

***Bildungsroman* of the Bastard:**

Dorothy Allison and the Genealogy of Illegitimacy

Linda Camarasana

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* is a novel--whose very title, hero, and subject are illegitimate--that reveals the entanglements between various systems of surveillance, and how these systems inscribe class, gender, racial, and sexual illegitimacy in the novel. The first chapter of Dorothy Allison's quasi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* reveals the immediate circumstances of Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright's birth into southern white poverty. However, unlike the traditional *bildungsroman*, Bone's narrative trajectory doesn't lead to middle-class respectability. A Foucauldian reading of the text reveals how Allison's subversive narrative strategy resists normative expectations of genre.

In *The Novel and the Police* D.A. Miller describes how the contrast of worlds depicted in novels, for example in *Oliver Twist*, articulates and reinforces middle-class standards; it is one of the ways the Novel acts in its disciplinary function even though it may portray the police themselves as corrupt, or as fools and the ostensible criminal element as sympathetic. The teleology of the Novel is ultimately into a world of middle-class respectability. The Novel legitimates itself by recuperating its characters into the legitimate, that is, into the middle-class liberal world that produces readers who consume novels. What, however, is the trajectory of *Bastard out of*

Carolina? Does Allison succeed in resisting the Novel's legitimating function which by tradition would invalidate the abject world of Bone's family? To what extent does her novel try to legitimate itself? Does Allison's own desire for legitimacy undermine the transgressions she performs? Does her novel demonstrate how legitimacy is bound with literacy? If so, does legitimacy necessarily entail being inscribed within an established Law?

As the novel makes clear from the start, the car accident that forced Bone's unconscious mother, Anney, into the hospital and Bone prematurely into the world was a result of her uncle's drunkenness, and the confusion about her patrimony a result of the illiteracy of her Aunt Ruth and grandmother. The red stamp on Bone's birth certificate, illegitimate, confers a label not just on Bone; it also declares the abject status of her family in Greenville County. "The stamp on that birth certificate burned [Anney] like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her: *No-good, lazy, shiftless*" (Allison 1992, 3). The stamp reinforces the labels applied to her because of the place she occupies in American society as a poor white.

However, Bone's otherness is not just determined by her low class family status – as a bastard, Bone is also an outsider to her family – she is, in Lacanian theory, symbolically outside the Law of the Father. Anney Boatwright's humiliating attempts to legitimize her daughter are thwarted by the stubborn refusal of the county clerk: "The facts," he declares, "have been established" (Allison 1992, 4). But the clerk doesn't act alone in applying the discipline; in the background unnamed women also watch, whisper, and judge. Moreover, it's not just the codified, juridical law that brands Bone. By insisting on enforcing the label under the guise of an omniscient but invisible power invoked under the label "the facts," the assertion reveals both the indefinite nature of those facts and the disciplinary power the clerk chooses to uphold. As Anney says, had she been conscious she might have been able to declare

the name of the father assertively enough to thwart the label. It is in the comic controversy between Aunt Ruth and Bone's grandmother over the spelling of names, and the hospital clerk's resultant irritation, that the unavailability of the name of the father becomes the basis for the "fact" of illegitimacy.

In an interview titled "Prison Talk" from *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault describes the "central moment in the history of repression [as] . . . the moment where it became understood that it was more efficient and profitable to place people under surveillance than to subject them to some exemplary penalty" (1980, 38-9). Using Foucault's repressive model of surveillance as a basis for his own narrative theory, D.A. Miller speculates on "the possibility of a radical *entanglement* between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police" (1988, 2). That is, Miller explores how the novel, as discourse, is part of the synaptic regime of surveillance described by Foucault. Miller theorizes that the plot of the novel of development, for example, although it may ostensibly aim to free its protagonist from social repression, invariably reinscribes the hierarchic binary of liberal and carceral subjects.

For a bildungsroman to begin, as *Bastard out of Carolina* does, by revealing the outcast status of its hero is a common trope. The traditional bildungsroman then follows such heroes as they claim their rightful place in society which false representatives of the moral law seek to deny; it is the quest of the hero of such plots to enter into a valid and respectable subjectivity. Miller writes specifically about *Oliver Twist* and how its plot ultimately reveals that the injustice Oliver suffers is a result of his being denied the privileges entitled him because of his lineage (Miller 1988, 59). When the truth about his identity is learned, he is reinscribed as a middle-class citizen, free in the end to leave the lower-class world of crime and poverty. His abject status, therefore, is largely attributable to mistaken identity, and his search for identity is not a psychological transformation but rather the recovery of a lost origin.

As Miller reveals, in such novels the police and their supplements are often dupes who prevent justice; but the policing function of the Novel itself is to describe the more pervasive because invisible social control of which the novel itself is just one part.

Unlike nineteenth century protagonists who seek escape from their outcast status, Allison's novel explores an abject community, namely poor white "trash," that is always already delinquent, illustrating, in Miller's words, "a normative scenario of crime and punishment" (1988, 3-4). The original crime here, as witness the frenzy over the birth certificate and all it means to Anney and her identity, is not defined by action but instead by the markers of identity itself, or in Bone's case, the absence of the mark indicating paternity. A Lacanian reading of the first chapter would emphasize that Bone, as bastard, is not just outside the social order; she is configured outside the Symbolic order as well. Upon her birth she is beyond the place of subjectivity and also beyond the reach of the Law that is designated by the Name of the Father.

One of the strengths of Allison's novel is that she avoids oversimplifying the topic of social control via the delineation of abject categories by dividing society into a dichotomy in which those in power devise the "perceptual grid" (Miller 1988, 18) while the illegitimate function to passively legitimate the regime of the norm. Rather, what Allison's novel does in examining the life of poor whites in the American south is to show that the disciplinary surveillance that maintains the regime is so pervasive that it includes the protagonist herself. Bone's family, with its web of marital, parental and sibling relationships, is part of the social fabric that establishes roles and punishes transgression. As Bone's step-father Glen and her mother Anney watch one another during their courtship they each look to the other to serve different needs, notably needs that reflect how they themselves wish to be perceived. While Glen is

physically attracted to Anney, he seems to feel a stronger attraction to ally himself with the infamous Boatwright brothers, especially to Black Earle. A constant disappointment to his own successful middle-class father, Glen's desire is to "marry Black Earle's baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers" (Allison 1992, 13). In contrast, Anney wants stability: "He'd make a good daddy, she imagined, a steady man," and she concedes that she "needs a husband" (Allison 1992, 13), a husband who would adopt and thereby legitimate her bastard daughter.

However, after his marriage to Anney and the death of their son, Glen's transgressive fantasy fades. He wants instead to please his father, to impress his brothers. The implication is that because of Glen's failures in the eyes of his own cruel family, when he adopts the role of father to Anney's girls he in turn re-enacts the psychological punishment he himself has suffered. As family disciplinarian, Glen tries to justify his abuse under the guise of a lesson. Bone and her sister, Reese, are said to be responsible for Glen's rages. In turn, they scrutinize themselves; they control their own behavior in order to control his. Fearing, for example, that litter on the front lawn might be used as justification for one of his rampages, they search their yard for trash in order to contain his emotions (Allison 1992, 81).

Nothing is so troubled in the novel as the relationship between Bone and her mother. As Amber Hollibaugh notes, "The gravest challenge . . . that Allison takes up, harder even than the story of incest and violence by Daddy Glen, is the tale of betrayal among the women, between Bone and her mother Anney" (1992, 15). Anney's repeated attempts to fix the birth certificate cause both of them to be the object of scrutiny and derisive humor. As Bone grows up, Anney constantly reminds her daughter how important it is to appear well in the eyes of others. In effect, Anney is the mediator between the child and the disciplinary world. Her attempts at trying to

alter the perceptions of others only keeps her (and her daughters) under surveillance.

In a world of such all-encompassing surveillance, it is natural that Bone would develop the habit of continual self-examination. Her self-scrutiny intensifies as she grows older, enforced in part by the regulatory proscriptions she receives from her family. When Bone turns the gaze on herself her judgment is as harsh as those who judge her. Besides repeatedly questioning her own behavior, Bone also scrutinizes herself physically. Even while stoically deciding that she will not allow herself to be defeated by Daddy Glen's constant abuse, she describes her uncertainties about her identity as she observes her adolescent body:

I took to watching myself in mirrors to see what other people saw, to puzzle out just what showed them who I really was. What did Daddy Glen see? Aunt Raylene? Uncle Earle? . . . When I was alone I would look down at my obstinate body, long legs, no hips, and only the slightest swell where Deedee and Temple had big round breasts (Allison 1992, 205-6).

Bone worries about her physical difference from her younger sibling throughout the novel, a difference signified not just by their physical attributes. To Bone, her half-sister, Reese, has another identity made possible because of her paternity. By naming Reese as one of "our people," Mrs. Parsons, Reese's paternal grandmother, indicates that Reese herself may possibly hope for a better future. Bone is obsessed by her own precarious status in the family, signified at first by her looks. Even while affirming her identity as a Boatwright, her uncle Earle tells her she is "the strangest girlchild we got" (Allison 1992, 27). Bone complains that she doesn't look like any other Boatwright. She wants to know if she looks like her father, a subject Anney refuses to talk about. Bone's grandmother suggests that she is part Cherokee. Her aunt Raylene hints at the possibility that there's black blood in the family.

Miscegenation, however, is the one transgression even the most outlaw in her family will not embrace. "People were crazy on the subject of color," Bone reveals,

“and it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it, enough that everyone was a little tender on it” (Allison 1992, 54). Even the children maintain the separation, that is, until they’re overcome by their desire to play. At her aunt Alma’s apartment Bone notices a girl whose gender she can’t at first decipher, so obsessed is she with the girl’s blackness and attractiveness, especially as compared to her cousin Grey. This girl is at first unidentifiable by categories of gender, categories which themselves trouble Bone throughout the novel. The attraction is solely race-based, and Bone’s articulation to herself of that racial attraction is one of the many transgressions she commits over categories of identity that are meant to determine behavior and limit social interaction.

It is the Boatwright men who seem most emphatic about maintaining separate racial identities; it is they who object to Alma moving into an apartment above a black family. They claim to fear for the safety of their women. Wade rages: “My little girls have to go up those stairs past those nigger boys. My wife walking the street past those peckerwoods” (Allison 1992, 86). While poor whites maintain their identity by separating themselves from blacks, and especially the white men maintain their masculinity by acting as protectors of the threat black masculinity poses to their white women, the Waddell brothers insult Glen and assert their own superiority by joining the two abject categories. Linking the otherness of blacks and poor whites, they refer to Anney’s family as “nigger trash” (Allison 1992, 102).

The attempts to control and reinforce an outsider label on Bone are not limited to her role as daughter to Anney and Glen. Growing up female is a continual lesson in transgression and in being scrutinized for failing to inhabit a norm which is unavailable to her. The Boatwright family is the intimate network that causes Bone to feel uncertain about her gender identification and makes her continually aware that her very existence represents a transgression of established roles. Heteronormativity

and heterosexual marriage serve the key function of legitimating the identities and status of the Boatwright family members, even, and perhaps especially, to each other.

Anney refuses to tell Bone anything of her father, because it is that transgression on her part which makes Anney different from her own siblings. For Ruth, pregnancy proved that she was attractive enough that a man would want to sleep with her. Carr's jealousy over Wade's attention to Alma, which is also centered on the issue of female attractiveness and the consequent ability to catch a husband, causes a rift between the two women, ongoing bitterness on the part of Carr, and her subsequent departure from South Carolina to marry Baltimore Benny.

If the women are depicted as needing men to legitimate their status as women, the masculinity of the Boatwright men is also depicted as needing legitimation by others. As noted, the category "nigger" helps establish them as protectors of their women. Gender roles not only reify race, but also class status. At the beginning of their marriage, Glen insists Anney not work outside the home because in his middle-class family of "lawyers and dentists. . . . the women stayed at home" (Allison 1992, 98). The Boatwright males use their lower class status as lawbreakers to assert their masculinity. Tommy Lee, Ruth's oldest child, who steals from his own mother and beats his girlfriend, is looked up to by his cousin Grey. With obvious pride, Grey and Garvey place themselves in the tradition of Boatwright males when they boast about being the youngest in the family to have been arrested.

Because of Bone's ambivalence about the roles available to her male and female relatives, her identification shifts throughout the novel. At times she feels separate from the women; at times she is pleased to identify with their strength. At times she wants the freedom the men have; at times she hates them for their vulgarity or their exclusion of her. The enforcement of gendered sex roles is part of the regime that Bone grows up with and is often frustrated by. In spite of her anxiety about

gendered expectations and her own resistance to such expectations, Bone, nevertheless, is ready at one point to fault Raylene for remaining unmarried. Like the epithets bastard, trash, and nigger, one's marital status is a readily available category deployed to define and to judge. And while Raylene as family is accepted by her siblings, her outcast status is made manifest by Anney's anxious concern over what Bone understands about her lesbian aunt.

Raylene, because she resists identification by others, is described as the most self-fulfilled Boatwright and her physical surroundings reinforce her contentment. The novel juxtaposes descriptions of Alma and Raylene's houses. At Alma's the spigot has been turned off in the summer by a cheap landlord; as a result, the grass burns up and dries out. In contrast, Raylene's house is by the river and there she offers freedom to family who come to visit, notably the growing males, whose delinquent status makes them the constant object of scrutiny from the family as well as from the law. The fishing is the best in the county at Raylene's because there things are allowed to be. In salvaging discards from the river, Raylene reverses the trope of discipline. "Trash rises" she says, when "no one can mess with it" (Allison 1992, 178). Nevertheless, Raylene's situation is not glossed into a false idyll. She keeps her land clear so that she can survey what's coming in order to protect herself; she has scars she refuses to talk about. She is not allowed to be a mechanic, a job for which she is adequately skilled. Moreover, Bone's lesbian aunt accepts limitations to her own resistance. When Raylene goes into town, she trades her overalls for a dress. And she is one of the prominent voices that counsels Bone to control her own legitimate anger in order to maintain peace in her family.

Bastard out of Carolina is in many ways a traditional novel, yet it successfully resists normative scenarios at various turns. Bone's petty theft from the Woolworth is a prime example of this rewriting of a well-worn script. Discovering

Bone has stolen the common object of childhood acquisitiveness, penny candy, her mother decides to bring her to confess her crime to the manager. As usual, Anney is concerned about appearances, about what others will think. But the eyes that fix Bone do not forgive; instead, the manager extends his power to punish and to stigmatize by furthering Bone's humiliation under the pretense of acting for her own good. Barring Bone from the store, he tells her, "When your mama thinks you've learned your lesson, she can come back and talk to me. But till then, we're gonna remember your name, what you look like" (Allison 1992, 97). Instead of repentance, what Bone learns is rage, and when she enacts her revenge by later breaking into the store with her cousins, leaving the doors wide open for others to steal as well, she takes her anger out not only on her own behalf, but on behalf of the dispossessed "gray-faced men" who hang out on State Street and remind Bone of her poor, disposed uncles (Allison 1992, 226). Allison's novel not only resists the usual pattern of sin, punishment, and salvation, it also challenges the veracity and reveals the disciplinary function of those categories. As Earle acknowledges, the prodigal sheep is desired because it is outside the fold (Allison 1992, 148).

According to D.A. Miller's interpretation of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the aim of disciplinary regulation "is to enforce not so much a norm as the normality of normativeness itself." He explains: "Rather than rendering all its subjects uniformly 'normal,' discipline is interested in putting in place a perceptual grid in which a division between the normal and the deviant inherently imposes itself" (Miller 1988, 18). By altering the point of view of the "perceptual grid" and the standards for judgment, Allison succeeds in reversing the punitive gaze, both for Bone and for the novel. To her Aunt Raylene's chagrin, Bone insists on idolizing her Uncle Earle. But his insistence on remaining outside the fold mimics Allison's own insistence in keeping her narrative outside the trajectory of the normative and

regulatory plot. When Bone and the Woolworth manager next cross paths, he fails to recognize her, evidence no doubt of her insignificance to him, but also an interesting reversal as she is now the one who watches and judges. Bone's gaze at her accusers is an important element in the novel. Aunt Raylene chastises Bone for the presumptions she makes about those who watch her (Allison 1992, 262). Nevertheless, by watching others, Bone attempts to reverse the gaze that judges and punishes.

Ultimately, Allison's novel attempts to resist the identification with the Novel in Miller's sense, that is, as part of the system of surveillance that maintains and validates the liberal middle-class. Although Allison deploys some traditional narrative techniques, by her reversals and transgressions, especially by altering the expected trajectory of the plot, Allison effectively works against tradition. Further, by positioning the law as antagonist, Allison remains within the tradition Miller describes; however, by placing Bone outside the inscribed Law of the Father, Allison forecloses the possibility that Bone will achieve the recovery that is part of the traditional bildungsroman. By resisting traditional inscriptions, in effect Allison queers the bildungsroman. Instead of trying to recuperate the Other, Allison effectively resists the normative function of established plots that reinscribe binaries that produce Otherness.

In spite of Allison's willingness to resist normative scenarios even when inscribed within outcast communities, she has also said that she writes stories in order to articulate the truth of her life:

I have never been able to make clear the degree of my fear, the extent to which I feel myself denied: not only that I am queer in a world that hates queers, but that I was born poor in a world that despises the poor. The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction (Allison 1994, 14).

Allison has written openly about the autobiographical elements in the novel,

including the sexual abuse she, too, was subjected to by her step-father. “Writing *Bastard out of Carolina*,” she states, “became, ultimately, the way to claim my family’s pride and tragedy, and the embattled sexuality I had fashioned on a base of violence and abuse” (Allison 1994, 34). Within the context of the novel it is possible to suggest that Bone’s sado-masochistic fetishization of objects of abuse and her fantasies rewrite the script of that abuse. In her revision, Bone reverses the discipline she suffers from her sadistic step-father by fantasizing witnesses to her suffering. Is it possible, however, to conclude that Allison’s performative re-enactment of her real childhood abuse at the hands of her family is also successfully reinscribed by her act of writing her story in the form of a novel?

The theoretical problems inherent in Allison’s intentions are obvious. If the Novel is part of the regulatory regime because of its participation in surveillance, is it possible for a story, once inscribed, to resist the legitimating, and hence the regulatory imperative of all inscription? If it’s true, as Foucault declares in *Discipline and Punish* that “visibility is a trap” (1979, 200), then revelation, whether in the form of confession or condemnation, is necessarily linked with subjection. A recuperation into language inevitably brings the subject into a position whereby she can be controlled. As Juliet Mitchell explains Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the subject, “born into language,” forms what can only provisionally be called an identity but which is actually a “mirage arising when the subject forms an image of itself by identifying with others’ perception of it” (Lacan 1982, 5). For both Foucault and Lacan, there is no way out of discursive and regulatory regimes.

Since the trajectory of Allison’s novel is towards accepting illegitimacy--Bone is after all, emphatically named in the novel’s title as a bastard--Allison’s novel itself, in spite of her stated desires to be understood, in its refusal to accept the punitive gaze of other carceral subjects may possibly demonstrate a way to conceive

of queer narrative space. In its refusal to define itself in opposition to other categories, and in its resistance to the assertion of any normalizing perceptual grid, Allison's narrative truly is queer.

In the novel's final chapter, Anney has achieved one part of her quest as she places in Bone's lap the now unmarked birth certificate. However, although she has been witness to the abuse that has sent her daughter to the hospital, she also proceeds to abandon her daughter for her husband. On the one hand, the ending is a traditional one for a novel of development, with the youth in question left in control of her own fate but stripped of self-delusion that might hamper self-fulfillment. But the "truth" the certificate tells poses additional questions. Bone's true father is listed as "unknown." Although her certificate no longer carries the stamp of public scorn, in terms of Bone's story, it resolves nothing. Moreover, if Anney's project has been to recuperate her daughter into a legitimate, that is Oedipal, family, one thing that is clear by the end of the novel is that neither Bone nor Glen will take their proper symbolic positions in regard to each other. Ironically, Bone is the closest she will come to being "legitimated" at the same time she is abandoned. The abandonment by her mother, however, also keeps Bone free from the Law of the Father. Bone is recognized by the law that is depicted in the Novel, but not by the Law that determines subjectivity.

It is significant that the project of recuperating Bone into the symbolic order, both by having the label "illegitimate" removed from the birth certificate and by marrying and thereby providing her daughter with a "father" is Anney's goal, not that of the novel. On the contrary, the novel reveals that what Anney does in her attempts to make her daughter legitimate is the source of Bone's suffering. The subject of Allison's novel is legitimacy itself, including the legitimacy of storytelling. The trajectory of this novel is not into a legitimacy which Bone can never achieve, but

rather into a realization and awareness of the degree to which she and her family are illegitimate, and in writing their story, Allison herself resists the legitimating function of the novel and its normative scripts. In one of the many scenes of self-examination, Bone ruminates:

When I saw myself in Daddy Glen's eyes, I wanted to die.... He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself. It was sliding down an endless hole, seeing myself at the bottom, dirty, ragged, poor, stupid. But at the bottom, at the darkest point, my anger would come and I would know that he had no idea who I was (Allison 1992, 209).

Although she laments the fact that he doesn't really see her, for Bone, "The worst thing in the world was the way I felt when I wanted us to be like the families in the books in the libraries, when I just wanted Daddy Glen to love me like the father in *Robinson Crusoe*" (Allison 1992, 209).

Throughout the novel, the law, or more specifically, the supplements who uphold the law, constantly discipline Anney's family. Earle declares the futility inherent in Anney's recuperative project in regards to her ongoing efforts to change the certificate when he says: "The law never done us no good" (Allison 1992, 5). As Judith Butler points out, in Lacanian theory:

Bodies only become whole . . . by the idealizing and totalizing specular image which is sustained through time by the sexually marked name. To have a name is to be positioned within the Symbolic, the idealized domain of kinship . . . which is governed by the law of the father. . . . the name, which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative. To be named is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law (1993, 72).

As a means of rejecting the law that incarcerates him, Earle embraces his outcast status. For Dorothy Allison, in rejecting the Law that would subjectify and therefore subjugate Bone, Allison articulates the narrative development of a queer subject and in effect repeats, with a significant difference, Earle's statement: The Law never done

us no good.

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