

**The Necessary Disclosure:  
Confronting Childhood Abuse in  
Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina***

Ying-chiao Lin

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**Abstract**

This paper, focusing on childhood abuse and its impact upon the injured child, will attempt to investigate the “family politics” in Allison’s autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, particularly the relationships between the narrator daughter and her stepfather and mother, by using empirical psychological theories: Heinz Kohut’s notions of self psychology and narcissism and Judith Herman’s observations on trauma survivals. To the author, the writing of *Bastard* is a movement through the history of childhood abuse toward the possibility of choice—Allison’s choice to strike back at her abuser. The desire for revenge is so urgent and compelling that the writer puts her scenes of violent abuse right at or near the beginning of the novel. The deliberately graphic description of the abuse scenes functions then, by shocking the reader, as a way of seeking revenge: the battleground is now shifted from a girl’s abused body to the body of a text that cries out with pain, cries out for justice. The text has now the power to punish the abuser by laying bare his crime; the text becomes a court of law, the readers judges. Thus in effect Allison, through her girl narrator’s story, is reversing or rather inverting herself, turning her own hidden scar inside out and into the broad light of day, displaying the cruel reality of her suffering in full force and for all to see. The writing itself has sprung forth from this terrible inner wound; as the wound can never fully heal the writing must keep flowing out of it.

**Keywords**

Heinz Kohut, self psychology, Judith Herman, narcissistic personality disorder, narcissistic rage, autobiographical fiction, childhood trauma

The story I am going to tell is a horrible one: I beg that daughters and fathers should hold themselves aloof, while I sing, or if they find my songs enchanting, let them refuse to believe this part of my tale, and suppose that it never happened. ---Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

I grew up poor, hated, the victim of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and I know that suffering does not ennoble. It destroys. ---Allison, "Question"

## **The Origin Story**

Though *Bastard* was a National Book Award Finalist it received but little critical attention, much less psychoanalytic scrutiny. This paper, focusing on childhood abuse and its impact upon the injured child, will attempt to investigate the novel's "family politics," particularly the relationships between the narrator daughter and her stepfather and mother, by using empirical psychological theories: I am especially interested in Heinz Kohut's notions of self psychology and narcissism and Judith Herman's observations on trauma survivors. Through an examination of the abuser's profile in relation to his narcissistic injuries, the violently mistreated girl's reenactment of her abuse and healing process, the worn-out mother's final "betrayal" of the daughter (whom she leaves), and the socio-economic condition of this "poor white trash" family, this paper intends to uncover the hidden motivation(s) behind the exercise of domestic violence in the context of personality formation through family relationships. Though Laurie Vickroy's "Elusive Redemptions: Trauma, Gender and Violence in *Bastard* and *Paco's Story*" deals with the issues of trauma and violence in *Bastard*, she only provides a general discussion of violent abuse, and is mainly comparing the two chosen texts. This study differs in several respects: it will examine the narcissistic personality of the persecutor and closely analyze the girl-narrator's psychic identity formation, her concept of her own body, and the impact of chronic paternal abuse on her cognitive development. In short, this investigation is devoted to the search for the possible origin(s) of domestic violence, particularly in the relationship between father (or father surrogate) and young daughter. It is believed by psychiatrists and by Allison herself that trauma survivors' recovery can never be a complete one;<sup>1</sup> the most that trauma victims can hope for would be to come bravely

face to face with their past unresolved emotions, with the scar of their experience. Allison seems to argue that the full realization of the fact of the abuse and of the abuser marks the real moment of healing for the victim.

*Bastard*, set in the 1950s in Greenville, South Carolina, is generally considered to be a “‘coming-of-age’ or ‘rite-of-passage’ story” (Horeck 48). The novel begins with the illegitimate birth of Ruth Anne Boatwright, who was called Bone by her family; she is the “Carolina bastard” of the title. Anney Boatwright, Bone’s mother, was eight months’ pregnant and fifteen years old when she was in a serious car accident: the truck she was in, driven by her drunken brother, crashed into another vehicle; Anney flew through the windshield and was still unconscious when she gave birth to Bone a few hours later. As the young narrator of the novel, Bone recalls her early years and immediately focuses on the relationship between herself and her stepfather, Daddy Glen. Glen’s abuse of Bone dominates most of the narrative. However, *Bastard* ends with Bone’s mother “betrayal”: she leaves the girl to her Aunt Raylene, even after learning of her husband’s brutal rape of their daughter in the final scene.

*Bastard* is a daring and rebellious disclosure, particularly in its centering on the dynamics of parent-child relationships through personal and social perspectives. With this novel Allison re-examines family politics to see how the perverted exercise of paternal power may distort and deform a child psychically and emotionally. Rather than focus on incest, the author directs her readers to the girl-child’s inner monologue in order to trace the hidden version of the history of her abuse, a history that hangs over her and demands to be told so that an unresolved rage may be released. In the retelling of past pain in her semi-autobiographical writing, Allison chooses a girl-child as the narrator who will undergo a journey, the revisiting of a violent memory. Through the child narrator’s recounting of the detailed horrors of the abuse, Allison is able to reconstruct the past crime scene in order to access her (the girl’s and her own) old wounded self and initiate recovery. As Allison demands direct contact with the abuse itself, she needs, rather than an adult’s discourse, the language of a girl-child narrator exactly the same age as the author when she suffered her own torment. Allison then wants to personally revisit the/her terrorizing past in order to muster a force of resistance to the inner chaos and find a *catharsis* for her tragedy. Her revelations here will show the public that childhood abuse is a social pathology, since the history of an abused person is always set within the rhythm of a larger social context.

### **A Case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Daddy Glen**

Allison in *Bastard* offers an extended view of the narcissism displayed by the

physical (beating) and sexual (rape) abuser of his stepdaughter, Glen Waddell. Glen is at first kind to his wife Anney and gentle with his daughters, Bone and Reese; he is seen as a “[s]kinny, nervous little” (10) person who, in the eyes of Bone’s mother Anney, would “make a good daddy” (13); a man who “didn’t drink, didn’t mess around, didn’t even talk dirty, but the air around him seemed to hum with vibration” (35). With his middle-class background, Glen seems to bring a sense of strength and a chance for revival to this poor white trash family. Although he is a small man, Glen is “so muscular and strong that it was hard to see the delicacy in him, though he was strangely graceful in his rough work clothes and heavy boots” (34). Glen is, as the novel presents him in its class-conscious code, a blend of middle-class elegance and lower-class debased physicality. More specifically, beneath his outward appearance of middle-class refinement lies the urgent need to perpetrate physical violence on powerless people, which results from his own unhappy family life with his father.

The relationship between Glen and his father, the proud and successful owner of a local dairy, is a destructive one, marked by the son’s unfulfilled craving for love from an abusive and indifferent father who has unintentionally shaped this uncertain and frightened child. “It was true. Around his father, Glen became unsure of himself and too careful. He broke out in a sweat, and his eyes kept flickering back to his daddy’s face as if he had to keep watching or miss the thing he needed most to see. He would pull at his pants like a little boy and drop his head if anyone asked him a question” (99). Glen seemed to live from moment to moment beneath the threat of his father’s authoritarian power: “We knew that he would not have the nerve to leave before his father had delivered his lecture on all the things Glen had done wrong in his long life of failure and disappointment” (99). The son’s hidden yet chronic state of shame-rage reveals that he is unable to free himself entirely from the pathological need for his father’s recognition and approval. In his wife Anney’s observation, Glen suffers a strong sense of lacking paternal support and empathy: “Anybody can see how Glen got bent, what his daddy’s done to him. I ain’t never seen a boy wanted his daddy’s love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get out from under his daddy’s meanness” (132). Feeling abandoned and humiliated by his father, Glen gradually begins to display the symptoms of narcissistic rage as described by neurologist and psychiatrist Heinz Kohut:

Narcissistic rage occurs in many forms; they all share, however, a specific psychological flavor which gives them a distinct position within the wide realm of human aggressions. The need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims which gives no rest to those who have suffered a narcissistic injury—these are features which are characteristics for the phenomenon of

narcissistic rage in all its forms and which set it apart from other kinds of aggression. (1972: 380)

According to Kohut, “[n]arcissistic rage enslaves the ego and allows it to function only as its tool and rationalizer” (1972: 387). Glen’s internalized rage has become the predominant urge in his relationship with others, so that he is in effect controlled by his explosive inner anger:

The berserker rage that would come on him was just a shade off the power of the Boatwrights’ famous binges. . . . Tire irons and pastry racks, pitchforks and mop handles, things got bent or broken around Daddy Glen. His face would pink up and his hands would shake; his neck would start to work, the muscles ridging up and throbbing; then his mouth would swell and he would spit. Words came out that were not meant to be understood: “*Goddam motherfucker son of a bitch shitass!*” Magic words that made other men back off, put their hands up, palms out, and whisper back, “Now, Glen, now, now, Glen, now, hold on, boy.” (100)

Different from healthy or reactive aggressive impulses which can be dissolved effectively, narcissistic rage takes revenge as its only end. Beneath Glen’s middle-class gracefulness is a violent, malevolent monstrous drive for revenge. Accordingly, most of his acts and behaviors are directed by his will toward striking back at his own father, getting even with a psychologically abusive father who always saw him as the black sheep of a decent middle-class family. His marrying Anney is but one of his resentful moves in response to his father’s negligence and open humiliation of him: to marry Anney was to marry the “whole Boatwright legend” and thus “shame his daddy and shock his brothers” (13). For “[i]t was not only Daddy Glen’s brothers being lawyers and dentists instead of mechanics and roofers that made them so different from Boatwrights” (98).

Unable then to find a place in his own family, Glen aligned with the outcast Boatwright men’s reputation for shameless and disruptive behavior; by thus “disgracing himself” he was in effect getting even with his father. But by identifying with this white trash family Glen also gained a certain status and access to a new self-assurance and (paternal) power, his birthright, free of the reach of his father’s humiliation. The Boatwrights represent the exploited lower middle class and can thus be manipulated and redefined according to Glen’s own fiat. His search for an omnipotent and powerful self-identity in his relationships with others is then driven by an extreme narcissistic personality disturbance. The Boatwrights, functioning to replace Glen’s father, help to rebuild a superego wounded by the depreciation of the father figure: because “[t]he superego did not possess the requisite exalted status and was thus unable to raise the patient’s self esteem,” we get the “insufficient idealization

of his superego (an insufficient cathexis with idealizing libido of the values, standards, and functions of his superego) . . .” (Kohut 2001: 61-2). Suffering this sense of loss of an idealized object (his father) and in a state of damaged self-esteem, Glen therefore finds himself incompatible with the people around him; he is hypersensitive to humiliation and defends himself with verbal and physical assaults on those insult him. As a result, he loses job after job.

Glen then presents himself as a powerful and intimidating man, but this merely covers the disorganization of a vulnerable personality; this is the behavior of a certain type of violence-prone man who reacts to humiliation violently. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, narcissistic rage becomes a mechanism by which a person may reach his/her “grandiose self”<sup>2</sup> (idealized self-image), which serves as a defense against rejection. In Kohut’s view, “there is a defensive hypercathexis of the grandiose self (perhaps acquired originally after a painful disappointment in an idealized object or the loss of it)” (2001: 163). He continues,

The flaunting of omnipotent unrestricted activities and the delinquent’s pride in his skill of ruthlessly manipulating his environment serve to buttress his defenses against becoming aware of a longing for the lost idealized self-object, and against the emptiness and lack of self-esteem that would supervene if the continuous elaborations of the delinquent grandiose self, in word and deed, were to cease. (2001: 163)

Glen, with his obsession with grandiosity, is a man whose childhood primary narcissism was disturbed by parental empathic insufficiencies. In such cases the ignored and abandoned child reacts by creating a grandiose self, by transferring the sense of “perfection” to an idealized and omnipotent “self-object” or “idealized parent imago” (Kohut 2001:26). Lacking the healthy developmental conditions that allow a child to progress from self-love to object-love, the child with narcissistic injuries is arrested at a stage where the idealized parent image remains central to the newly-formed self-image. The consequence is, according to Kohut, a fixation on, or developmental retaining of, the archaic self- object and a powerful form of unfulfilled object hunger (2001: 45). Glen’s narcissistic hunger manifests itself in his chronic feelings of humiliation, self-loathing and dehumanization. Thus, his unexplained infantile fixation on and attachment to his wife—he sees Anney as his “idealized parent imago”—is a result of his irrevocable loss of paternal affection. Likewise, Glen’s brutal abuse of his stepdaughter is the consequence of his competing with her for his “father”’s attention, and thus of his narcissistic rage that demands revenge. Both relationships, father-(step)daughter and son-father, are then driven by Glen’s *transference* of his narcissistic personality disturbance, which aims to restore archaic self per-

fection and omnipotence when the self is threatened with fragmentation and/or loss of its idealized object.

On the one hand Glen suffers from the delusion of self-reference, on the other he is devoured by the self-loathing image engendered by his father's ignorance and degradation. In his desperate need for love and destructive response to humiliation, Glen behaves then like a patient suffering from pathological narcissism. Otto Kernberg, another leading authority on this disorder since the mid-1960s, defines narcissistic personality disorder:

These patients present an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions with other people, a great need to be loved and admired by others, . . . Their emotional life is shallow. They experience little empathy for the feelings of others, they obtain very little enjoyment from life other than from the tributes they receive from others or from their own grandiose fantasies. . . . In general, their relationships with other people are clearly exploitative and sometimes parasitic. It is as if they feel they have the right to control and possess others and to exploit them without guilt feelings—and, behind a surface which very often is charming and engaging, one senses coldness and ruthlessness. Very often such patients are considered to be dependent because they need so much tribute and adoration from others, but on a deeper level they are completely unable really to depend on anybody because of their deep distrust and depreciation of others. (1975: 227-28)

Clinically then Glen, Allison's sexual persecutor in *Bastard*, exemplifies this pathological narcissistic idealization and grandiosity, this defensiveness against obsessive traits due to the projection of internalized rage, arising from traumatic injuries suffered in childhood. His desire to be loved and admired is clearly revealed to the girl-narrator, who in turn becomes the scapegoat for his inner rage: "Every time his daddy spoke harshly to him, every time he couldn't pay the bills, every time Mama was too tired to flatter or tease him out of his moods, Daddy Glen's eyes would turn to me, and my blood would turn to ice" (233). Glen's "fragile masculine pride undermined because he finds it difficult to support his family, [he] uses a classic defending script against shame when he blames others for his failures" (Bouson 109-10).<sup>3</sup>

Described as a son depreciated by his father, one whose mother is entirely textually absent, Glen is psychologically locked into a state of eternal childhood, arrested in that preoedipal state in which the mother is solely desired. Glen, presenting himself as an eternal boy, would impose eternal motherhood on his wife Anney; his emotions remain those of a child insatiably yearning for his mother. Glen's image as a child-man is further reinforced by Allison with the metaphor of his inability to beget a son. Glen is condemned to be an eternal boy, forever prevented from reaching man-

hood, a complete failure both as a grown-up and as a protective and empathic father for his family. Psychologically, he is a traumatic child unable to develop a healthy sense of the self; he suffers a lack of self-esteem, a lack of subjectivity, a lack of the symbolic phallus. “Allison constructs a paternal figure whose bemused rage at the duplicities of the symbolic, specifically the failure of the penis and the phallus to converge, is wrought on the body of his twelve year-old stepdaughter” (Irving 99). In the eyes of this stepdaughter, Glen presents a split and thus deformed, monstrous personality, unresolved and overwhelming. When with him Bone would picture “two separate movie images: Daddy Glen screaming at me, his neck bright red with rage, and the other, impossible vision just by it, Daddy Glen at *his* daddy’s house with his head hanging down and his mouth so soft spit shone on the lower lip” (100).

The narcissistic Daddy Glen thus sadistically abuses his stepdaughter, Bone, the scapegoat for a history of traumatic pain and suffering imposed by his cold, stern father. That is, his inhumane cruelty to Bone is but a confirmation of this monstrous identity that he has unconsciously internalized from his narcissistic injuries. From a Freudian viewpoint Glen’s exercise of sadism allows him to realize his desire of becoming omnipotent. In the words of Kaja Silverman: “Sadistic ecstasy, . . . hinges upon a ‘swelling’ of the self. Freud comments upon the ‘extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment’ which accompanies sadism at its ‘purest,’ an enjoyment which derives from the fulfillment of the ego’s ‘old wishes for omnipotence’”<sup>4</sup> (Silverman 275-76). To abuse another to give meaning to one’s own contemptuous existence or, like Glen in his acts of aggression, relocate one’s displaced identity. In his sexual abuse and ongoing beatings of his stepdaughter, Glen has erased the empathic domestic ethos and redefined the parent-child relationship according to a sadomasochistic pattern.<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, is Bone chosen, rather than the other, younger stepdaughter Reese, as the object of Glen’s abuse? In the scenes with Glen and the abused girl, Allison designates for her readers the inner space of Glen’s humiliated self in confrontation with his alter ego, Bone: both have been abandoned by father (Bone’s biological father remains unknown all through the novel), both are the “worst one” in the family (Bone’s physical ugliness), both are vying for the mother’s love, both are overwhelmed by narcissistic rage. At one point, Bone reflects all of her father’s narcissistic stepfather’s internalized emotions of defeat: hatred, the will for revenge, shamefulness and low self-esteem. Thus, in torturing his mirror-self, Glen is acting out the compulsive ritual of killing his own weak and inferior self. By hurting Bone he is hurting his debased self, desiring to erase this abject and humiliated self so as to achieve the grandeur (grandiosity) of an integrated identity. Dominated by narcissistic rage, Glen trespasses the boundaries of the parent-child relationship and fails to



distinguish self and other in viewing Bone as his own darkened shadow, thus indicating that his self could never exist independently. Serving then dangerously as her stepfather's mirror-self, the already ugly and now further degraded Bone reminds Daddy Glen of his own imperfect self, of the self-devaluation and thus symbolic destruction necessary for attaining his own grandiose self (idealized self-image).

### **Stories of "Blood and Bone"**

Allison's traumatized girl-narrator, known to the family as Bone, from the beginning of the novel is struggling with the problem of the (il)legitimacy of her birth; she remains totally cut off from her biological father to the end. The girl cannot obtain an official birth certificate because of her run-away father; this makes her feel that she has lacked an "identity" from the moment she was born. Bone thus is or can symbolize a "deserted" daughter—indeed the father's name is unknown to her family, so she is even a "nameless" daughter—just as her "poor white trash" family is ignored or "deserted" by the mainstream society. As a fatherless child in a society in which illegitimacy means alterity, isolation, alienation, Bone is forced to construct her own identity out of stigmatized origins. According to Martha Zingo and Kevin Early: "The identity of the biological father is crucial to the concept of legitimacy since in a patriarchal society women and children are recognized only in relation to men. To say that a child is fatherless is to place her/him outside the power of a specific male" (15). Bone's identity is then defined by her abandonment by both the patriarchal society and her biological father.

Unprotected and unwanted by her father, or by any father-figure, Bone is socially and emotionally a rejected child. However, she lives with the fantasy of a loving father who can give her security and love. Early in her narrative, Bone reveals her desire for the absent father, and even a made-up story would satisfy her: "It wasn't even that I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn't have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told" (31). That is, she wanted a fantasy to cling to, even though she *knew* her real father "didn't even know I existed" and, in her aunt's words, "[t]ook off without speaking to your mama and never came back again" after his first and only visit to the eight-day-old baby. Like other girls suffering from father loss, Bone suffers from the fear of abandonment: "These preoedipal losses become emotionally organized around narcissistic issues and fear of abandonment" (Krueger 100). From a theoretical and clinical standpoint, the importance of the father in a daughter's life is that, as Elyce Wakerman puts it, "fathered daughters have the advantage of glimpsing what is ordinary and human in men" (ix).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, based on trauma theory and object-relationships, psychia-

trists believe there is a relationship between early parent loss (or continuous separation) and pathological narcissism. According to them, the actual loss of a parent during the period of childhood development “imposes an actual trauma . . . which frequently provides a sensitizing precursor for any subsequent experience of loss in adult life” (Krueger 99). Bone’s desperate need for a father’s love is even projected onto her cruel and abusive stepfather, whose demonic sexual violence seems to be ignored due to the girl’s craving for an empathic father: “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 library, when I just wanted Daddy Glen to love me like the father in *Robinson Crusoe*” (209). Bone’s powerful need for a loving father is mainly recounted in the latter part of the novel, after the girl-narrator’s experience of chronic abuse at the hands of Daddy Glen. She is fully aware of her inner longing for a caring father: “a father’s love would purify my heart, turn my bitter soul sweet, and lighten my Cherokee eyes. If he [Daddy Glen] loved me, if he only loved me. Why didn’t he love me?” (209).

Bone, then, initially experiencing a sense of powerlessness and namelessness due to abandonment by her natural father, is then exposed to the stepfather’s sadistic code. Failing to obtain the “good father”’s love, she like her abusive stepfather nurtures herself on a narcissistic rage caused by the absence of the birth father and then (later) the violence done to her by the stepfather. Glen invades Bone’s boundaries by threatening to submit her to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Accordingly, Bone is forced to endure *his* feelings by denying the reality of her own, even though in fact she suffers considerable personal pain and loss. The relationship between Bone and her stepfather is distorted, broken and reconstructed in a sadomasochistic pattern, guided by the parent’s monstrous request for his stepdaughter’s altruistic self-sacrifice, her total submission to his uncontrolled aggressive emotions. Confronted with Daddy Glen’s sadistic abuse, Bone is overpowered, trapped, unable to escape.

Once she was cruelly beaten by her stepfather in a locked bathroom simply for running in the house: “He pulled his belt free from the loops and wrapped the buckle end around his palm. ‘I’ve waited a long time to do this, too long.’” (106). In her powerful descriptions of the physical violence, complete with her child-narrator’s screams, Allison gives her readers immediate access to the crime scene:

I stumbled back against the tub, terrified, praying Mama would come home fast. Mama would stop him. His left hand reached for me, caught my shoulder, pulled me over his left leg. He flipped my skirt up over my head and jammed it into that hand. I heard the sound of the belt swinging up, a song in the air, a high-pitched terrible sound. It 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. . . . 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).

Episodes like this govern the narrative. More hurting is the story of her being beaten is drowned out by Daddy Glen's deformed version of the story and his pleading tears in telling of it to her mother. The abused girl simply seals the truth of her maltreatment from her mother, keeping it as her own secret. She chooses to suffer her pain alone, hoping to spare her mother the horrible, wrenching stories of blood and bone. The sacrificed Bone feels only the most profound concern for her mother: "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" (118). The act of saving her mother from knowing of her suffering places Bone, through a sort of reversal, in a mother-like role and the mother in the role of protected daughter: "It was as if I was her mother now, holding her safe, and she was my child, happy to lean on my strong, straight back" (118). Facing then her unspeakable abuses, Bone is never really given the chance to be a child. As Allison says: "Working-class kids, kids under harrowing circumstances, grow up really fast with a false maturity . . . Bone is not a child. She's not an adult, but she has never been allowed to be a child" (Ng, online interview, 2000). With her adult vision and voice, words like "frightened," "feared," "dead," and "hated" fill Bone's narration, sharpening the picture of a wounded soul, a soul transgressed against, invaded, stunted without anyone on the "outside" knowing of it.

Lacking any external help, Bone shelters herself with her fantasies; with them she is able to locate her true identity, true self. Her creative fantasies, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, are the products of her chronic abuse. According to Judith Herman's observations on the character development of abused children, the

pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold. These altered states of consciousness permit the elaboration of a prodigious array of symptoms, both somatic and psychological. And these symptoms simultaneously conceal and reveal their origins. (96)

The symptoms of Bone's unbearable physical and sexual abuse are seen in her purely psychological fantasies of people watching her being beaten, and also her somatic ones (masturbation). Both are for Bone compulsive (and perverse) reenactments of violence that serve to defy the inescapable violence she endures. Through these reenactments Bone is temporarily liberated from her hellish molestation. As stated by Herman, the "emotional state, usually evoked in response to perceived threats of abandonment, cannot be terminated by ordinary means of self-soothing. Abused chil-

dren discover at some point that the feeling can be most effectively terminated by a major jolt to the body” (109).

Bone’s compulsive desire to be watched grows increasingly masochistic: she wants to be the focus of these spectacles as they reinforce her sense of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom (Vickroy 2001: 42). The point is, of course, that in remembering or imagining these scenes she becomes herself a spectator of her own humiliation. In Kaja Silverman’s analysis of feminine masochism through an examination of Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten,” she claims that “[v]oyeurism has been heavily coded within Western culture as a male activity, and associated with aggression and sadism . . . , [yet] the shadowy onlooker is more mastered than mastering” (204). On the other hand, beyond the perversity and self-destructiveness of her fantasies of “voyeurs” who watch her being beaten by Glen, Bone is also empowered by them, for she feels adored and loved by these spectators of a shameful act:

Now I imagined people watching while Daddy Glen beat me, though only when it was not happening. 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. Someone had to watch. . . . Sometimes a whole group of them would be trapped into watching. They couldn’t help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. . . . Those who watched admired me and hated him. . . . Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. . . . Yet it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen. Only there that I had any pride (112-13).

The compulsion of autoerotic pleasure thus allows her also to move from mastered “object” to mastering “narrative subject”<sup>7</sup>: in this way Bone regains (or rather feels for the first time) pride in herself and can at last analyze, reconstruct, understand her abuser’s sadomasochistic behavior pattern.

In another of the novel’s episodes or scenes she imitates her abuser (Glen), turning herself from victim to victimizer, in a “real” reenactment with her friend, Shannon Pearl. Indeed, Shannon is Bone’s double, a part of her self that got split off from her, an incarnation of the dynamics of her inner rage and humiliation, her “dark side.” Sharing Bone’s sensitivity, her feelings of shame and humiliation, Shannon is the target of public ridicule: “‘Cootie train! Cootie train!’ somebody yelled as the bus lurched into motion and Shannon still hadn’t found a seat. I watched her face . . . she reminded me of myself, or at least the way I had come to think of myself. . . . There was fire in those pink eyes, a deep fire I recognized, banked and raging” (154). With the white skin and hair and the pale pink eyes of an albino, Shannon is bullied by

other children for her physical difference, thus functioning as an actual physical embodiment of Bone's own self-image of "white trash ugliness."

However, when their bond is broken the two insult-prone girls begin to insult each other, exploding with the aggressive anger they have learned too well from their assailants. And in Bone's use of abusive language one sees the legacy of Glen's maltreatment of her. Once again, as psychiatrists predict, the abused child is imitating the aggressor. Using the phrase "identification with the aggressor," Anna Freud points out how children learn to imitate the aggressive actions of their parents: "[b]y impersonating the aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression, the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat" (113).

Observing that the "fire that burned in [Shannon's] eyes was the fire of outrage" (158), Bone reflects upon her own internalized rage. For there is indeed in Bone a deep old rage that is invoked when she overhears the Waddells, Glen's birth family, calling her family "trash," and at this time she feels her burning shame-rage and desire for vengeance: "Trash for sure. . . . I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us" (103). In a sense, Allison's telling of the stories of the injured girl's (girls') is itself already a demand for justice, or at least some balance and compensation for the "trashy" backgrounds (fates) and unsettled, burning hearts they have been given. For otherwise such young girls could find a helping hand only in God's hellfire: "If there was justice, then Shannon and I would make them all burn" (166).<sup>8</sup> The truth remains that it is much more often the abused and insulted child, not the aggressor, who gets burned: Shannon becomes the real martyr of Bone's masochistic fantasy in a ritualistic (though accidental) self-burning; she is swallowed up in flames at a family picnic when she lights a match after spraying too much lighter fluid on the grill. Witnessing the scene, Bone remembers:

Shannon didn't even scream. . . . Her mouth was wide open, and she just breathed the flames in. Her glasses went opaque, her eyes vanished, and all around her skull her fine hair stood up in a crown of burning glory. Her dress whooshed and billowed into orange-yellow smoky flames. . . . I saw Shannon Pearl disappear from this world. (201)

Shannon's death uncannily haunts Bone (204), reinforcing her fear of death at the hands of Daddy Glen's "burning" (or "stinging") abuse. But the symbolic import of this scene may also be that Bone can now finally see her internalized rage, embodied by Shannon, being burned up and buried, leaving no trace to mourn.

The disappearance of her “other self” brings Bone back to the story of her abuse, in which her death wish is now intensified. Pressed and isolated by her secret history of abuse, she angrily admits that death is a better end for an endless life of condemnation and woe. “I was no warrior. I was nobody special. I was just a girl, scared and angry. When I saw myself in Daddy Glen’s eyes, I wanted to die. No, I wanted to be already dead, cold and gone. Everything felt hopeless. He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself. It was like sliding down an endless hole, seeing myself at the bottom, dirty, ragged, poor, stupid” (209). Bone is inevitably and repeatedly pushed back to the zero point—confronting her debased self-esteem, her need to punish herself for her ugliness, her feeling that life is meaningless, that she has no future or anyone to really love her. The psychologist John Briere reports that survivors of childhood abuse show more anger and suicidal tendencies than other patients (327-34), and Herman claims that “[i]n contrast to the impulsive self-destructiveness of the first stage of recovery, the patient’s suicidality during this second stage may evolve from a calm, flat, apparently rational decision to reject a world where such horrors are possible” (194). She continues, “[c]ommonly the patient has the fantasy that she is already among the dead, because her capacity for love has been destroyed” (194). Thus it is almost as if Bones’ once-desperate cry for the dissociation of her “self” from the reality she confronts is now becoming swallowed up within an “already deadened” desire.

### **The Beloved/Betraying Mother**

The most devastating “absolute hopeless grief” for Bone, one that lingers and casts a shadow back over her entire story, is her final abandonment by her mother Anney, who chooses to leave Bone without the slightest knowledge of the abused girl’s intensified need for her empathy and protection. Anney is presented as a woman significantly aloof from her daughter in the opening scene of the story, where she is thrown through the car windshield in an accident: landing on the pavement unharmed and still asleep, she delivers the baby without awakening. Bone reports later that her mother was not, “strictly speaking” (1) present at her birth. This emotional distance between the mother and daughter, primarily a function of the mother’s detachment, is amplified by Allison as the whole narrative of the daughter’s abuse by the stepfather develops. A parallel is ironically drawn between Anney’s unconsciousness at her daughter’s birth and her “unconsciousness” of Glen’s abuse of the girl, right up until the brutal rape scene at the end (Horvitz 255). Anney can represent a mother’s—perhaps also the author’s mother’s—tacit acquiescence and even complicity, by choosing to ignore it, in the stepfather’s violent behavior toward Bone.

Though Anney is aware of Glen's severe and chronic beating of her daughter she remains passive, making no protest until the girl's blood-stained underpants and bruised thigh were accidentally discovered by Aunt Raylene. Once this abusive behavior becomes known to her extended family, Anney could no longer justify or even understand her lack of action: "'Oh God, Raylene. I'm so ashamed, I couldn't stop him, and then . . . I don't know' . . . 'He loves her. He does. He loves us all. I don't know. I don't know. Oh God. Raylene, I love him. I know you'll hate me. Sometimes I hate myself, but I love him. I love him'" (246).

Anney, in allowing this paternal violence to intrude into the family, can be described as what ego psychology calls a passive aggressor, one who identifies with the angry, active aggressor and abuser. Anney chooses to be helpless in the face of her husband's attacks; she is willing to subjugate Bone to abuse at his hands. In presenting the final rape scene, Allison is showing us not only the enraged Glen's monstrous onslaught against the girl but also the mother's passive collusion when she finally chooses to leave her girl aside for the assailant. In this scene Anney, finding Glen still on top of Bone after the rape, begins to attack him physically and then succumbs to his tearful pleas; rather than give any further aid or emotional comfort to her traumatized daughter. The devastated Bone is thrown into a vast darkness when she sees her mother holding Glen in her arms tightly: all the girl's attempts to shield her mother from the painful truth of her abuse (she "kept everything smooth and quiet," 249), to hide from Anney her "bruises" and stifle her tears ("I wouldn't cry, not where Mama could see me. I wouldn't cry," 251), are now utterly denied, rejected, negated as her mother abandons her for the man who has ruined her young life. At this moment Bone suffers a second traumatic shock: her most beloved object, the one whom she thought her only ally and supporter, the one she thought could help her to overcome her inner rage is now fanning its flames. "Rage burned in my belly and came up my throat. I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? . . . I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried" (291). The feeling of being now totally unwanted, the mourning of the loss of a mother as well as father push Bone over the edge into the abyss of darkness: "I looked up into white sky going gray. The first stars would come out as the sky darkened. I wanted to see that, the darkness and the stars. I heard a roar far off, a wave of night and despair waiting for me, and followed it out into the darkness" (291). The tone here is mournful and significantly quiet, muted, in contrast to the previous uncontrolled rage of Bone's first person narration. The heavy silence suggests a profound grief that might drive the victimized and utterly lonely girl into a deadly darkness.

Apparently, Anney values her victimizing husband above her victimized daughter, giving priority to her love for her husband over her love for her daughter: to Bone this fact is even more cruel than the fact of the stepfather's abuse. The mother's shocking failure to show her love to her own daughter in the decisive final scene will continue to haunt the wounded girl. What then is the hidden motive that prevents Anney from being a caring and protective mother, that allows her to in effect betray her own daughter? Allison gives us some clues, some insights into Anney's personality which center around the mother's debased self-image, her awareness of her white trash origins from which there is no escape, no matter how hard she may try to ignore, forget or refute them. Thus we have Anney's obsession with the fact that Bone's birth certificate is stamped with the word "illegitimate," an incident that begins and ends the story. What Anney is really fighting for, rather than her daughter's "legitimacy," is her inner sense of her own legitimacy, her own value and "status" in a society which classifies her as a member of the working class, as poor white trash. Anney's insistence on changing her daughter's status on the birth certificate proves that she sees her daughter as an extension of herself; she is, as Kohut puts it in *The Analysis of the Self* (2001: 277-78), a narcissistic mother.<sup>9</sup> Due to her great fear of being disgraced—being a disgrace—in society's eyes, Anney surrenders to the socially accepted convention of legal marriage after a short period of widowhood and chooses to marry a middle-class man. She is, in other words, oppressed and driven by a compulsive fear of shame. Anney's case exemplified Kohut's explanation of this inner fear:

Behind these preconscious fears of social disgrace lies unconscious fear of a traumatic rejection of their idealizing attitude by the idealized object or the anticipation of a traumatic disillusionment with the idealized object—a dread, in other words, of frustrations in the narcissistic realm which would lead to intolerable narcissistic tensions and to the painful experience of shame and hypochondria. (2001: 162-63).

Anney's sticking to Glen, the middle-class man, at the price of her daughter's suffering is then the very product of her "intolerable narcissistic tensions" and her "painful experience of shame." Anney unconsciously sacrifices her daughter's life to her own obsession with the concept of legitimacy and socially accepted rules, in order to ward off the stigma of "illegitimacy"—even if (ironically) it is the daughter who is most directly marked (stigmatized) as "illegitimate." The mother then nurtures her daughter not with a natural maternal love but with a narcissistic self-love, itself a non-empathic (implicit, complicit) form of abuse.

The girl-narrator clearly expresses her anger at the mother's failure to protect her



from a violently abusive stepfather. During the mother's last visit to Bone, who now stays with Aunt Raylene, at the end of the story, the girl's burning rage has turned into icy emotionlessness: "I had lost my mama. She was a stranger, and I was so old my insides had turned to dust and stone" (306). The main reason Anney comes back to her daughter for the last time is to provide her daughter with a "clean" birth certificate, one that can now replace the old one with the word "illegitimate" stamped on it in red ink. Anney's obsession with dissociating herself from feelings of shame is further seen in her insistence on bringing this new and "blank, unmarked, unstamped" birth certificate (309); ironically, to her it is proof of her strong love for her daughter. The new certificate, with its connotations of cleanliness and blankness as opposed to ugliness and trashiness, may after all clear a space for Bone's new identity, her new life—and perhaps also her new "mother" (Aunt Raylene).

Thus at the end the daughter-narrator's need for maternal love persists, but is being gradually transferred to the mother-substitute, Aunt Raylene. Though the ending is marked with the uncontrollable grief and despair of mother-daughter separation, there is nonetheless hope that the victimized girl will gradually come to understand the mother's decision to "abandon" her (for Glen) and give her to Aunt Raylene—a choice that is carefully explained not by the mother but by the aunt. Bone seems now, at least, to be able to see her mother's leaving her more objectively: "Maybe it wasn't her fault. . . . Maybe it was like Raylene said, the way the world goes, the way hearts get broken all the time" (307). Though acknowledging a recurrent inner pain, (" . . . let it all go. The grief. The anger. The guilt and the shame. . . . It would come back forever," 307), Bone is able to reconstruct a relationship grounded in trust with the outside world, and particularly with Aunt Raylene, letting her own head "tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love" (309). With this new sense of maternal (if still not paternal) love and empathy, Bone may therefore at last regain her sense of self through a reconciliatory acceptance of her degraded past: "I wasn't old. I would be thirteen in a few weeks. I was already who I was going to be. . . . I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309). Bone's slow but sure understanding of her mother's choice and, more than that, her affirmation of her own life, mark her ultimate victory over hellish suffering and the beginning of the healing process.

### **Her Story/ My Story**

To the author Allison, as she reveals in an interview with Carolyn Megan, "Bone is moving toward a kind of truth and that's real important. She's caught in a network of lies and misrepresentation. . . . The only thing that saves her are the stories, the

ones that she needs to make for herself” (73). Telling her stories (through the first-person narration of the novel) has after all been the most effective healing strategy for Bone right from the beginning—yet this has also been (secretly) the author’s own story, a testament to and validation of her own life experience. To Allison, storytelling is about revenge and justice after the suffering of unspeakable abuse: she needs her pain to be recognized and understood, so that it is no longer a nightmare hidden within herself. Like her girl narrator, the author acknowledges her own “despised identity” (“Question” 29) and her poor, white trash family, from which she has tried to stay away for many years. “Peasants, that’s what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us” (*Two* 1). Out of her presumably shameful family history and, set within it, the history of her own childhood abuse, Allison creates her imaginary works, just as Aunt Raylene makes “works of art” from the trash collected from a river. Thus, for Allison, storytelling transforms all that is or has been distorted and deformed into art, making meaning out of her painful existence. The capacity to articulate coherently the memory of one’s own suffering is considered by psychologists to be a crucial sign of emotional recovery. Telling through Bone her own story of domestic victimization and rage, Allison is like her narrator able to survive it.

For Allison storytelling is telling the truth, revealing all of the neglected, hidden, shameful events, and even (if they really occurred) the painful lies and deceptions, so as to see things as they really were and are. Though coming face to face with her past means risking the reenactment of almost unbearable memories, Allison attempts to validate, to show the value of this dark “place” in her life, even as art. “That our true stories may be violent, distasteful, painful, stunning, and haunting, I do not doubt. But our true stories will be literature. No one will be able to forget them, and though it will not always make us happy to read of the dark and dangerous places in our lives, the impact of our reality is the best we can ask of our literature” (“Believing” 166). For realistic writing about one’s own experience can also offer the reader, “as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding” (Belsey 67). The writing of *Bastard* was then the writing of a still unresolved rage that yearned for public understanding, a terrible secret crime that still demanded justice. The deliberately graphic description of the abuse scenes functions then, by shocking the reader, as a way of seeking revenge: the battleground is now shifted from a girl’s abused body to the body of a text that cries out with pain, cries out for justice. The text has now the power to punish the abuser by laying bare his crime; the text becomes a court of law, the readers judges.

The writing of *Bastard* is a movement through the history of childhood abuse toward the possibility of choice—Allison’s choice to strike back at her abuser. The desire for revenge is so urgent and compelling that the writer puts her scenes of violent abuse right at or near the beginning of the novel. Structurally, the whole story of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is framed by the sexual molestation with which it opens and the terrible rape (and mother’s betrayal) with which it ends. But in the middle we have the traumatized girl’s search for her self, her survival strategies: the relationship with her own (with the narrator’s, perhaps too the author’s) alter ego, the fantasies, the appeal to gospel music. Thus in effect Allison, through Bone’s story, is reversing or rather inverting herself, turning her own hidden scar inside out and into the broad light of day, displaying the cruel reality of her suffering in full force and for all to see. The writing itself has sprung forth from this terrible inner wound; as the wound can never fully heal the writing must keep flowing out of it. Storytelling is the author’s vital power, “a process of survival, of deciding once more to live—and clinging to that decision. . . . The stories were the blood and bone of it” (*Trash* 7).

## Notes

1. In Herman’s observations, “[r]esolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (211).
2. In *The Analysis of the Self* (2001), Kohut postulates that narcissism, distinctively apart from earlier psychoanalytic thinking, follows an independent and potentially healthy line of developmental line. Kohut replaces the traditional term *narcissistic self* with *grandiose self*.
3. J. Brooks Bouson uses shame theories to interpret Glen’s practicing of brutal violence, Bone’s abused and stigmatized life, and Bone’s mother’s obsession with her shameful social status as a lower-class laborer. Here, as Bouson indicates, the shame-vulnerable Glen is unable to recognize his own failure, which testifies the shame theorist Gershen Kaufman’s observation, “The transfer of blame is fundamentally a transfer of shame” (102). Bouson elaborates, “Seeking to relocate his own shame in others, Daddy Glen blames his failure on the ‘unbelief’ of his family” (110).
4. See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, p. 21.
5. Deborah Horvitz, in her analysis of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), points out that sadomasochism is connected with gender, with the Corregidora women are victims of men (249). For the relation between sadism and masochism, Max Scheler presumes the complementary mode of it. In Scheler’s describing of Schopenhauer’s recounting of a white squirrel and a snake observed by an English officer in the Indian jungle, he concludes that “[m]asochism . . . resembles its opposite, *sadism*, in being simply a (twofold) manifestation of the erotic power. . . . Even for the masochist, the object of enjoyment is not pure passivity as such, but his self-identifying participation in the dominance of the partner, i.e. a *sympathetic attainment of power*” (italics original, 21-22).
6. Wakerman in *Father Loss: Daughters Discuss the Man that Got Away* (1984) emphasizes that girls without father experience emotional disturbance and confusion with love relationships.
7. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* indicates that the repetition compulsion principle is for the individual to convert a passive experience into an active one for the purpose of mastery. Freud writes, “he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not” (15).
8. Here we see the fundamentalist Protestantism of the “Bible-toting” American South, and especially of the lower middle class or “poor white trash.”
9. According to Kohut, “a narcissistic parent—in most, but not in all, cases it is the mother’s personality whose influence is predominant in this respect—considers the child as the extension of herself”

(2001: 277).

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*Ying-chiao Lin is Associate Professor in College of International Studies and Education for Overseas Chinese Students at National Taiwan Normal University*  
*yclin@ntnu.edu.tw*