the image of the powerless, innocent child; violence invades the first-person narrative to convey the evolution of the child's state of mind; the readers follow her troubled gaze and hear her disturbingly mature voice. Although Bone fails to overcome her abuser and free herself from the cycle of terror, she resolutely questions clear-cut divisions between innocence and experience, passivity and agency. As she distorts traditional language and imagery in an attempt to seize power and fight back, she momentarily reverses the values attached to childish behavior or fairy tales, and thus oscillates between childhood and adulthood.

Conclusion

Bastard subverts the autobiographic mode, the feminist incest story, and the patriarchal discourses on social hierarchy. It gives the child a central place, as the heroine takes control of representation and tells her version of abuse without being hampered by adult voices. The figure of the child evolves in an ambiguous way throughout the narrative: First a silent, powerless victim, who does not have access to the language of denunciation and is only able to report her incomprehension on the page, Bone tells her story in childish terms which confirm her child-victim status. However, she progressively finds refuge in the sphere of imagination and transgressive sexuality, as she elaborates gruesome tales and violent sexual fantasies which turn out to be both shame-provoking and liberating. The reinvestment of violence shows the perversion of her identity and the complex uses of abuse in emancipation. The brutal rape confirms the ambiguity of the abused child's identity. Bone has discovered not only resilience, but also willpower and resistance: the fantasies she invents allow her to express her agony, cope with violence and rebuild herself emotionally (Cyrulnik 16), but further give her the strength to actively defy her abuser. Agency, though, seems to belong to the realm of imagination, and Bone never completely emerges as a liberated heroine. The novel ends on the ambiguity of her identity, as we leave her motherless, fatherless, physically

and emotionally damaged. The child is rejected in an aberrant space, in-between innocence and maturity, power and powerlessness.

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