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“Anything dead coming back to life hurts”: *Beloved*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *dogs in Alabama* as Contemporary Female Gothic

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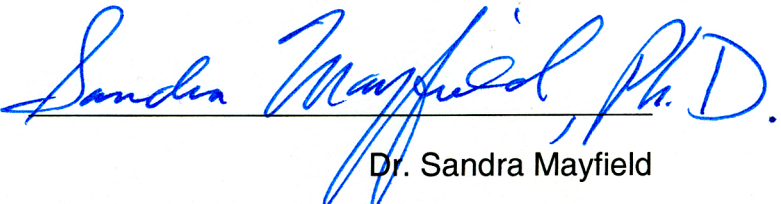
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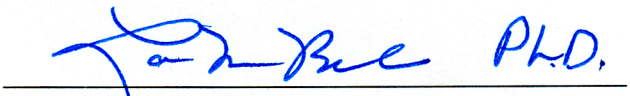


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Abstract

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TITLE OF THESIS: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts": *Beloved*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *gods in Alabama* as Contemporary Female Gothic

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The contemporary Female Gothic is characterized by the highlighting of the monstrosities of patriarchal ideology's failures in order to point to a more positive space created by the agency of the female heroine and her community. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Joshilyn Jackson's *gods in Alabama* contain the Gothic characteristics of supernatural and real monsters, of social realism, and of ruptured narrative, but use these tropes as a background to be overcome by the personal agency and community power of the feminine heroine. First the protagonists must rename themselves by accepting the responsibility of self-definition and ownership; they must create an identity for themselves, as the protagonists Sethe, Bone, and Arlene do, that is not defined by others or by their traumatic pasts. Secondly, these heroines must find the strength to narrate their own stories. This story must include the trauma of the past, must speak the unspeakable, and then must move beyond victimhood into the possibility of a future where the heroine is free to make her own choices, to write her own story. The narrative structure of each text reflects the uneven journey experienced by each heroine in her struggle for the ability to narrate her story. Finally, each protagonist must escape from the confines of the Gothic home, which may be a literal house but which also includes the intrusions of a grotesque culture into the family home, and must find a new home through connection with a female community that gives each heroine the power to live as her true self. Although no feminist utopia is promised by their endings, each novel uses the female heroine's painful triumph over the Gothic threats to her physical and psychological well-being to point to a more positive space beyond victimhood for the growth of the woman's true self.

“Anything dead coming back to life hurts”¹: *Beloved*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and
dogs in Alabama as Contemporary Female Gothic

Chapter 1

Introduction

Women writing in the last thirty years have faced a feminist dilemma. As feminists, they recognize and speak out against the systems of patriarchal oppression that have hindered women’s intellectual development and silenced women’s voices. However, as so much significant progress has been made since the second wave of feminism began in the 1960’s and 1970’s, women writers also want to give their female protagonists personal agency, to make them more than victims. Finding the balance between victim and active agent is precarious.² When one considers a genre like the Gothic, which is so heavily gendered and so obviously based on the victimhood of the female, this challenge would seem doubly perilous. However, several contemporary writers have undertaken this challenge, seeking to redeem a classic genre and instill it with feminist thought.

¹ Morrison, p.35

² See Meyers’ first chapter for a complete discussion of this topic.

I intend to show that many of the works of contemporary Southern women writers salvage the lives of their female heroines through the regenerative power of name, narrative, and the home place. Texts such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Joshilyn Jackson's *gods in Alabama* use Gothic structures and tropes to illustrate the destructive forces of both the past and the present, but as contemporary feminist texts, they demonstrate the personal agency of their female protagonists to counteract these destructive forces. These heroines regenerate their true selves, claiming ownership by renaming themselves, by telling their own stories, and by escaping from or rebuilding differently the confining Gothic home.

To begin discussing these three texts as Gothic fiction, I must first establish some sort of parameters for what I mean by this term. I will not delve into a discussion of the many historical definitions of the Gothic genre or the development of this genre throughout literary history, but will confine my parameters to the more relevant ideas of the Female Gothic and of American Southern Gothic, both of which are terms I contend apply to all three of these texts. Ellen Moers coined the term "Female Gothic" in her book *Literary Women* in 1976, saying that her readings of Gothic texts established in this genre a focus on the female body that tended to "highlight anxieties and fears that she directly relates to female experience – from 'the savagery of girlhood' and the threat or experience of sexual violation, to pregnancy and childbirth" (Bailey 272). Thus Moers dangerously and disturbingly linked the violent and grotesque tendencies found in Gothic fiction directly to the female body. These three texts all focus on

the violation of the female body and relate that violation to the destruction of the self, the psychological toll of physical and sexual abuse. Peggy Bailey further states that in the 1980's and 1990's, scholars and critics further developed the idea of the Female Gothic to include the Female Gothic heroine, "a motherless, vulnerable young woman facing the threat, if not the reality, of confinement and/or violation" (273). *Beloved*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *gods in Alabama* all demonstrate this trope as their heroines are all motherless in some way; either the mother is dead and gone as in *Beloved*, is emotionally unable to support her daughter as in *Bastard*, or is mentally absent as in *gods*. Additionally, Bailey finds in contemporary Female Gothic writings "The imprisonment and vulnerability of women within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety, especially the family home" (273). In all three novels, the "home," whether it be the actual house, the community, and/or the patriarchal social system which surrounds the heroines (all of which are highly interrelated, as will be discussed later), is a threatening place, full of ghosts and monsters, both supernatural and real.

And what characterizes Southern Gothic, or Southern writing in general, as different from, say eighteenth-century British Gothic? According to Bailey, "The Southern Gothic is fueled by the need to explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable" (271). Most analysts would trace this trauma and the desire to explain it to the culture that established and allowed slavery in America, to the grotesqueness of the institution of slavery itself, and to the Civil

War that completely destroyed an entire cultural way of life, however disgusting and disturbed that way of life may have been. Often found in Southern Gothic are the “thematic and stylistic characteristics that suggest the inescapability of the past and of inheritance (via both blood and culture), the workings of obsession and monomania, the naiveté or outright falsehood of foundational tenets of American society” (271). The “monstrosities” of the Southern Gothic, then, become not the supernatural beings of earlier Gothic novels, but the “real” people and ideologies of these texts, the people who inherited a monstrous culture and the assaults on “foundational tenets” in these texts which often lead toward a mental propensity to the madness and disillusionment shown in the characters of these novels. These texts relate more closely to the works William Faulkner or Flannery O’Connor, not those of Horace Walpole or Mary Shelley.

When one combines these tendencies of Southern Gothic with the Female Gothic above them, the picture of the contemporary female heroine seems doubly in danger of being a distorted and disturbing character. She is vulnerable to bodily violation and without protection in a society that is fraught with the “real” monsters of an inherited trauma that has damaged both the heroine and her culture. However, contemporary Female Gothic writers, such as those exemplified by the works I examine here, subvert these tropes and devices and appropriate them to their own uses. Susan Donaldson and Anne Jones, writing not about Gothic literature but about the characteristics of Southern writing in general, state that “cultural texts mark ideologies’ failures as well as its successes because they echo with the possibilities of alternative and opposite

meanings, allude to language that has come before and will follow, and reverberate with discursive practices from a host of different discourses” (7). The Southern Gothic carries the inherent social critique of its realistic style. By foregrounding the failures of Southern, patriarchal ideology, these texts, inadvertently or purposely, point to an “alternative and opposite meaning” as their signified difference. If these Gothic texts, which so gruesomely highlight culture’s failures, can be appropriated, redirected, toward those “alternative and opposite meanings,” toward language that speaks to both the past and the future, then might we have a form that a modern feminist could use?

That is what the writers of these novels, and of the contemporary Female Gothic more generally, have done. Helene Meyers states in her book *Femicidal Fears*, that “contemporary women writers adopted and adapted the tropes of an already gendered literary tradition to address the sexual politics of their own time” (19). Thus the heroines of these texts, enveloped in Gothic devices as they are, instead of being damsels in distress who must be rescued by a male hero or by a return to patriarchal protection, are presented as the only ones capable of saving themselves, through their own agency, through connection with a female community, and often against the patriarchal devices that were once seen as their protection. As feminist texts, these novels present a “development and critique of feminist thought on female victimization,” thus performing both “critical and creative functions of feminism” (19). These texts show the conflict in current feminist thinking between the realities of a patriarchal system which oppresses and abuses women and the desire for feminine power and agency, for a heroine

who can save herself. These novels explore how the Female Gothic heroine can accept her victimhood without being defined by it.

Beyond their function as feminist texts, each of these novels is also linked to other modern aesthetic movements. Meyers links the contemporary Female Gothic to “social realism,” but states that “even as the Gothic is yoked to the realist tradition, it also has much in common with postmodern aesthetics. Epistemological uncertainty, the rupture of narrative, and multiple points of view mark both the Gothic and the postmodern text” (17). As noted by Donaldson and Jones earlier, Southern writing tends to allude to the future through its critique of the past and to employ a number of discursive techniques in its attempts to do so. These writers link together the seemingly unlinkable forms of the Gothic and the postmodern through their narrative techniques. All three novels discussed here present their plots in a way that “ruptures” the expected chronology, that mingles the past with the present, delays the expected outcome, or flashes both forward and backward alternately. Additionally, all mix their heroines’ fantasies and imagined stories with the main narrative or change narrators or points of view in ways that create a sense of uncertainty in the reader. It is these postmodern characteristics that also help to move these Female Gothic texts into contemporary times and beyond the history of traditional Gothic.

But how do these writers create the agency necessary in their heroines to defy the historic Gothic tropes? How can they find a way out of the trap of the vulnerable, motherless young woman encased in the “real” monstrosities of a culture that threatens her both physically and psychologically? I contend that

Morrison, Allison, and Jackson all demand of their heroines that they claim ownership of the self by naming or renaming themselves, by telling their own stories, and by escaping from or rebuilding differently the confining Gothic home.

Chapter 2

The Power of Name

“Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers-not the defined.”³ – Toni Morrison

“A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live...how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh.”⁴ – Adrienne Rich

The power of a name is mired in the history of psychoanalysis and linguistics. We will assume here that the name one is given and by which one identifies one's self is powerful for any number of psychological and social reasons. As these three texts suggest, the power to name one's self is the power of self-possession. When this power is dislocated, as it is in *Beloved* and *Bastard out of Carolina*, danger ensues. Thus any attempt by the heroine to redefine herself includes the attempt to rename herself, to create her own identity. Morrison states in *Beloved* that one of the most terrifying dangers of slavery was

³ p. 190

⁴ Rich, Adrienne. “When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision.” *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. Eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. 3rd ed. Vol. 2. 982-994. Quote p.983.

that the “definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined” (190), and Sethe’s subsequent actions show “the danger of internalizing the definer’s definitions” (Jesser 14). *Bastard* shows us that these dangers are not isolated in slavery, and all three novels show the reader a heroine who is searching “for stories/names that will better serve her” (King 5).

The characters in *Beloved* struggle with name as a result of a system which denied them one. Barbara Hill Rigney states that “Among slavery’s crimes is the theft of identity, the inflicted loss of a name and of a culture” (230). As Sethe’s own remembrance of her childhood reflects, “people have no last names, having had no identifiable fathers and very little claim to their mothers,” and even the names their fathers or mothers may have had were often replaced by brands or scars (Rigney 230). Sethe’s mother, whom she barely remembers, shows her the brand on her side and tells Sethe to look for it in case she is killed and Sethe is unable to recognize her mother’s face. A “circle and cross burnt right into the skin...This is your ma’am.” (61). That brand becomes her identifying mark, not a name for a child to call her mother, but a scar of ownership for owners to identify property, the only defining mark she is left because she has been stripped of her humanity. In another example, Paul D is one of several Pauls on the Garner’s plantation, reflecting the fact that the Garners see all their male slaves as a mass, not as individuals. Further, when he hears schoolteacher name his price at “\$900,” Paul D feels this is his definition, his label, stating everything that he is worth in the eyes of his owners (227). He is not a “man,” an individual with a will, a brain, and a heart; he is a commodity, \$900 worth of flesh.

Other characters in Morrison's novel, however, fight against this erasure of identity by naming or renaming themselves. Baby Suggs chooses to keep her "husband's" name instead of the name "Jenny Whitlow" that reflected the name of the man who had owned her before she was sold to the Garners (142). In her mind, she chooses to label herself the name of the man she loved instead of the labels given to her by a man she abhorred. Stamp Paid chose this name after his escape, literally naming himself as "paid up" after he believes whatever "debt" he owed to his master for running off was paid for because he had not killed the man for forcing Stamp's wife to sleep with him (184-5). In his mind, he owes nothing to these people and separates himself from them by claiming ownership of himself through his name.

Sethe herself struggles with her name. The woman who "mothered" Sethe as a child told her the story of her name's origin. In her story, Sethe was the baby that her mother kept, the baby of the "black man" that her mother had "put her arms around" (62). Her mother had given her the name of this man, the only man who had impregnated her that she actually chose, and thus the only baby she bore that she chose to keep. Like Baby Suggs, then, her name comes from a root of love that Sethe wants to understand, but which is shrouded in the uncertainty of a lost African language she no longer remembers. Only once does she rename herself, telling the white girl who found her and helped her to bear Denver, that her name is "Lu," for fear of anyone following her (33). But it is in refusing to allow the schoolteacher to list her "animal characteristics" that we find Sethe's real struggle with self-definition. Sethe is "the first of Morrison's women

to demand the privilege of defining herself” because she “will not tolerate any reduction of her selfhood (from Schoolteacher’s listing her parts or Paul D’s counting her feet)” (Furman 74, 75). The impetus for Sethe’s flight in the novel is shown when schoolteacher is teaching his nephews how to divide the slave’s characteristics into human and animal qualities (Morrison 193). After overhearing this conversation, Sethe realizes that she has been naïve to think that she has any sort of dignity or identity in the system of slavery, and that her owner has the privilege of defining her any way he chooses – as an animal even. More importantly to her at the time, she also realizes that this man will have the privilege of defining her children, and this she refuses to allow, both in her actions of running away and in her devastating act of killing her child.

In the structure of the novel, Morrison too denies the privilege of name to the “crawling already? baby.” This child that Sethe murders is never named for the reader, although she must have had a name before she died. However, Morrison reminds us of the power of name by reminding us that Sethe and the others in the novel cannot even speak the “crawling already? baby’s” name. It is too loaded; it would give more presence to her past and to Sethe’s deed to name the child she killed. When Beloved returns, she does not assume the name of the dead child, she instead assumes the name of her death, the one word engraved on her tombstone, a name paid for by her mother’s own sacrifice of flesh (184). And in the lyrical, first person chapters of the novel in part two, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved become conflated in a threat to each of their separate identities. “I am Beloved and she is mine” – the reader wonders exactly

who is speaking. Sethe? Beloved? Someone in between – a metaphorical, symbolic character who subsumes the identity of both? This merging of name and identity stems from Beloved's subsuming of Sethe's person at this point in the novel, dissolving her and consuming her. It is only through the intervention of the community of women that Sethe is able to "complete the separation, which is also the reintegration, the rebirth, of Sethe" (Rigney 233). Sethe must separate herself from Beloved, must remember that she has her own strength and characteristics, her own identity that is more than a mother who killed her child, in order to remain herself.

In *Bastard out of Carolina*, Allison gives her narrator several names. She opens the novel stating "I've been called Bone all my life, but my name's Ruth Anne." Thus from the beginning, the labels of her life are confused. "I am Ruth for my Aunt Ruth, and Anne for my mama" (2). Thus she is different things to different people, fracturing her from the very moment of her birth. Vincent King notes the "ironic commentary on the relationship between Bone and her mother" that is present in the allusion to the Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi (4). In this Biblical story, Ruth follows her mother-in-law Naomi and is obedient to her, even to the point of giving herself to another man to ensure their well-being, and Naomi sings Ruth's praises for her loyalty and fortitude. Perhaps in some distorted way Allison is making a commentary, though, on what Anney asks of Ruth Anne – to give herself to Glen, to allow him to abuse her without complaining, in order to allow the survival of their "family." Additionally, the nickname Bone was given to Ruth Anne shortly after her birth by her Uncle Earle

and her cousin Deedee; Earl states that she is “no bigger than a knucklebone” and the young Deedee reduces that to Bone (2). The obvious connotations of Bone are varied; she is hard, tough, but breakable, and Bone would probably not be considered a very “feminine” name. King also notes that “a bone, of course, is a thing, an object, something to be possessed, broken, or thrown to the dogs” (4).

Bone is doubly damned by the name she is given by the social structure around her, a label carried by the title of the book. She had been “certified a bastard by the state of Carolina” at birth and although her Granny claimed there was “no stamp on her nobody can see,” for her mother Anney, “the stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy, shiftless*” (3). For Anney, the stamp represents the trap she wanted to escape, but had never been able to, all the things she had never wanted to burden her children with, but inadvertently gave them anyway. Kings states that Bone must not only try to escape from the names of her parents, who “fail to name her definitively,” but also from the name stamped on her by the “petty clerk (who represents the callous patriarchy of the state)” that “legally marginalizes her” (3). This social class name that “marginalizes” Bone is inherent to the patriarchal social system that Allison is attacking through the events, characters, and symbols of this novel. This is a system which labels a child with a “dirty” name from her birth, a system that perpetuates a culture which allows children to be abused, verbally or otherwise, from their very infancy.

The verbal abuse of name-calling that begins with the state continues in Bone's experiences with her stepfather and abuser "Daddy Glen." Each time he beats her, and even sometimes when he doesn't, Glen calls Bone terrible names. The first time it is "You bitch. You little bitch" (106). She was eleven. Because of the repetitive, insidious nature of the beatings and of the names he calls her, Bone begins to internalize these labels. They become "who I was in his eyes and mine;" she sees herself as "evil" when he tells her she is "hard as bone...cold as death, mean as a snake, and twice as twisty" (110-111). And Bone herself shows how destructive these names can be when she uses them against her friend Shannon Pearl, calling her "You bitch, you white-assed bitch" during a fight (170). Believing herself to be all the things her Daddy Glen names her, she in turn uses that horrific language to label someone else. Allison's use of name-calling in the novel, King states, "illustrates that the names we give each other - often without thought - can have terrible consequences" (5). The names Glen calls Bone become her self-definitions for a time, and Shannon Pearl, not as strong as Bone and unable to withstand the contemptible names with which she is constantly bombarded, eventually commits suicide, always a possible end for Bone in both her mind and the reader's fears as well.

Bone is further condemned by her last name of Boatwright, her family name that automatically associates her with all the adjectives her mother so hates. Her Granny tells her she is "almost pretty...pretty, pretty ugly...you're a Boatwright for sure" (21). She is claimed by her mother's family as theirs with their last name, but is without the name or identity of a father, something that

haunts her as a failure on either her or her mother's part throughout the novel. She feels that part of her identity is missing because of this lack of a paternal name. Her stepfather, Daddy Glen, attempts to redefine Bone and her sister Reese by telling them "you're mine now, an't just Boatwrights" (52). His attempts to separate Anney, Bone, and Reese from their maternal, extended family are a source of contention throughout the novel as well, as if he is trying to separate them from that family's history and social status. But his attempts always fail, and Bone is still convinced at the end of the book that she is "just another ignorant Boatwright, you know. Another piece of trash" (258). Brenda Boudreau notes that "Bone is torn...between needing to identify herself with her family and being deeply ashamed of her 'white trash' background" (51). Although she longs to rename herself, as we shall see later, she also longs for a sense of belonging, for the love and connection offered by the tradition of names through real family that she believes will make her feel whole.

Finally, though, Allison shows that the most powerful names are those we give ourselves as Bone attempts to claim the power of self-definition in fits and starts throughout the novel, finally reaching a clearer claim of ownership at the end of the book. Bone attempts in several ways to create a new identity for herself. During one of many moves, she tells her new teacher that her name is Roseanne Carter and that she has just moved to town from Atlanta (67). In this instance, Bone seeks to escape from being Ruth Anne Boatwright for just a little while. Additionally, she seeks a "cleansing" and a way to restart her life anew through gospel music and religion during the book's middle chapters (140-146).

She begins to see a new side of herself in her visits to her Aunt Raylene's house, where she is praised for being good at things instead of being belittled and beaten (177-193). And at the end of the novel, the one thing her mother is able to do for her is bring her a new birth certificate, one without the offensive stamp. King states that this "blank, unmarked, unstamped" paper "indicates that Bone herself will be responsible for filling out the blank spaces of her own identity" (8). She is no longer beholden to the names placed on her by others, either by her mother, the state, or her society. She is given both the freedom and responsibility of naming herself.

In Jackson's *goods in Alabama*, names also play an important role. They begin simply, with the symbolic meanings of the character's names. The main character, Arlene Fleet, has changed her name to "Lena" at the beginning of the novel. She has attempted to escape from her past self by changing her name, by taking the "our" out of her name (at least in a Southern pronunciation) and asserting self-ownership by severing ties with the people who named her. She is "fleet" as she deftly runs away from and escapes her home, family, and past. Additionally, her boyfriend's name is Wilson Burroughs, but she and everyone else call him Burr. Of course his African-American race is the proverbial "burr under the saddle" that she believes will rile up her racist Southern family. There is Arlene's cousin Clarice, a model of clarity and light, whose name is reiterated in her appearance, and her Aunt Florence, who nurses Arlene's mother and clinically scrubs the house to remove anything that is painful.

But most important in the novel is Arlene's attempt to create a new self by renaming herself, to hold the past at bay by running away from it literally and by being someone else figuratively. Arlene recognizes the impossible dichotomy she has created, and as the events of the novel unfold she is forced to accept the name "Arlene" as part of who she *is* as well as who she *was*. As Arlene she was the "little, skinny unlovable victim;" as Lena she is "attractive, educated, self-assured" (115). As she finally begins to force herself to put together her past and present, she states "I would rather be Lena, his victim, than Arlene, a girl so desperate-hungry she had wanted to be his victim" (257). It was powerful for her as Lena to let herself believe that she had been the victim of Jim Beverly's rape and to use the "educated, self-assured" young woman she wanted to believe she was to live out a life that defied victimization; it was pathetic to have been so hungry for love as Arlene that she wished she had been the one Jim had chosen to rape. This dichotomy echoes the feminist conflict between victimhood and agency. Arlene, raised in a Southern patriarchal culture which deified men as savior, particularly athletic ones (thus the title of the book), wanted to be the heroine, wanted to be "rescued" from her loneliness by this "virile" male, even if that meant giving up her own agency. "Lena" must accept this perverted desire, recognize its perverted source, and move beyond the grotesque society that she has inherited. Lena cannot exist without Arlene's past, and so Jackson shows that Arlene/Lena must learn to integrate these two parts of herself in order to carry on with her future.

Chapter 3

The Power of Narrative

“What would I be when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be as strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed?”⁵ –

Dorothy Allison

“She must write herself because, when the time comes for her liberation, it is the invention of a new, insurgent writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history.”⁶ – Helene Cixous

To rename one’s self is to claim ownership, to become the definer as well as the defined. To fully stake ownership, however, all three of these stories show that the heroine must realize and harness the power of narration as a rewriting of the self. Central to each of these novels is the heroine’s ability to integrate the stories of her past and to take ownership of writing her own story as the ability to change her future. Deborah Horvitz writes of the importance of story-telling in her

⁵ p.309

⁶ Cixous, Helene. “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays.” *The Feminist Reader*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Blackwell, 1989. 91-103. quote p.102-103

work *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*. She uses the basis of psychoanalysis and cultural studies and from them gathers that “the greater one’s ability to ‘make story’ out of trauma, which is defined differently for each protagonist, the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after that trauma” (6). Each of the protagonists in these stories undergoes some kind of trauma which has a profound effect on her life, and it is only by finding a voice to tell of that trauma that each is able to “regain control” over her own life. Further, Horvitz states that “not until the victim encounters and translates her ‘unspeakable’ tragedy into ‘her’ story can she envision a future devoid of violence” (40). In order to break the cycle of violence which each of these heroines finds herself perpetuating in one way or another, it is necessary for each of them to “translate” what was previously “unspeakable” in a way which acknowledges and then moves forward from the past.

Furthermore, each of these novels employs a narrative technique that is very similar to the interrupted and uneven paths these women take in attempting to own and tell their stories, which I discussed earlier as both a Gothic and postmodern characteristic. Meyers states that contemporary female Gothics “tend to be achronological with an abundance of flashbacks and – sometimes – flashforwards. Thus the reader must reconstruct these stories as well as the (dis)connections among past, present, and future” (23). Each author’s narrative structure reflects each protagonist’s struggles to find a way to tell her story; each author uses different techniques at different times, but each heroine’s story comes backwards, forwards, interrupted, in memory and in present time,

reflecting the uneven journey of the protagonist's growth toward ownership of her story.

Deborah Horvitz states that in "trauma literature," "narrative is inextricably entwined with memory and the process of remembering" (5). This characteristic relates most closely to what Toni Morrison calls "rememory" in *Beloved*. This complex idea is a mixture of memory and spiritual and physical reality. Sethe tells Denver "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (36). Marilyn Mobley states that *Beloved* "challenges the Western notion of linear time" and "foregrounds the dialogic characteristics of memory along with its imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the significance of the past" (192). By foregrounding the importance of the past, and even the coexistence of the past with the present, Morrison shows how Sethe must link the two together in order to tell her own story. Through the structure of Morrison's storytelling, which intersperses remembered events with the present events of the novel's main narrative line, one character's version of an event with another's version, she creates the complex texture of Sethe's story by showing that the "text of the mind" can be "both historical and ahistorical at the same time" (Mobley 196).

For example, Sethe and Paul D are linked together by their shared history, their backstory, but each must find their own way to tell that story without denying it in order to move on. Sethe believes that "her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for – well, it would come in time"

(99). Sethe gathers strength by finding someone to share the burden of her traumatic narrative; however, Paul D is initially unable to bear the burden of the unknowns of the rest of Sethe's story, namely the killing of her child. Furman states that "Sethe...overestimates Paul D's empathy for her struggle. He is sorrowful for those indignities of Sethe's experience which his own suffering corroborates. But, perhaps as a man, he cannot fully accept the maternal weight of her breasts" (75). Before he can do this, Paul D is forced to open the "rusty tin box" that he believes has replaced his heart. He must find a way to speak the unspeakable things that slavery did to him in order to truly move into a new story with Sethe. It is only when each of them is able to accept the burden of their own narrative, when they can each accept that they are their own "best thing," (273) that they are able to create a new narrative together.

Morrison also shows the power of narrative in the story of Denver, who must escape from the cycle of memory in her mother's stories in order to create a story of her own. Throughout the beginning of the novel, Denver is trapped in and defined by her mother's stories, whether the story of her own birth or the story of her mother's past in slavery and at 124. She has heard the story of her birth so many times from her mother, but as she tells the story to Beloved, she "began to see what she was saying and not just hear it" (177). She begins to take the story for her own, to feel that it is her story, not that of her mother, and she is in danger of entrapment. This danger, however, is juxtaposed with her fear of the unknown world outside of her mother's narrative certainty. Nancy Jesser states that "the rough choice that Denver must make is between risking entrapment in a narrative

written by the white power structure, a fate ready and waiting for her, and being swallowed up into a closed and exhausting relationship with that past that has marked and nourished her” (16). Denver must choose between living out the story of her mother’s past as her own future, or take the chance of writing her own narrative in a world that is always threatening erasure.

The destructive power of narrative is shown in the character of Beloved in her figurative and literal “eating up” of Sethe and Denver through storytelling. It begins as something pleasant. “It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling” (58). But this feeding becomes cannibalistic as the story progresses, as Sethe has learned who Beloved “really” is and begins using her stories to plead her case for her murder. As Sethe tries to expiate her horrific act, Beloved makes up more demands, “invented desire” (240). She literally begins to swell, whether with Sethe’s sucked up life or Paul D’s child the reader is free to imagine. “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (250). This physical manifestation of Sethe’s past is now threatening her life physically just as the power of the remembered story has controlled her life psychologically for the past sixteen years. Sethe is in danger of being consumed by the cyclical narrative of rememory – a past that is physically present – and must escape from the cycle to see the possibility of writing a new future. It is only the community’s finally exerted effort to free her from the seclusion of her own story, through an intervention of baptism not unlike

something Baby Suggs would have led, that breaks this physical bond of the past to allow Sethe the freedom to write her own future.

“Fiction persistently offers the acquisition of story as a means by which the repetitive cycle of violence or pain and its repression can be stopped,” Horvitz states in *Literary Trauma* (55). For Bone in *Bastard out of Carolina*, the power of narration also has both constructive and destructive capabilities. First, in Allison’s narrative, story provides an important link between the women of the Boatwright family. It is an oral tradition, a passing down of history between generations as they sit on the front porch snapping peas or dyeing each other’s hair. Bone relates that in her Granny’s stories there is both “story and memory” with no clear distinction between the two (26). Like Morrison’s “rememory,” these stories have the power to create anew something that refuses to be lost, but also is an imaginative outlet for Granny’s creative energies. Of course Glen does not like for “his” girls to listen to these stories and categorizes them all as lies. While Bone admits that she doesn’t know how much of Granny’s stories are lies, truth, or what she wished was true, she knows that she doesn’t believe Glen about the destructive nature of Granny’s storytelling (52-3). She recognizes that the stories are a link between her and the other women in her family, a circle that threatens Glen because it excludes him, just as it excludes all other men. Bone relates that she laughs along with her aunts’ stories, even though she doesn’t always understand them, because she likes “feeling a part of something nasty and strong and separate from...rough overbearing males” (91). She identifies with the

female power inherent in the stories and in the act of storytelling, even if she is too young to fully understand the content.

Like the women in her family, Bone herself is quite a storyteller. As she listens to her family's stories and reads voraciously, she creates in herself a powerful ability to narrate. Early in the book, she begins to make up stories about how her life "should" be, the way she imagines it, not the way it really is. As she begins to drift toward puberty, she begins to have sexual fantasies involving heat and light (63). However, as the abuse by Daddy Glen escalates, her fantasies change. In these new and disturbing fantasies, people have to watch while Glen beats her; they love her and hate him (112-113). The orgasmic quality of her masturbation during these fantasies stems from the sense of control over her abuse that it gives her; her fantasies are the only time she can defy Glen and feel unashamed of herself. Boudreau quotes Allison as stating that the fantasies are "a technique whereby she retains a sense of power in a situation where she has none" (53). However psychologically disturbed it is for Bone to orgasm to fantasies of being beaten, these fantasies create for her power over Daddy Glen – the people who watch love her and hate him, so she feels justified and in control, so unlike her real life.

The stories she literally narrates to others also grow more gruesome as well as the abuse in the novel escalates. Early in the novel, Bone creates the fake identity of Roseanne Carter and "enjoys a brief popularity" by creating stories she can make up for her classmates as a girl from the big city (67). She also makes up stories for her sister Reese to discourage her from hitchhiking

alone, telling her horror stories about horrid people and supernatural creatures that prey on little girls who go out on their own (75). As her life continues to spiral out of control, her stories escalate into narrations of gruesome rapes and murders which she tells to her cousins, stories so horrific that even her less than dainty grown aunts are disturbed by them (119). These stories reflect the level of damage Glen's abuse has caused to Bone's sense of self. As she endures more and more abuse, the stories that she tells to herself and to others become more and more violent and disturbing.

As the story progresses, though, Allison makes it very clear that Bone must stop allowing Daddy Glen's abuse to write her story for her and shows that it is only by overtaking ownership of her stories that she can rewrite the direction of her life. At the same time that she is telling gruesome stories to her cousins, Bone tells the reader that reading fiction is her only way of escape, both mentally as she invests herself in the story, but also physically, as she hides away from Glen and is quiet and still so that he does not notice her (119). When she imagines herself hitchhiking, her stories change to ones of her walking along a highway north, alone, with no one calling her or stopping her, and the north star guiding her (259). In these fantasies she sees herself as separate from her family, from her mother, from the abuse of Daddy Glen, from her past. She narrates for herself the possibility of taking a different course.

She also begins to see stories from the perspectives of others, a definitive characteristic of a more mature narrator. Her aunt Raylene, her lesbian aunt who "rescues" her at the end of the story, advises her to put herself in other people's

shoes when she thinks up a story, to see it from their side; if Bone is able to do this, Raylene tells her, maybe all her “stories won’t be so full of hatred” (262). The self-centered nature of the adolescent is well-documented. But in these words, Raylene is encouraging Bone to move beyond herself and her narrow experiences and to see other possibilities and points of view. At the end of the story, Bone thinks from her mother’s point of view, wondering who her mother had been before she was born. What were her dreams, her fears, her experiences? In doing so, she can then compare them with her ideas of her own future, wondering what she would be at twenty or thirty (309). Bone can see the possibility of writing her own future, one that is not devoid of a past, but is not dictated by it. As Horvitz states, “with memory and narrative...[she is] capable of moving forward into the future without repressing or recreating the sadism of their pasts” (40). Additionally, Allison’s use of the first person narrator in the novel sends a powerful message. As King states, Bone, as the narrator of this story, “transforms herself...from the victim of a story to the author of one,” and, characteristically of a postmodern text, “Allison dares to make Bone responsible for the stories she tells about herself and others” (8). Allison uses narration not only to give Bone the agency to move from victim to author, but also states that in spite of her victimization, she is ultimately responsible for moving out of that role, for becoming the creator of her own story instead of recreating the story that was given to her by her past.

Allison’s own storytelling technique, like Morrison’s, reflects the contemporary Gothic characteristic of the “rupture of narrative” which Meyer

described. Although in *Beloved* this effect is created through a layering and interweaving of memory and present narrative, in *Bastard* this rupture takes place in the form of a section of chapters which seem unrelated to the main line of the narrative. Most of these stories, however, center on Bone searching not only for an alternative to physically being at home as she travels to gospel shows with her friend Shannon Pearl or lives with her sick Aunt Ruth or “odd” Aunt Raylene, but searching for different stories for herself, alternative identities, different ways in which she can live her life. As King states, the middle eight chapters of the book, which seem to have nothing to do with the rest of the plot, “are not subplots that lead to nowhere; they simply reflect her [Bone’s] attempts to create stories (read identities) that will provide her with what Allison describes as ‘the hope of a remade life’” (2).⁷ These diversions or distractions for Bone and the reader serve as alternative “plots” that Bone can see for her life besides the one that has been forced upon her at the abusive hands of her stepfather.

According to Gwin, “Allison’s novel walks the tightrope of survivor discourse: the necessity of breaking silence and telling the story of abuse in specific detail without having that detail misused...in popular culture, and thereby actually *contributing* to the ideology that perpetuates the father’s power and violence in the first place” (436, emphasis hers). It is by giving the narrative power to Bone herself that Allison imbues this survivor story with the horrible

⁷ Allison has been accused of various infractions involving these middle chapters. Some contend that she has padded the book to make it longer by inserting narratives that are found elsewhere, such as the story of Shannon Pearl which is in the short story collection *Trash*. Others have asserted, much more disturbingly, that Allison has delayed the seemingly inevitable rape scene, thereby “titillating” the reader. King’s essay is devoted to summarizing and answering these accusations.

reality that testifies against the negative aspects of Southern culture without perpetuating them.

The power of narrative is also illustrated by Jackson's control of her narrative and the effect that the denial of a truthful narrative has on Arlene in *goods in Alabama*. Horvitz writes that in trauma literature "each text becomes a meta-story centered upon the protagonist's search for and acquisition of story" (40). This is true from the very beginning of *goods* when Arlene begins to fabricate a story that will assimilate her trauma, even though the story is not a true one. She begins by trying to recreate a world over which she has control, an illusion that has been shattered by her assault and her cousin Clarice's rape by Jim Beverly. By having sex with every boy in her class, she believes she can control their sexuality, can stop them from desiring Clarice, and therefore can protect her cousin from a world that is violent and unsafe (103). She is in a sense "raping" each of these boys, using their sexuality against them in an attempt to control them; she has turned herself into a predatory monster, but is unable through that power to usurp the power of the original predator, Jim Beverly.

After Arlene "murders" Jim, she believes that she has created a "bargain" with God in which she promises "I will stop fucking every boy who crosses my path, I will not lie, and I will never go back to Posset," and God apparently agrees because he upholds His end of the bargain by performing the "miracle" of moving Jim Beverly's body (23-24). To a logical outside observer, this story obviously makes no sense and its falseness is confirmed at the end of the novel. But this is the story Arlene creates for herself and by which she lives her life for ten years.

Because she cannot yet allow herself to tell the true story of what happened, she creates a false narrative which threatens her future by controlling her actions in the present. She creates elaborate ruses to avoid lying and to ensure that she never returns to Posset, and she is unable to fully invest herself in her relationship with her boyfriend, the man she truly loves, because of the story that she has created to forestall her assimilation of trauma. Burr accuses Lena, correctly, saying “I watched you work your aunt over, and I found myself wondering-not for the first time-how often you work me, to keep me out of the middle of your life” (14). He recognizes that despite her promise not to lie, she is adept at forcing others into fabrications, that she is keeping a part of herself from him, which is exactly the part that she is attempting to hide from herself.

Like Morrison and Allison, Jackson also “ruptures” her narrative to create a sense of uncertainty in the reader and to illustrate the necessity of the heroine’s search for and finding of the ability to tell a *true* story. Arlene and Burr have created a game called “what have I got in my pocketsets” in which the narrator creates a story and begins at the end, telling the story backward. The listener has to guess the beginning of the story from the ending given (79). This is the “game” Jackson plays with her reader. She tells part of the story backward, adding slightly more information each time she tells it. In doing so, she attempts to mislead the reader into creating assumptions without ever actually lying, just as Arlene does with her aunt and others. These narrative gaps force the reader to create her own version of what she thinks happened, which is exactly what Arlene wants others to do for her. Arlene imagines playing “what have I got in my

pocketses” with Burr using the story of Jim Beverly’s rape. But in her imaginary scenes, she can never get Burr to jump to the conclusion she wants him to, to say “he raped you” was the beginning of the story (114). And this is because Jackson forces Arlene to confront the beginning of her own story, her own *true* story, to be able to admit to herself, Burr, and the equally confused Rose Mae Lolley that it was not her Jim had raped, but Clarice, but in some twisted way, she had wished that Jim had “chosen” her instead (226). Jackson forces Arlene to face the truth of her past in order to be able to move forward with her future, just as Sethe and Bone had to assimilate the stories of their pasts and own them, to find a truth from which to move forward, in order to create their own future narratives.

Chapter 4

Making It Home

“First of all, Possett, Alabama, is not the middle of my life. It is not my home. It’s the fourth rack of hell.”⁸ – Joshilyn Jackson

“What happens when the space of “home” becomes nonfelicitous? The space of the unspeakable? What happens when the unspeakable is spoken?”⁹ – Minrose Gwin

We like to think that “home” is a place of safety and comfort, a place where families love and children grow. However, this idea of home is “both nostalgic and utopian,” Nancy Jesser writes, and instead “domestic spaces have worked out for many women as places to be domesticated and/or to be a domestic” (1). The home in the Gothic text is even worse than this. In contemporary Female Gothics, the gloomy castle of classical Gothic is replaced, Meyer writes, by the “quotidian...; thus the housing project, familiar streets, a park, a home that is not a castle – all harbor potential danger” (23). Though none

⁸ p.14

⁹ p.423

of the three texts discussed in this paper take place in a castle, they all represent the daily places women encounter – from a rented house to a home town – that pose a threat to each of the protagonists. Minrose Gwin addresses this idea from a particularly American and Southern point of view in her article “Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women’s Fiction”:

Within a dominant ideology that has historically emphasized the importance of property (owned place) and has manipulated women’s bodies to that end, these southern women’s stories trace the workings of patriarchal power within the father’s house, explore the ideological construction of ‘home’ (both as the material space of the house and the cultural space of the patriarchal family) as a space of female entrapment, and sometimes (not always) suggest that ‘home’ can be reconstructed as a site of empowerment and survivorship for women. (419)

Morrison, Allison, and Jackson all show in these novels the danger posed to the female body through its “entrapment” in the Gothic “home.” Gwin shows us that “home” in these types of works is not solely a house, but an ideological framework as well; an ideology which would devalue the body of a slave woman or a “white trash” child; an ideology which would make two young girls think it was necessary to hide the rape committed by the high school quarterback. And yet all three texts also provide the possibility in their endings for the hope of a remade space. As Jesser writes about Morrison’s *Beloved*, “instead of offering a configuration of utopian space, sustainable in isolation, she offers a warning that spaces can change, over time or suddenly, and that the key to sustenance is in

links to others, to communities” (3). For all three protagonists, “home” eventually becomes about finding peace within, not only through owning their own identity and narrating their own story, but through positive connections with others in a space called home.

Toni Morrison begins *Beloved* with the powerful personification of the house at 124 Bluestone. It is a personality, inhabited and alive, just like the women who live there, and it takes the reader several lines to realize that 124 is a house and not a person. As the book progresses, 124 takes on several personalities. On the first page, it is “spiteful;” after Paul D leaves, it is “loud” with ghosts clamoring; after Beloved has taken over Sethe’s existence, it is quiet; on Paul D’s return after Beloved has been expelled, it is “unloaded.” The house has a life of its own which mirrors and is mirrored by the lives of the women who live there.

124 also has many different symbolic significances as well. Deborah Cadman writes of Morrison’s work that “her figures of the closed back door and the dangerous front yard depict a kind of space that her fictional girls occupy, one that is simultaneously enclosed and open to the physical dangers and metaphysical terrors present in the milieu of each of her novels” (57). This is especially true for Denver in *Beloved*, where 124’s back door has been closed up, and the only way in or out of the house is through the front door. Cadman states that the boarded up back door “serves as a physical sign of the end of enslaved life,” a life where slaves always had to enter through back doors, a practice which for most African-Americans was to continue in public life for many

years (57-8). Baby Suggs, however, had determined that she would not go through the back door of her own home and had boarded it up, moving the kitchen inside and building a storeroom around the space where the back entrance had been (Cadman 59).

The front yard in Cadman's theory represents not only an extension into the black community, but also into "the road traveled by slave catchers" (58). After Sethe killed the "crawling already? baby," white boys tore up the fence separating the front yard from the road, "yanked up the posts and smashed the gate, leaving 124 desolate and exposed at the very hour when everybody stopped dropping by" (Morrison 163). The removal of the boundary between the house and the yard symbolizes the intrusion of slavery's menace into what had been the peaceful and joyous lives lived at 124. It is at this point "when the yard is invaded by slavery's institutional forces...the house becomes both an unapproachable and inescapable space – hard" (Jesser 10). After this, Denver lives in terror that the "thing" that caused her mother to kill her sister will come again, and though she cannot identify it, she knows it came from the front yard, a yard she refuses to go out into (205). It is only when she and her mother are starving, when she realizes that Sethe is in danger of being consumed by Beloved, that she is able to "step off the edge of the world," that is the front porch, alone (239). To do so, she must confront the terror that is in her yard and must step out of the whirlpool of the past in which Sethe and Beloved are trapped inside the house. And as she steps off into the world, she hears Baby Suggs tell her that there is no defense against "the thing" that is out there, but she has to

just “know it, and go on out the yard” (244). In order to find the connection with community which can save them, Denver must accept the risk, the vulnerability, which openness and connection allow.

Contrasted with the personification and symbolism that most often surrounds 124 is the irony of Sweet Home. The name, like the way the slaves were treated there, was intended to make the residents and all who heard the name believe an unreality. As Sethe herself says, “it wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (14). Instead, it was a place of entrapment and constant threat, even before schoolteacher came to rule the plantation. As Nancy Jesser writes, “Garner’s model farm places his slaves in a false position of community” (4). While Garner attempts to make himself, his neighbors, and his slaves believe he allows his slaves to be “men” because he gives them the right to have opinions and carry guns, the fact of slavery remains, and he can single handedly take away these rights at any time, can buy or sell them like cattle at any time. Nothing can be home under those circumstances. Halle, Sethe’s husband, recognizes this fact earlier than Sethe does, stating that the “rights” he was given under Garner disappeared the moment he stepped off the plantation, out of Garner’s jurisdiction. And though schoolteacher may treat them worse than Garner had, Halle realizes “It don’t matter, Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or soft” (195). The grotesque, inhumane institution of slavery made any place uninhabitable.

124, however, had begun to be a home for Baby Suggs, primarily through its function as a community hub. “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing

house...where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there...messages were left there...talk was low and to the point” (86-7). This is what 124 had been, the freedom that Baby Suggs had loved and which Sethe had just begun to taste before it was so rudely ripped from them. Jesser believes that Morrison shows through her depiction of 124 that the “safety and the protection of the real sweet home do not lie in constructing an iron façade, but rather in a porous and open space. The most open of spaces, however, also offers the greatest danger of incursion” (3). As Baby Suggs had opened her home to the community for an impromptu celebratory picnic, this same openness allowed the “incursion” of the slave catchers the next day. Jesser also writes that “as long as white people set the limits, African-American attempts to transform their houses, their communities, and their minds into safe, open spaces remain subject to a reassertion of the narrative of slavery” (14). So although Baby Suggs had changed the physical layout of her house, although she and those around her had tried to create a supportive community, all that failed to protect Sethe and her children from an intrusion on their home space by the horrors of slavery. Thus the home place is not a safe space as Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver discover, but as Baby Sugg’s voice tells Denver, she must recognize the threat and go out anyway because the only salvation is in connection to the community. It is only because of Denver’s reconnection with the community which Sethe had scorned and which scorned her in return, only because of Denver’s acceptance of the risk posed by vulnerability, that Sethe is rescued from Beloved through the power of female community to circumvent the oppressive past.

In *Bastard out of Carolina*, Allison too weaves the threat posed by Southern society's terrors into Bone's physical spaces. For her, place and patriarchy are tied together; cultural power structures are woven into the setting. Bone describes Greenville, South Carolina in 1955 as "the most beautiful place in the world" (17). Allison then includes poetic descriptions of Aunt Ruth's house where the "weeping willows marched across the yard," or Aunt Raylene's home where the "clover grew in long sweeps of tiny white and yellow flowers" (17). This is contrasted by the yard at Aunt Alma's house, where the landlord has cut off the outdoor spigots "so that the kids wouldn't cost him a fortune in water bills," turning the yard into "a smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks" (17-18). Thus the class power structures are shown to have the power to reduce the fertility and beauty of these women's houses, cutting off the water, the source of life, as a concern over money Aunt Alma couldn't pay.

These rental houses play further into the picture because, as Gwin writes, Daddy Glen is a failure in Southern male ideology because "not only does he own no property; he cannot even...keep his family in shabby rental property for more than a few months at a time" (434). His houses are desperate, cheap imitations of the homes of his father and brother, who have been "successful" in living up to the patriarchal ideal (81). His "failure" to live up to the ideas of what a "man" is supposed to be and do in Southern patriarchal culture are undoubtedly part of what fuels his abuse of Bone. Gwin believes that just as land was property in this disturbing culture, so were bodies, especially African-American bodies and the bodies of women (419). So Glen's assertion of control over Bone's body, one

that is not literally “his” as she is not biologically his daughter, is an attempt to assert control over what he believes is rightfully his property.

Their literal lack of property ownership leads Bone’s family through a series of rent houses which she contrasts longingly with the houses of her aunts. While they are moving from one house to the next, none of them are home, Bone states, and it gives her the sense of “everything sliding...nothing could be held on to” (63). They are always off balance, always starting over, never able to put down the roots that would connect them to a community outside of the extended family Bone loves and from which Glen tries to distance her. The houses Glen chooses for them are always tract houses that look “naked and abandoned;” Bone contrasts this with her aunts’ houses which are rambly and rickety, but “loved” (79). “It was alive” at her aunts’ houses, but their house is dead; there is “something icy in Daddy Glen’s houses” (80). This contrast is of course linked to the abuse that Bone associates with Glen’s houses; there is nothing in these houses for her but fear, the coldness of Glen’s heart. At her aunts’ houses is love; noisy, tough, and tumbled love, but it is warm and alive there because she can live there without fear.

It is this space without fear that Bone longs for and which the reader hopes she has found in the end. In the summer before Anney marries Glen, Bone says that their feminine household felt safe, quiet, and sweet, “like home” (22). This is the memory she holds of what home should feel like. After that idea of home is shattered by Glen’s abuse, Bone finds refuge at Raylene’s house, spending weeks of her summer there, hitching rides there after school to avoid

Glen's terrible and terrifying hands. At the hospital after Bone has been raped, Raylene tells her "I'll get you home and safe" (298). And Raylene's home has always been a place where she feels good. As Horvitz states, "Raylene's metaphor (and actual work) of making beauty out of trash resonates deeply within Bone, connecting her own and Raylene's lesbianism and artistic creativity with comfort and safety" (50). It is here that the reader leaves Bone, sitting on the porch in Raylene's embrace, contemplating her future. It is this creative and alternative home that allows the reader to hope that Bone will survive her horrific ordeal and will find a home and a community that can support her and allow her to become her true self.

In contrast to the protagonists of *Beloved* and *Bastard*, Jackson's heroine Arlene "runs away" from her home and her family in order to escape from the threats she sees there, only to feel herself inescapably drawn back. Arlene carefully avoids returning to her home town by creating a life for herself that "requires" her to be in her new home of Chicago at all times, or by claiming to have no money to return to Alabama. And she believes that she has been successful in extricating herself from that world. She tells her boyfriend, Burr, "Possett, Alabama is not the middle of my life. It is not my home. It is the fourth rack of hell" (14). Although she speaks to her mother and aunt on the phone weekly, she attempts to deny the importance of her home place and her family in her life. However, when a girl from high school, Rose Mae Lolley, seeks out Arlene in order to solve one of her own lingering issues, Arlene feels that Alabama has intruded into her new home, forcing her to confront her past. "You

can take the girl out of Alabama, but how do you stop Alabama from following you over a thousand miles to lay siege to your doorstep?" (20). Through these ideas, Jackson shows that although Arlene may believe that she can cut herself off from her home place by "taking the girl out of Alabama," she cannot "take the Alabama out of the girl." She is in fact part and parcel of what her home place created her to be, however much she wants to deny that.

Additionally, Arlene subconsciously finds a "home" that reminds her of her real home place when she meets Mrs. Burroughs, Burr's mother, in a Wal-Mart and Mrs. Burroughs takes her in. Arlene, a very white girl in the midst of a much darker-skinned community, later realizes that she feels "at home" in this community because these people were all transplanted Southerners who had formed a community in the northern city during the great-migration after the industrial revolution, and many parts of their southern culture survived in this community of transplants (44). Thus she seeks out and feels at home in a community that reminds her of the one from which she was so anxious to escape.

Arlene's home with her family and home town of Possett are seemingly non-descript and non-threatening, echoing Meyer's view of the quotidian being invested with menace. She lived most of her life with her Aunt Florence, Uncle Bruster and cousin Clarice in their very average ranch home on an acreage in the small town of Possett. But Jackson uses even this unexceptional house to show that any home is inhabited by the ghosts of those who live there. When a young Arlene arrives at their home after her Aunt Florence has "rescued" them

following her father's death, it is also shortly after the grotesque and random death of her young cousin Wayne, who had been stung to death by wasps his dog had riled up. Arlene says that the house is too quiet; "it wanted Wayne with all his boy noise and karate violence to stir it to life" (16). The condition of the house is primarily a reflection of Florence's inner life. She too has become too quiet and lifeless, stern and hard, a "steel magnolia with zero magnolia" Jackson says (280). She has scraped Wayne's room completely clean of all traces of him, literally taking a razor to the wallpapered walls, until it is a "stark, institutional white" (66). She has tried to scrape herself clean of him, too, scraping away at pain and memory, but in the process destroying an integral part of herself. The threat of the randomness of death, the inescapability of pain, are too much for Florence; when she loses her son, whom Jackson states she loved with the "ferociously all-consuming" passion mothers feel for their children, she became a "dried husk of a woman" and "the world changed for her" (280). And the home she manages is a reflection of her self.

This pattern repeats itself, and when Arlene finally does return home, her side of the room that she and Clarice had shared as girls has been "obliterated" as well (160). She is flooded with memories of all her beloved childhood objects and is shocked that Florence would get rid of them, only to have Florence shrug off her shock, replying "It's not like you were using it" (160-61). Obviously Florence has used the same coping techniques for the perceived loss of Arlene that she used for the loss of her son. It is only later, after Arlene has finally found the strength to narrate her own story of the truth of Jim Beverly's rape of Clarice

and her own unsuccessful attempt to kill him, that she finds the truth of Florence's story hidden in the attic. The attic is, of course, symbolic of the hidden places in the mind, the place where we store up the things we don't show to others, and that is where Arlene finds bags and bags of the crumpled wallpaper Florence had scraped from Wayne's walls, along with all of her "obliterated" childhood things as well. Florence admits that she had stored them up there because she "couldn't throw them out, but I couldn't stand to look at them every day, either" (264). She had attempted to distance herself from the loss of her son and what she perceived as the loss of Arlene by putting their things away in the attic, a place she visited only when the memories became unbearable.

But the real threat to Arlene, Clarice, Rose Mae Lolley and all the women in the book is woven inherently into the patriarchal culture which surrounds them, a world which Florence realizes "is not a safe place" (267). From the opening line of the book - "There are gods in Alabama: Jack Daniel's, high school quarterbacks, trucks, big tits, and also Jesus" - Jackson establishes an atmosphere dominated by male activities, desires, and bodies. It is this atmosphere that makes Jim Beverly's behavior possible and that makes Clarice and Arlene feel that they must hide what happened. It is this atmosphere that makes Rose Mae's father, who beats her until she is black and blue, impervious to law enforcement or punishment even when everyone in town knows what goes on (126-27). Florence, Clarice, and Arlene all on some level understand that the men around them are more powerful, more trusted, more important than they are. But what Arlene fails to realize is the power available to her through

connection with the women who love her, primarily to her Aunt Florence, who has been her mother figure for most of her life; a woman who would sacrifice her own safety and morality to kill Jim Beverly because she believed he had raped and killed the Arlene she loved as her own daughter. This mother-love is what Arlene has failed to recognize in Florence; the “all-consuming” love that makes Florence force her way into Arlene’s life even as Arlene tries to push her out. It is only when Arlene is able to accept the strength of the female bond available to her that she is able to confront her own past, to narrate her story, and to connect that story with the actual story of Jim’s death as narrated by her Aunt Florence, that she is able to feel at home in her true home place. The place where she finally realizes, with the man she loves and the family surrounding her who loves her, that she is “right where I belonged” (275). Jackson states that *gods in Alabama* is a love story; not the kind we usually think of, but a “mother-daughter love story” (279). It is through this love that Arlene is able to feel at home in Possett, in spite of the damaged Southern culture that it represents, because of the power available to her through female community that circumvents the patriarchal power structure through female agency.

Conclusion

As Minrose Gwin states, “for some daughters, ‘home’ may not be grounded in a place but in the replacement of the self elsewhere. What women’s writing and feminist reading can do is to point to that other space...in which the daughter can begin to write her own cultural story, create her own felicity. Call it home” (437). In the end, all three of these protagonists literally relocate physically to another home. Sethe will move out of 124, Bone goes to live with her Aunt Raylene, and Arlene will return north to Chicago. But more importantly, all three begin to relocate their sense of home as one that they have created, not one that has been defined for them by their haunted past, their broken family, or their grotesque culture.

These women writers are examples (though they are by no means exhaustive examples of women’s writing on this topic) of the struggle for balance in the feminist community between victim and agency. They show that women’s journeys toward a found voice and a freedom from oppression are not without pain; indeed, the horrors of the traumas endured by these heroines are as

frightening as any Gothic monster. The difference is in the resolution. Salvation for these heroines is not found in a male hero or a return to patriarchy, but in their own agency and in female community. The Gothic tradition is appropriated, resignified. The fallacies and failures of the Southern ideology of the past are highlighted through the traumas endured by each of these women, but the regressive and oppressive characteristics in the Gothic tradition are countered by the use of progressive and postmodern techniques. Through their narrative methods, whether the skillful interweaving of past and present in Morrison's text, the dramatic use of the first person to assign narrative agency in Allison's book, or the gameful search for a true story in Jackson's novel, the control of technique shows all three writers developing contemporary ways of rewriting the Gothic genre. Perhaps this is because as women and particularly as Southern women, these writers are able to deal honestly and openly with the bizarre and grotesque treatment of the "other" in patriarchal culture, and therefore they are more adept at finding the redemptive power available through the development of the "other's" potential. When woman as the victim, the outcast, the "other," finds agency in the development and recognition of the self and in developing a community of "others," change and progress are possible; not certain or easy, but possible. These works point to that possibility of redefining, rewriting, relocating.

By renaming themselves and claiming ownership of their minds and bodies, by telling their own stories and finding the power to narrate the truth of their pasts and the ability to narrate their own futures, and by finding or defining a

home for their true selves, these three heroines turn Gothic tragedies into female triumphs. They are not free of pain, there is no idealistic guarantee of a female utopia, but there is hope through the agency given to these women who choose to accept their victimization and move beyond it. Thus these three authors in three very different ways manipulate traditional Gothic tropes to create contemporary feminist stories which “point to that other space” where the female self can truly live.

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