

Chapter 7

On the Borders of the Real

In the 1990s two popular novels, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996), recenter the incest story in the homes of the poor. Allison's novel, set in the rural South, features the culture of "poor, white trash" and a narrator named Bone who is physically and sexually abused by her stepfather. Sapphire's narrator and protagonist, Precious, is a black, unwed teenage mother who lives in Harlem on welfare. She is sexually abused by her father and brutally exploited by her mother. Neither Bone nor Precious has forgotten that she was raped by her father, a fact that lends authority to their accounts of abuse. Yet telling these stories would also seem to confirm the middle-class expectation that incest is primarily found among the lazy and immoral poor. In an effort to revise this expectation, Allison and Sapphire combine the strategies of other incest narratives to "tell" incest in a new way. Like Ellison, they contend with the hunger for stories of incest told by exotic others. Like Walker, they offer a compensatory story about a plucky heroine capable of rising above abusive circumstances, but they also challenge the "recovery story" by insisting upon the long-lasting and fragmenting effects of trauma. The changes in the telling that we have documented in this book have made possible a self-consciously hybrid construction of subjectivity, sexuality, and memories of incest.

As do most narratives, incest narratives exist on a boundary between fact and story, and this doubleness is explicitly acknowledged by Allison and Sapphire. Allison, for example, describes her work as "not biography and yet not lies" (*Trash*, 12). This border genre claims authenticity and truth—but only to a point. Certainly, Allison and Sapphire attempt to remain true to their own experiences of incest. In a memoir written after *Bastard out of Carolina*, Allison writes: "The man [her stepfather] raped me. It's the truth. It's a fact. I was five and he was eight months married to my mother" (*Two or Three Things*, 39). Similarly, Sapphire has, in therapy, "'recovered' memories of being sexually abused by her father when she was three or four years old" (Powers, B2). And both writers draw heavily upon their direct experiences of life among the

underclass; Allison grew up in a “poor white trash” family, and Sapphire taught in Harlem, finding in one of her classes a direct model for Precious, a student who was a “single mother . . . overweight, HIV-positive,” who had a “Down Syndrome baby by her father” (Powers, B2). These direct experiences further buttress the authority and “truth” of accounts that are also “not biography” or, better, not just autobiography.

Yet linking their novels to autobiographical experience lends them credibility and thus gains them a special hearing, as reviews of both novels indicate. A commentator in the *New Yorker* notes wryly that Sapphire’s grim portrait of Precious “can make writers who think they’ve been truthful feel extremely jealous” (Rose, 48). And while a review of *Bastard out of Carolina* in the *New York Times* praises the artistry of Allison’s novel, both the title of the review—“No Wonder People Got Crazy as They Grew Up” and a prominently featured sidebar about Allison’s childhood—assure readers that this terrible story is based upon Allison’s real-life experiences. Allison is a major new talent, claims the reviewer, who writes “in a manner as authentic as that of any credible autobiographer” (Garrett, 3). Yet Allison says in the same review that her story is not fully autobiographical: “I made her, Bone, a stronger child than I was—and more important—I gave her a way out . . . if the book had been autobiographical it would have been a lot meaner” (3). This admission that her novel mutes her life’s meanness suggests that *Bastard out of Carolina* offers some of the comforts of the “recovery story.”

As we have already seen, a “recovery” novel such as *The Color Purple* is structured to offer recovery and empowerment to beset, traumatized characters. This narrative model continues to appeal to writers and readers, and it is not surprising that Allison and Sapphire appropriate some of its drive to “heal.” More interesting is how their novels both deploy and rupture the promise, conventionally made by autobiography as well as the recovery story, to tell a real and true story. Feminists have developed a compelling critique of realism that by now operates as a form of conventional wisdom.¹ At least since the early 1980s, when Catherine Belsey published her insightful book *Critical Practice*, realism has been understood as a system of representation that does not so much reflect the world as construct it. This constructed “real” world seems complex, true, and familiar precisely because it reflects a shared body of understanding that is called “the dominant ideology.” The literary tradition of realism is one in which characters are represented as individuals implicated in, but often successful at rising above, their familial, social, and economic circumstances, and thus it reinforces the dominant ideology of individualism through an emphasis on the exceptional individual. So, for example, in *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Push*, reliable first-person narrators demonstrate how a female child, immersed in an abusive environment that is personal and social, comes to understand and provisionally transcend that environment. The advo-

cacy of realism by and on behalf of culturally marginal subjects, which is a serious plea for greater inclusiveness “in the real world,” thus also risks embracing the values of an individualistic society that has crushed such people.

The constitutive tensions in *Push* and *Bastard out of Carolina* are related to this problem of individualism as portrayed in the realist novel. In both novels, the protagonist is featured as having a resourceful, autonomous “self” and, at the same time, as having been shattered by implacable external forces. Neither Bone nor Precious stands outside or fully escapes the forces that threaten to crush her. At the same time, neither is represented as absent of agency and desire. Indeed the child victim’s intense desires and provocative modes of representation disrupt familiar expectations about the recovery novel and the autonomous individual at its center. The power to fragment is depicted as both a weapon employed by the protagonist (it is displayed in Bone’s meanness and in Precious’s use of poetry) and a weapon wielded by intrusive victimizers. This doubleness leads to the production of a subject who is not an “innocent,” passive victim.

The active and “knowing” female subject is usually constructed in opposition to the innocent, good girl. We have already discussed why feminist scholarship about incest often dramatizes children’s innocence: it hopes to challenge an oppressively gendered discourse about seductive children and adolescent girls that traditionally obscures the actions of powerful men. Yet the result is “monster talk” about monstrous adults and innocent children, talk that is open to the charge, recently reiterated by James Kincaid, that this discourse denies all sexual feeling to the child (3). And if children and adults both have sexual feelings, should we not talk about power because such explanation is “hostile to desire,” as Kincaid also argues? (33). Clearly here is the familiar double bind: admitting to children’s sexuality becomes a demand to forget that adult-child relationships are structured by asymmetries in power. The feminist incest story, whose central focus was on power imbalances within the family, insisted upon the innocence of the abused child in response to a dominant narrative that blamed incest on seductive girls. Allison and Sapphire create an alternative story that acknowledges asymmetries of power without sentimentalizing or desexualizing the female child. Indeed the refusal of innocence operates as a claim for agency.

Allison’s victimized protagonist, Bone, is not an “innocent” child, although neither is she to blame for what happens to her. Belief in the child as essentially pure implicitly works to censor a child’s sexuality as deviant and provocative; it also supports the emotional logic of good/bad used to maintain class hierarchy. Either the poor are naturalized—as being “always with us”—and in this guise understood to be innocently noble and hardworking, clean but unlucky. Or the poor deserve what they get because they have been bad: lazy and morally depraved. “I understood that we were the bad poor. . . . We were not noble, not

grateful, not even hopeful” (*Skin*, 18). Allison knows that by this logic: “My cousins and I were never virgins even when we were” (*Two or Three Things*, 36). For the poor, female child there is a double motive to expose the oppressive way in which notions of innocence operate. As Jenny Kitzinger points out, “Implicit in the presentation of sexual abuse as the ‘violation of childhood’ is an assertion of what childhood ‘really’ is, or should be. The experience of abuse is contrasted with the ‘authentic experience of childhood’: a carefree time of play; an asexual and peaceful existence within the bosom of the family. The quality of childhood that is most surely ‘stolen’ by abuse is ‘innocence.’” This view “stigmatizes the ‘knowing’ child,” whose world does not conform to the ideal (157–58).

In Bone’s world, children have sexual desires, and adults talk frankly about sex. The bosom of her family is hardly peaceful, and nobody is carefree. As does Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, Allison depicts a world that hardly meets idealized white middle-class norms. But Pecola and her family are trapped in a world where their feelings of helplessness and rage turn in upon themselves. By contrast, Bone appreciates her white trash family’s social class as the source of her dissident perspective: “We’re smarter than you think we are. I felt mean and powerful and proud of all of us, all the Boatwrights who had ever gone to jail, fought back when they hadn’t a chance, and still held on to their pride” (*Bastard*, 217). The social and economic forces that create the Boatwrights’ poverty also fuel them with the rage to fight back and resist. Yet Morrison may not make the same claim for the Breedloves or the McTeers because she is aware that African-American “meanness” is too threatening to white readers. The Boatwrights’ “meanness” may be more permissible, for the white poor are expected to be “mean” but not genuinely threatening to the status quo.

Allison claims to write in a spirit of revenge: “I am the meanest writer I know how to be. Because, to change people, you have to crack them, and at the core of that is breaking their hearts” (Jetter, 57). To perform this kind of “breaking,” she must be more than permissibly mean—and so her novel must challenge the benign assumptions of the recovery story. One way to do this is to draw upon the resources of the earlier “feminist story,” which dramatizes male violence against women and children. Allison’s embrace of violence in the telling of the incest story disrupts those feminist practices that assume violence is always bad and male. Much feminist antiviolence rhetoric has focused upon how violence has been directed at women, and how responding in kind perpetuates a cycle. And in difference feminism, the very identity of women is posited as more therapeutically nurturing than an opposed and essentially violent male identity. Yet as Pamela Haag writes in her overview of the feminist debates about violence and victimhood, “while most thoughtful feminists within the academy—and many without—have sensed that identity politics and a therapeutically absorbed feminism are irksome and ideologically inade-

quate, the alternative seems to offer either an obliteration of the victim at the hands of a delusional, rugged-individualist discourse of ‘free creatures’ or an abstract directive to denaturalize the concept of sex difference that historically has organized the feminist critique of social relations” (24). For the feminist novelist aware of these issues, the task is to contextualize violence without losing track of gender and to create a victim neither innocent nor blamable, neither passive nor free.²

For Allison to want to crack the hard hearts of her readers in need of changing might at first sound like what the perpetrator of her story, Daddy Glen, does to the young victim, Bone. But admitting to both the desire and the pleasure, as Allison’s novel does (and as she has in interviews), of being mean, aggressive, and angrily vindictive acknowledges and makes use of these hostile feelings to build a different story about women, violence, and sexual abuse. The feminist story, however, is still structuring Allison’s novel insofar as it blames patriarchy for what happens to Bone. The “meanness” of Bone’s world comes not only from its grinding poverty and hunger and limited horizons, but from the attitude of its male inhabitants. Physical meanness is gendered, figured in the uncles who are described as “invariably gentle and affectionate” with Bone and her cousins. But

half the county went in terror of them. . . . Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be. . . . My aunts treated my uncles like over-grown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too. . . . Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. (22–23)

Yet no matter how much the uncles terrorize other adults in the county, they never terrorize children.

This particular form of meanness is left to Daddy Glen, who comes from a prosperous middle-class family, and whom Bone’s mother Anney marries, ironically, to gain respectability. White trash men may be mean and vicious, but it is the terrifying aggression of white middle-class men directed toward those weaker that is the cruelest. And Daddy Glen’s “meanness” is mirrored in other white middle-class institutions, such as the bureaucrats at the county courthouse who refuse to correct Bone’s birth certificate and the “meanness” of the sheriff who, though he intends to help Bone, only manages to badger her for information about her abuser. Bone has already absorbed the lesson that the law does not serve white trash; it only fines, harasses, and imprisons them.

There is a double sense of meanness in the novel. Meanness is linked to love and resistance but also to cruelty and destruction. Bone learns from her aunts

that women love men who are mean, another lesson that challenges the feminist story about women's innocence. As Aunt Ruth puts it, "that's what Earle is, a hurt little boy with just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested" (25). Part of the appeal of the mean boy is indeed that he himself is "a hurt little boy." Not only is Earle hurt, but Glen too is hurt (and mean because of it) by *his* father, who rejects him and makes him feel less competent than his successful brothers. Bone's mother, Anney, explains her attraction to him in precisely these terms: "Anybody can see how Glen got bent, what his daddy's done to him. I an't never seen a boy wanted his daddy's love so much and had so little of it" (132). She adds, "It was like looking at a little boy, a desperate hurt little boy. That's when I knew I loved him" (133). Women in this configuration of relationships are the mothers and nursemaids to their mean little boy-men.

While it looks like the Boatwright women are the sympathizers and nurturers, they too are mean, even in the desire to love. In the intense focus on their love for these mean but hurt little boys, there is a familial pattern of neglect of girls. Granny favors her boys, neglecting her girls. Aunt Ruth has driven away her daughter DeeDee, who is sick of picking up after her brothers and taking care of her debilitated mother. Women's love for their partners has another kind of meanness, in that it often comes at the expense of children's needs. Aunt Alma destroys her house and furniture and terrifies her children and claims she wants to kill her husband Wade only because she loves him; and even Aunt Raylene, who loves a woman, nearly brings herself and her lover to destruction by making her lover choose between her child and Raylene. Most important to Bone, her mother's love for Glen almost always takes precedence over her desire to protect her daughter.

The cycle of neglected women-girls loving their hurt men-boys rather than their children who grow up to be hurt men-boys or abused, neglected girls has its emotional fulcrum in deprivation, which is compounded by the hunger and economic distress of the characters. In one vignette, Bone and her sister, with only soda crackers and ketchup to eat, dream of pretend meals. In another scene, Bone, forced by her mother to return stolen candy to a bloat-bellied store manager at Woolworths, feels a hunger and rage in the back of her throat that reminds her of a similar hunger that "would throb and swell behind [her] tongue" (98). This hunger makes Bone want "to hurt somebody back" (98). She pulls roses off the bushes at Daddy Glen's father's house, and she gets her revenge on the manager of Woolworths by using a trawling hook, trash found in the river, to break into the store, not stealing from it but smashing counters and leaving it to be looted. It is no wonder, then, that one of Bone's own masturbatory fantasies has to do with a raging fire, an apocalyptic, destructive symbolic vehicle that conveys both her own terrible anger at her abuse and lack of protection from those who should love her, as well as her triumphant escape.

By showing that this form of destructive love is both a familial pattern and a dimension of the family's economic circumstances, Allison lifts the novel away from blaming individuals, while still refusing to make these individuals innocent and desexualized.

The representations of sexuality, meanness, and rage in the novel humanize the characters. And given that white trash culture is often made to seem less than fully human, this appeal to human nature is strategic. *Bastard out of Carolina* suggests that sexuality is human primarily in its excessiveness. Like a fire, it is that which always threatens to rage out of the characters' control. And in its very excessiveness, it addresses, though it never resolves, the characters' immense sense of deprivation. Daddy Glen, the black sheep son of a middle-class family, is emotionally suffering from rejection by his father. Glen is so angry that he loses job after job, losses that exacerbate his sense of economic distress; he is so angry over his failure and inability to provide that he punishes Bone by beating her. That Glen, from a solid, prosperous middle-class family, gets caught in a cycle of deprivation and rage aligns him with the white trash family that he marries into. The uncles grant him some respect, as does the grandmother, when they discover that the "berserker rage that would come on him was just a shade off the power of the Boatwrights' famous binges" (100).

This identification of Glen with the uncles also extends to Bone, a child suffering from both economic and emotional deprivation similar to his own. His sexual abuse of her punishes her as his father punished him and is for him a source of pleasurable authority. The story he tells himself and others to rationalize this punishment is that he is keeping Bone in line: "Someone has to love her enough to care how she turns out" (107). Minor infractions, often imagined, serve as triggers. Though the actual beatings and abuse are nothing but terrifying and painful, Bone creates a masturbatory fantasy that allows her to re-create the punishment so that not only is she pleasurably reliving the event but controlling it. She fantasizes that as she is being beaten, she is proud and defiant and that people are watching her: "I was wonderful in their eyes" (112). In these scenarios, she is in control and special.

In fantasy, then, Bone finds a way to express her anger, make up for a sense of deprivation, and gain control. Danger and sexuality are linked for her, but she is not hurting anyone the way Daddy Glen does. As Ann Cvetkovich points out, Bone masters the trauma of sexual abuse by repeating it in fantasy, with the difference of creating authority and agency for herself. Thus Bone's fantasies become a way to manage and control, without disowning the violence and aggression that have constituted her as a sexual subject. But what cannot be fully recuperated is her sense of self-worth. "I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first

place. I lived in a world of shame” (112–13). Her sense of shame exceeds the pleasure of the fantasy, ultimately making her feel guiltier about the fantasy than about the abuse.

Bone’s shame over her fantasies helps to insure her silence about her abuse, but other factors contribute to her unwillingness to speak, even to a sympathetic listener. After offering Bone an explanation for Glen’s hatred of her: “There’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband” (123), Aunt Ruth gently invites Bone to confide in her by asking Bone if “Daddy Glen ever . . . well . . . touched you? . . . ever hurt you, messed with you?” (124). Bone knows perfectly well what Aunt Ruth is referring to, “that thing men did to women. I knew what the act was supposed to be, I’d read about it, heard the joke. ‘What’s a South Carolina virgin? ‘At’s a ten-year-old can run fast’”³ and commands herself, “Tell her . . . Tell her all of it. Tell her” (124). But she cannot bring herself to say anything more than that Glen scares her by the way he looks at her. It is not simply shame that silences Bone; she has been given her cues from Aunt Ruth as well. Ruth’s face grows increasingly pink with embarrassment even as she sympathetically persists in questioning Bone. Ruth’s embarrassment, Bone’s shame, and her association of rape with a “joke” reinforce her reluctance and, finally, her inability, to tell.

As Allison herself has pointed out about *Bastard out of Carolina*, the story’s emotional center is the damaging failures to protect Bone rather than the abusive acts themselves (Strong, 96). As the scene with Ruth reveals, however, the individual “failures” of the adult women in this particular culture are so intertwined with unquestioned beliefs about their men and the rightness of expected patterns of behavior that there is no “outside” for any one individual to appeal to. Neither does the violent vindictive beating that the uncles administer to Glen as both punishment and warning serve its purpose; rather, it seems to backfire in the even more horrifying rape of Bone at the end of the novel.

Although Bone is not protected by the adults in the novel, she does take it upon herself to protect her mother, and her protective impulse is another reinforcement for Bone’s shamed silence. Even her final departure from her mother reflects an adultlike and still protective recognition that her mother needs Glen. Bone, then, never really tells her story. Nowhere in the novel does Bone ever say that Glen beats or rapes her. Physical signs and acts must speak for her: An x-ray shows that her coccyx is broken; her Aunt Raylene sees her bloodied legs; her mother discovers Glen raping Bone. In what she has described as an effort to make sure that her novel was not pornographic, Allison is careful not to graphically represent Glen’s sexual abuse of Bone, especially because it is Bone’s emotions that she wants to place in the foreground (Jetter). But at the same time, Bone’s silence, meant to protect her mother, is

also Allison's silence. Allison's need to protect her family and her class, while also refusing to make her characters "innocent," constructs a gap within the novel. On the one hand her story reveals the secrets of "white trash," the neediness, anger, and meanness, and on the other hand it conceals and protects.

By making Glen the villain, Allison uses the abuser to blame middle-class patriarchy and capitalism as the source of white trash misery. Because white trash have little power in this world, they can, in a way, be mean, drunken, and enraged without having much impact. Their destructive acts are figured as a series of childish pranks. One impulse behind the novel's muting of meanness may be a form of class loyalty that emerges in a lyricism that celebrates the landscape, the food, the gospel singing, and the strength and endurance of the women, all of which are conventional literary ploys for representing the "authentic" southern poor. But because of Allison's own rage at her family's and her mother's inability to protect her or themselves, and because she does want revenge, the novel torques on the counterimpulse to reveal as well as conceal the helplessness of these impoverished, blind adults. Bone never can tell her mother about the abuse because her mother, as well as the other women in her family, cannot hear what she is saying. Perhaps they do not need to hear this story: her hurt is not, for them, the primary one. Their paradigm for understanding their men as hurt and wounded boys, and their function of saving them, precludes any ability to save Bone. Bone will die if she does not save herself by escaping.

Bone, then, is not simply a survivor of sexual abuse. She also survives growing up in poverty, a culture she depicts as a trap in which helpless and mean adults neglect and abuse children who perpetuate the cycle. There are no options *within* this culture for, as Bone puts it:

Growing up was like falling into a hole. The boys would quit school and sooner or later go to jail for something silly. I might not quit school, not while Mama had any say in the matter, but what difference would that make? What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama at the diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up. (*Bastard*, 178)

To say that a child's options only point to the dead-end road of craziness is to dramatize the terrible constraints of her class—the same class that Allison wants to celebrate. Given this contradiction, it is not surprising that Allison does not enthusiastically endorse Bone's success at surviving her experiences. Bone's shame and guilt are not simply a sexual guilt, but a more complex form of survivor's guilt.

In an interview, Allison points out that her own "escape" from her family created an excruciating double bind.

Survivor guilt is so deep. I'm convinced that to be worthy of having survived when all these people I loved didn't survive, there's got to be something huge that I'm supposed to do. . . . The world would like us to believe that if you do well, if you do anything successful, you are proof that everybody else in your family is worthless. (Strong, 97)

The celebration of survivorship in therapeutic feminist culture does not acknowledge the dark side of survivorship or that it can have more than one origin. The popular recovery narrative extols the importance of a community of nurturing women who empower incest victims and provide "safe" places, but Allison, who figures just such a comforting and healing community in the Boatwright aunts, shows its investment in passive constructions of femininity and oppressive forms of heterosexuality that are inimical to Bone's safety.

Lesbianism certainly might offer an alternative to this traumatized and traumatizing form of femininity. In the novel, Aunt Raylene seems to suggest this way out. Late in the novel, Bone learns that Aunt Raylene ran away to the carnival where she worked like a man, "cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls" and calling herself Ray (179). And in the novel's last chapter, Aunt Raylene tells Bone that she "made the woman I loved" choose between Raylene and her child (300). Because Allison is herself a "cross-eyed, working-class, lesbian" who has explicitly discussed how her lesbianism saved her, the links between Allison and the fictional Raylene and Bone are easy to forge (Jetter, 54).⁴ Ann Cvetkovich argues that Bone finds in her "queer childhood sexuality" a form of agency that is both a fantasized and a real way of acquiring power (369–70) and that Aunt Raylene is a "displaced marker of Bone's queer sexuality, if not her incipient lesbianism" (371).

The idea that "incest makes you queer" is a powerful and dangerous one. One of the strengths of Cvetkovich's article is that she is willing to discuss the limitations and possibilities of this idea. Because, as Rosaria Champagne has shown, false-memory syndrome proponents use a family values rhetoric and have engaged in lesbian-baiting, they have created a climate in which admitting to a link between survivorship and lesbianism might fuel homophobic attacks on survivors, whose legitimacy as truth-tellers is already precarious (167–92). And, of course, positing sexual abuse as a "cause" of lesbianism is also a way of pathologizing it, though as Allison has remarked: "if people really believed that rape made lesbians, and brutal fathers made dykes, wouldn't they be more eager to do something about it?" (*Two or Three Things*, 46). Cvetkovich's own smart way of breaking the silence is to register her surprise and dismay at the recovery movement's timid disavowal of the connection between coming out as a survivor and coming out as a lesbian: "As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer"

(357).⁵ She uses the word “queer” to emphasize the unpredictability of the outcome of this object choice, yet her revealing exploration of *Bastard out of Carolina* creates a trajectory that consolidates Bone’s sexual identity (“incipient lesbianism”) as Allison does not. Cvetkovich knows she is looking for something that is not quite there: “Allison stops short of the autobiographical connection that would explore lesbianism’s presence in Bone’s queer sexuality, perhaps out of fear of the dangers of linking incest and lesbianism” (371). The problem with this explanation is that it emphasizes Allison’s “fear,” when Allison may have other reasons for refusing to make sexual identity a key.

What is also queer about Bone is her anger. Anger, abuse, poverty, brokenness, and raging need are what Allison writes about, and they represent the most potent danger to the comforts of the recovery story and its creation of imaginary “safe” havens. As she has written, “It was my anger that my aunts thought queer, my wild raging anger. Temper they respected in a boy and discouraged in a girl. That I slept with girls was curious, not dangerous” (*Trash*, 100). Allison’s anger is “queer” to her aunts because the women Allison knows best take “damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all” (*Two or Three Things*, 8). Allison crosses conventional gender lines not in terms of whom she sleeps with but by allowing herself to appropriate the energy of “wild” and boyish temper. The implication is that without exceptionally queer anger, bone-true stories about sexuality, racism, poverty, and violence cannot be told by women, much less believed. To get her story told, Allison must “pour blood on the floor to convince anyone that every word I say is true” (*Two or Three Things*, 51).

Yet the novel’s ending does not “pour blood on the floor,” is not that “mean.” Where is Bone’s anger in the concluding sentences of the novel? “I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman. I wrapped my fingers in Raylene’s and watched the night close in around us” (309). But if Allison relies upon the narrative trajectory of recovery, she also reveals the darker side of its creation of the mythically strong and exceptional woman. Without undermining the necessity for such strength (a source, after all, of survival), she reveals, first, that her mother’s and aunts’ strength unwittingly perpetrates a cycle of infantilizing men, and that Bone’s strength and identity have been seriously compromised by the trauma of her experience. As a result, at the end of *Bastard out of Carolina*, there is no clear consolidation of Bone’s identity within a harmonious context such as the one provided for Celie at the end of *The Color Purple*. Allison herself reveals that while she had the strength to break out of this cycle, her ability to do so relied as much upon her enormous anger as upon a supportive sisterhood, and that a legacy of trauma, survivor’s guilt, will always be with her. Allison’s novel might serve as a cautionary tale for feminists caught up in the heated exchange about incest that so often seems to position strong women and reasonable feminists against hyster-

ical victims and their gullible supporters, a positioning that never seems to inspect what women's "strength" relies upon or perpetrates.

In *Push* Sapphire also constructs a story of affirmation and survival, but in doing so, she self-consciously makes explicit, and a matter of some debate, the writing choices an author must make to attract an audience and gain its sympathy. Basing her protagonist upon a real person and her gritty urban life, Sapphire departs from *The Color Purple's* (and to a lesser extent, Allison's) rural nostalgia. Precious makes the point that

one of the criticisms of *The Color Purple* is it have fairy tale ending. I would say, well shit like that can be true. Life can work out for the best sometimes. Ms Rain [the teacher quite obviously based upon Sapphire herself] love *Color Purple* too but say realism has its virtues too. (85)

Push reveals the conflicting desires behind this dialogue: an optimistic desire that life work out for the best for deserving people vies with an equally strong insistence upon the "virtues of realism," cynicism about a social order that is hard to push against. In opting for the "virtues of realism," in however qualified a way, *Push* seeks to put before its readers a dark vision of "REALITY," which is, as Precious puts it, "a 'motherfucker, leeme tell you'" (85).

Precious "know what REALITY is" and is impatient with Ms. Rain's "IZM stuff" (85). The power of this vision resides in the conviction that raw experience can be represented. Like Precious, Sapphire draws upon the authority of her own experience to validate and shape her novel, especially her own recovered memories of being sexually abused by her father. Yet the "raw" experience of recovering memories is a highly mediated "source," given that her memories came to her in therapy and that she admits to doubting them. Moreover, her story is written as a novel that emphasizes the place of writing in healing. In *Push*, the protagonist's writing draws both upon the recovery story's narrative of self-determination and growth and upon the trauma memoir's insistence on the authority of the fragment. This doubleness allows Sapphire to explore the tension between a view of the individual's essential capacity for growth and one that emphasizes the individual as traumatically and productively fragmented. In *Push*, poetry offers a form of fragmentation that provides an alternative to the constraints of a realist narrative.

Both Sapphire and Allison first wrote about their experiences of sexual abuse in poetry. "To the Bone," a poem in Allison's *The Women Who Hate Me*, is a source of *Bastard out of Carolina*. It concludes with these words: "That summer I did not go crazy / but I wore / very close / very close / to the bone" (28). The "I" who suffers this abrading process makes retention of a tenuous rationality a kind of victory. But this is a victory whose truth is perhaps best understood by those who know how hard it is to resist the forces making poor

women into something hard and senseless. The power of the bone as sign of victimage and source of authority is also figured in Sapphire's first book of poetry, *American Dreams*. In Sapphire's poem, "poem for jennifer, marla, tawana& me" the speaker is shattered, yet her "bones" become both weapons and tools for changing the patriarchal world.

American Dreams is dedicated to "the child within us all," a dedication meant to embrace all readers. Inner child therapies, as Marilyn Ivy observes, assume that many people are adult survivors of childhood violence who need to be reparented and healed so that they can experience "growth." Ivy agrees that inner child therapies are an "index of widespread pain in the United States" caused by a violent "American capitalism that fosters compulsive gratifications in an all-too-real foreclosure of childhood." But she also worries about a logic that assumes the dysfunctional family to be a "cross-cultural" verity, a belief that forecloses any attention to race or class or social history (243). The end result of these therapies, she argues, is to shift awareness from an analysis of historical contexts and economic conditions, in which race, gender, and class inform the mistreatment of children in specific ways, to the inner core of bourgeois individuals. Since the incest novel is a way of entering into the life of an abused child, imagined from the point of view of the adult who is writing, Ivy's worries are a useful way of thinking about the challenges faced by Allison, who wants to contextualize the abused child, and by Sapphire, who wants to engage the sympathy of her readers for children who are not just "inside" but who suffer sexual abuse, racism, and poverty "outside." To get readers to identify with children vilified in mainstream culture, it may be strategic to ask readers to identify with "inner children" so as to facilitate sympathetic identification with "inner city children." But this form of identification, as Ivy points out, may also function to displace the social/political with a universalized personal sphere.

Sapphire develops the humanity of Precious so that the reader fully appreciates the waste of her life and potential and understands that child members of the black urban poor fully deserve resources and opportunities to grow, imagining these resources as primarily educational. As does Allison, Sapphire humanizes her narrator to make the case that threatened poor children should be listened to and given the resources to help them achieve their dreams of educational attainment—and of escape. Although this is an innocuous plea for sharing opportunity that does not even explicitly attack institutionalized pressures to deny simple human need, Sapphire's writing is scandalizing because it features luridly brutal and brutalized subjects. As Vaughn Carney scathingly put it in his *Wall Street Journal* review of *Push* and its marketers:

Why does the publishing industry have this morbid fascination with the most depraved, violent, misogynist, vulgar, low-life element in the African-

American experience? . . . I resent having my people defined by the lowest elements among us. To see the majority of African-Americans as shards of a degraded and dysfunctional monolith is hugely insulting and unfair. (A14)

Carney is responding to a problem that Ellison and Morrison also had to face: the tendency to associate depictions of black poverty and sexual violence with “authentic” black life. Pointing to Sapphire’s five-hundred-thousand-dollar advance for her novel, a reviewer in *Newsweek* notes the “tremendous appetite for minority voices” that publishers feed with novels like *Push*, a process of “feeding” that Susan Willis has linked to the consuming audience of a dominant white culture that “seems to have an insatiable need for the ethnic and new,” a need related to the demand that “marginal groups be authentic” (180–82).

Of course, her hostile reviewers do not think that Sapphire takes any risks to tell the black incest victim’s story. Instead, they believe that she gives the dominant culture exactly what it wants. This view of Sapphire’s *Push* echoes the fears of the black college administrators about Trueblood telling his story to a voyeuristic white audience that rewards him with money. But the lesson of *Push*’s publication history could be understood in a different way. Certainly, Sapphire has much more support for breaking the incest victim’s silence and shaping her narrative than Morrison did in 1970. The marketable promise of authenticity, the evolution of the incest novel into a popular genre, the recovery movement, all work to provide Sapphire with a sympathetic, affluent audience (even before the novel was published, an excerpt had appeared in the *New Yorker*). Yet despite her large advance, Sapphire has refused to negotiate with Hollywood for the film rights. She has not, then, encouraged the further mass commodification of her novel in a form where she would lose authorial control: “To have a child sitting in the audience look up and feel shame . . . that could really happen. . . . At some point I do have control” (Powers, B2). Here, the author asserts control by presenting her story only to a smaller, more privileged group of adult readers who, to judge by the attention her novel received, as well as many positive reviews, have acceded to the novel’s demand that they value the abused child as “precious.”

Further, in her novel itself, Sapphire challenges those who would see the “majority of African-Americans as a . . . dysfunctional monolith” by using a realist focus on individuals, all of whom manage both to use the system and to find the loopholes of benefit to themselves. Yet even in doing so, Sapphire does not shy away from the destructive consequences of the individualist credo, depicted in the opportunism of adults like Precious’s parents. When the book opens, Precious is sixteen and pregnant for the second time by her exploitative father. Precious’s mother is figured as an obese woman who force-feeds Pre-

icious and devours food herself, while also verbally and physically abusing her daughter and stealing the money that should be used to provide for Precious's first child. Although it is possible to see these parents as themselves victims of a greedy and narcissistic society, their brutality is so unqualified in the novel that they simply seem evil rather than socially and economically deprived.

Precisely because Precious's parents, unlike the Boatwrights in *Bastard out of Carolina*, lack any self-awareness or redeeming moments of self-reflection, anger at them is a more available response. Their brutality thus works to create more sympathy for their victim, who, like Bone, is not to blame and yet not innocent. Precious is overweight, self-hating, rebellious, and totally illiterate, though she goes to school every day and has been promoted to the ninth grade. She admits that she continues to live only because "Ain' no plug to pull out" (35). The risks Sapphire takes in focusing upon Precious's trauma and recovery are those that we have already seen are associated with the recovery model itself. False-memory advocates might see in *Push*'s depiction of Precious's parents clear evidence that "monsters" are being created here. And to emphasize Precious's resourcefulness is to appear to participate in the all-American ethic of individualism and its celebration of the will to "push." Yet if Sapphire's novel is implicated in oppressive ideological formulations, her invention of Precious also implicitly argues that culturally prized ideas about self-determination can be a resource for a disenfranchised, nearly invisible teenager.

To construct, as Sapphire does, welfare parents as wicked, lazy, and greedy is also to take the risk of confirming the cultural deficiency model: underclass parents cause their children to suffer. Sapphire makes it difficult to blame anyone but Precious's monstrous parents for her victimization. Giving voice to the victim, Sapphire follows Walker's lead in *The Color Purple*, but she does not share her strategy for letting the perpetrator—"Pa not Pa"—off the hook. Instead, Sapphire immerses the reader in Precious's point of view and language and welcomes the reader's anger on Precious's behalf. Anger about Precious's victimization is undoubtedly intensified by Sapphire's depiction of the social and economic conditions that both create the dehumanizing situation in which the narrator lives and are integral to her consciousness and language. But the contexts in which incest takes place and that are defined as a cause for anger in *Bastard out of Carolina* and in Ellison's and Morrison's novels are less of a target in *Push*. Unlike Pecola, who is annihilated by her circumstances, Precious always finds some lifesaving crumb within her experience to nurture a growing healthy sense of self. She also finds an "angel" in every situation, in keeping with *Push*'s epigraph from *The Talmud*: "Every blade of grass has its Angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow, grow.'" Like Morrison, Sapphire makes use of a natural metaphor to suggest that there is something outside the social and economic, a life force that in Morrison's novel is utterly destroyed and in Sapphire's novel is irrepressible. But in some ways there is more to be optimistic

about in 1996. Clearly incest is not the big secret in either the black or the white communities that it once was—and it is no longer understood as the problem of one class. Hundreds of books have been written discussing the effects of trauma and suggesting the means of recovery. And even the socially marginal Precious ends up going to several recovery groups. Sapphire is assured of an audience who, far from being offended by the topic, want to see it explored.

In *Push*, not only does the incest victim tell her own story, but the story is almost exclusively about her coming into language and the development of her self and of her growth as an authority. Sapphire borrows freely from, but also implicitly criticizes, the central therapeutic technique for incest survivors: journal writing. As we have already seen, Bass and Davis's *The Courage to Heal* features many samples of journal entries, always articulate, that reveal as much about the class of these writers as about their past experiences—and the conventions for narrating them. If memory is linked to a process of rehearsal, then some people have greater access than others to visible, powerful means of rehearsal. Precious cannot even write prayer letters, as Celie does. When her lesbian feminist teacher, Ms. Rain, announces that students in her pre-G.E.D. class have a daily assignment to “write in our notebooks,” Precious responds, “How we gonna write if we can't read? Shit, how we gonna write if we can't write!” (51). Precious has to start with the alphabet. Through oral testimony and some third-person narration, Sapphire somewhat awkwardly holds the novel at the edge of literacy until Precious acquires enough pieces of the alphabet to write to her teacher, who offers Standard English translations in parenthesis: “Dr Miz Ms Rain, all yr I sit cls I nevr lren (all years I sit in class I never learn) bt I gt babe agn Babe bi my favr (but I got baby again Babe by my father)” (71).

Recovery, in texts like *The Courage to Heal*, means not only healing from incest through journal writing and groups, but recovering memories of it. But in *Push*, as in *Bastard out of Carolina*, forgetting abuse is not an option: “what i got to rremember i nevr dun forgit” (102). What Precious *does* recover is the ability to live in the present and to hope for a future. But the novel so vividly renders the effect of trauma upon Precious's ability to construct a coherent account of what has happened and is happening to her that she fits the model of women who dissociate—and forget—their abuse. Precious, then, is an amalgam of the survivor who forgets and the survivor who remembers. Precious “spaces out” so frequently that she loses track of where she is and what people are saying to her. In these lost moments of time, she is “remembering,” but this is hardly a straightforward process. Early in the novel, Precious describes her memories as a process that continually whirls the past into the present “like clothes in the washing machine at laundry mat—round ‘n round, up ‘n down” (23). Rather than the popular “camcorder” or “computer” metaphors that lend a much debated “truth” to recovered memories, Precious's memories are shift-

ing and agitated by what she has seen and absorbed from television—its happy families and prosperous middle-class citizens—as well as by her own dreams and nightmares. Memory is imagined as a set of displacements—and subject to the power of a machine, which is at once a figure for the mind and for the social order that may leave Precious homeless at any time.

Part of the courage of the novel is its refusal to relinquish to a straightforward narrative line its complicated sense of memory and of the difficulties of gaining a voice. As Precious's life story is shaped into a familiar—because linked to stories of recovery—narrative order, Precious's writing becomes more and more like poetry than a coherent prose story with a beginning, middle, and happy ending. Poetry, then, energizes a disruption to a more blandly predictable narrative structure. The page literally opens up, with small lines of Precious's poetry surrounded by much white space and followed, in smaller italicized print, by Ms. Rain's translations. After Precious narrates her discovery that she is HIV-positive, Precious's journal entries, untranslated by Ms. Rain, begin to predominate. Ironically, as Precious's voice grows stronger and her literacy skills increase, the text seems to graphically fall apart—words are crossed out; drawings and arrows are included.

What does poetry offer that a prose narrative cannot? Poetry speaks a different language, in Precious's case, the language of an illiterate and impoverished child who has experienced traumatic abuse and whose subjectivity has been constituted within experiences of fragmentation. Through poetry, the linear recovery tale of growth and recovery is disrupted by a discourse of circling and shattering that has resonance with work on the long-term effects of violence on traumatized subjects. The textual fragmentation that marks Precious's poetry brings experiences of subordination, of psychological and social trauma, into view. Because of her illiteracy, Precious writes in fragments. She cannot write prayer letters as Celie does in *The Color Purple* (how did Celie gain access to writing and, without much difficulty, to middle-class discourse?). Yet if Precious's poetry demonstrates her distance from such language practices, it also proves that she is "somebody" despite her inability to express herself in Standard English (35).

Poetry, a learned form of articulation, allows Precious to bypass rules of syntax (poetic license), giving her access to a lyric subjectivity that her illiteracy denies her. Indeed, illiteracy, when transformed through education into poetry, becomes a sign of enhanced creativity and resistance. The open spaces surrounding the poems, whose lines are often only one word, correspond to the opening of Precious's own mind and vistas, but also encourage, as poetry does, the reader's own active participation in creating meaning. In this way, *Push* breaks and refashions silence in a new way. Fragmentation, then, is a sign of agency even as it marks Precious's vulnerability.

By formally opening up the text to many possible interpretations, Sapphire

insures that a triumphant ending is no longer the necessary one. *Push* contains two endings. The first ending makes *Push* into a recovery story. Precious sits in a place called the Advancement House. Sun is coming in the window and shining on her son, “an angel child” (142). Her thoughts about the future are optimistic. Maybe there will be a cure for AIDS. Maybe it is enough to appreciate the beauty of the moment, her son’s beauty, and her own. And yet the reader gets a choice. It is possible to stop there, but *Push* also includes an appendix, Ms. Rain’s class book, written by her students, and called, “Life Stories.” This section is in a different typeface, and it is not paginated.

The violence in these stories makes the point that, feminist teachers and recovery stories notwithstanding, female students are not free from the violent imposition of patriarchal power. The stories depict a world in which fathers abuse daughters; sons are favored; girls are punished for queer sexuality. Ms. Rain has nurtured her students’ sense of self and taught them to refuse being declared deviant, but they have not become survivors for whom “reality” is no longer a “motherfucker.” The appendix begins and ends with poetry, but now poetry pulls the reins in on an utopian ending by insisting that what Precious has to say is no fairy tale: it is not a familiar Mary-had-a-little-lamb story that leads to laughing and playing at school. Precious writes, “marY had a little lamb / but I got a kid / and HIV / that follow me / to school / one day.” After this poem, prose narratives by her classmates suggest that what follows them to school is also a history of violence.

Sapphire allows Precious to push about as far as she can. The community of nurturing women Precious discovers are all clients and employees of a welfare system that is itself threatened. Yet compassionate and well-intentioned individuals use its resources to push for alternatives that suggest a different, more communal and cooperative social order. *Push*, then, struggles with and pushes against forces of economic and social disenfranchisement by a forceful emphasis upon the determination and subversive resourcefulness of individuals, who succeed in opening up at least some new space. Yet Precious’s final poem, and the final words of the novel—“tick / tock”—remind the reader that there is not much time for Precious left, that even the most courageous and resourceful individuals are flattened by the bone-crushing momentum of a system that depends on the regular wastage of human resources.

Bastard out of Carolina and *Push* work to crack open the more linear recovery story even as both novels draw upon its conventions. As we have seen, the contradictory impulses fueling Allison’s novel, the silences and gaps that these create, are not explicitly highlighted in the telling of the tale. Nonetheless, Bone’s anger and meanness challenge expectations about both the guilt *and* the innocence of the victim, her mother, and her class while also exposing the limits of the virtues of the middle class. In *Push*, Sapphire makes gaps in the story more visible—and more linked to traumatic experience—by formally opening

up her text. However, like Allison, she draws upon the resources of the recovery story, especially its claims for the full humanity of a character who, if she does not completely triumph over adversity, has a seemingly innate desire to push. Why uphold conventions of the recovery narrative if they make it impossible to express “the thing” or its difficulty? The answer is that a novel’s promise of “reality” and of recovery encourages both belief in true stories of incest and identification with victims, understandable goals given the public debates about the truth and falsehood of incest stories and their tellers. These novels insist that incest really happens to people you could care about, and reader, if you believe that, you might also believe that whole peoples are dominated and abused.

Yet, as we have already seen, racial and class “others” are often associated with the “real” or the “authentic” and thus made objects of voyeuristic interest, already a danger given the possible voyeuristic appeal of incest narratives. Self-conscious about this danger, Allison refuses to fully embody scenes of incest, and Sapphire emphasizes Precious’s seemingly universal selfhood so as to link “realism” to humanism as well as the miseries of poverty and sexual abuse. But the effort to create a “real” document of an individual life, crucial as it is for witnessing, for validating experiences that have remained marginalized and therefore occluded, can also put into the margins a different “they” whose economic and social powers remain invisible and difficult to recover through individual processes of memorial reconstruction. And this particular difficulty, the difficulty of locating forms of power that are neither local nor familial, points to the limitations of a story that feminists have long felt offers clear links between the personal and the political. Yet if incest cannot be the enormity that speaks for all the crimes of the powerful, the work of Allison and Sapphire shows that the autobiographical incest novel does compellingly speak, on the border between what is real and rupturing, autobiographical and fictional, about women’s complex experiences of subjugation and hope.