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Dorothy Allison's Gothic Poverty

Gothic spaces saturate southern literature. Normally, these spaces relate to the horrific history of slavery in the South and are sites such as plantation houses. These gothic buildings are places of contention, where secrets of the past are revealed and the people of the present must battle and come to terms with these truths. According to Bridget M. Marshall, “destitute state of the Southern plantation in the post–Civil War period refers to the history of the planter class and, indeed, of the American South more generally” (“Defining Southern Gothic”). Dorothy Allison approaches the gothic from a more personal perspective. Allison’s novels do not center around century old family secrets and racial tensions, but instead focus on the lives of poor, impoverished southern families and depict the struggles that come with their lower-class status. The Boatwrights of *Bastard out of Carolina* and the Byrds of *Cavedweller* do not live in giant dilapidated plantation houses; they either migrate from house to house, living wherever is cheapest, or live in poorly constructed neighborhoods not old enough to be haunted by the ghosts of southern history. They do not trust the government for help, nor do they trust people that come from money. The gothic spaces in Allison’s works are ordinary, mundane structures that become gothic because of the personal meaning the characters associate to the places. Yet, she does not depict the gothic identically in her novels. In *Bastard out of Carolina*, places either are gothic from the beginning, or are safe spaces that transform into gothic places over the course of the novel. Conversely, in *Cavedweller*, most buildings and spaces are initially gothic but redeem

themselves over time so that they become safe for the characters. In both of her novels, Dorothy Allison underscores and complicates her main characters' lower-class status and the isolation that comes with poverty by transforming areas often associated with relative safety, such as suburban neighborhoods, storefronts, and churches into gothic spaces of fear and anger.

In Allison's first novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*, a distinct mistrust in ideological state apparatus (ISAs) saturates Bone's family, and the buildings that represent authority often become grotesque and gothicized. The novel begins with Bone's birth in the hospital after her mother, Anney Boatwright, is thrown out of a truck during an accident. Bone's grandmother and Aunt Ruth try to fill out the form for the birth certificate but cannot corroborate their story on who the father is, so Bone is officially "certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (3). Allison signals an immediate mistrust of both the government and hospitals since Anney blames the state laws for ostracizing Bone. Anney views the label 'bastard' as also calling her trash, and "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). The courthouse becomes a gothic space after this, with the clerks as the bearers of her misfortune. Allison focuses on the emotions in the clerks' eyes, describing how "their eyes [are] bright with an entirely different emotion" (4) and how the male clerk's "eyes laughed at them" (5) and giving them a look of "pure righteous justification" (5). The focus on the eyes highlights how looked down upon the Boatwrights are by society and specifically the government. When the courthouse burns down at the end of the first chapter, Anney immediately burns the old birth certificates and rejoices in the small victory against the county government. For all of Bone's life, Anney fantasizes about taking back her power and control over the courthouse and when she finally does, the entire Boatwright family rejoices and "it was almost as if everyone could hear each other, all over Greenville, laughing as the courthouse burned to the

ground” (16). The support Anney receives from her family, even when no one is physically with her, allows her to feel triumphant for once against the authorial figures that laugh at her each time she asks for a new birth certificate.

Bone enters the hospital only three more times before the end of the novel, each time eliciting fear from Bone because of the authorial figures’ interactions with her, causing her to shut down emotionally until she leaves the space. The first time is the night Anney goes into labor with her third child. Even though Bone does not go into the hospital at all, it is in the parking lot of the building that Daddy Glen molests her for the first time. The focus of the scene is on his hands, which are grotesquely large compared to his smaller body. Daddy Glen’s hands become a source of hatred and fear for Bone as “his hand dug in further” (47). Bone cannot fight him and suffers in silence, waiting for him to take his hands off her. After he is done molesting her, Bone notices that “his eyes had gone dark and empty again, and my insides started to shake with fear” (47). Again, Allison focuses on the authorial figure’s eyes and what they reveal about the situation. Daddy Glen’s eyes hold no remorse or regret for what he does to Bone; instead, they reflect his pedophilic nature that he hides from everyone but Bone. Moreover, parallel to Bone’s molestation in the hospital’s parking lot, Anney loses her baby inside the actual building. Thus, death and rape now mark Bone’s memory of the hospital.

The second time Bone goes back, the hospital becomes associated with the abuse she conceals from the authorial figures that can help her. Anney takes Bone to the hospital after Daddy Glen breaks Bone’s tailbone. Anney faces a doctor’s accusation of abuse and Bone must make the decision between protecting her mother and exposing Daddy Glen’s abuse. The abrasive doctor questions Anney harshly, accuses her of “throwing [Bone] up against the wall” (113), and tries to force Bone to answer his questions. Bone finds no comfort in the doctor’s

inquiry, as “he looked angry, and impatient, and disgusted” (114), and can only repeat to her mother, “Mama, take me home” (115). Bone also focuses on the doctor’s hands and how he controls them. He parallels Daddy Glen in his anger when the doctor “slammed the door open with his fists” (114) and “gave my chin a little shake” (114). She does not trust him physically or mentally because of this. Yet just as the doctor repels Bone, Mrs. Myer, a nurse, does seem to comfort Bone and her mother and tries to mediate between Anney and the doctor. Bone notes that her eyes are “old and wise” (114) and seem to be assessing the situation. Mrs. Myer apologizes on behalf of the doctor and brings them the forms to leave the hospital, effectively saving them from the doctor’s inquiry. Even though the doctor’s questioning might lead to punishment for Daddy Glen if Bone speaks, she cannot vocally admit what he does to her. This is both out of fear of potentially being taken away from her mother and sister and because the doctor’s questions make her feel shameful, just as the clerk makes Anney feel shameful in the courthouse. In that moment when the doctor holds her chin, Bone and Anney must face what Daddy Glen has done, and Anney must make a choice whether to protect her daughter or stay with her husband.

The hospital serves as a traumatic gothic space a third time when Daddy Glen rapes Bone. This time Daddy Glen savagely beats her, leaving Bone with broken bones, cuts, scrapes, and bruises all over her body in addition to the rape. The hospital becomes a place of abandonment, as Anney drops Bone off but does not return. Throughout the entire scene, she constantly waits for her mother to walk in and asks anyone around her whether Anney has visited. When Raylene arrives at the hospital, Bone “turned eagerly, but the struggling angry figure there wasn’t Mama” (297). Bone cannot conceal her disappointment and remains silent for the rest of the chapter. She cannot accept that Anney goes back to Daddy Glen after he rapes

her. She does not trust anybody in the hospital because of the confusion and betrayal surrounding her mother's abandonment. While unable to leave the hospital bed, a deputy keeps watch outside of her room. He constantly stares at Bone, making her "feel more and more like a child, a girl, hurt and alone" (295). While defenseless and incapacitated in her bed, Bone has no way to defend herself and feels vulnerable when faced with an officer of the legal system that, as Uncle Lyle says, "never done us no good. Might as well get on without it" (5). Bone has no reason to trust that this deputy or Sheriff Cole will do anything to help her. Even though the Sheriff makes Bone "wish I could talk, tell him what had happened" (296), she cannot bring herself to orally admit to Daddy Glen's rape. He repeatedly demands for Bone to talk to him, his voice "calm careful, friendly" (296), yet this reminds her of Daddy Glen and the false exterior he portrays to people to hide his anger and twisted thoughts. Bone does not trust any authorial figure anymore; to her "he was Daddy Gen in a uniform. The world was full of Daddy Glens, and I didn't want to be in the world anymore" (296). Every look he gives Bone makes her feel devalued and reminds her that the law does not actually want to help her with justice. In the end, Aunt Raylene comes to Bone's rescue, pushing the nurses and the Sheriff out of the room, much like Mrs. Meyers steps in between Anney and the doctor earlier. In Raylene's embrace is the first place she has felt safe since entering the hospital and becomes a respite from the gothic interior that Bone is in. Bone repeatedly thinks "Don't let me go... just please, don't let me go" (298), because outside of Raylene's arms, Bone must face her surroundings and the hospital she cannot leave.

While the hospital is a space of neglect and abandonment, churches and revival tents are both places of escape for Bone and also gothic spaces of abandonment and judgment. When Bone first finds religion, she connects strongly with the gospel music she hears at night coming from the revival tent near Aunt Ruth's house. For Bone, gospel "make[s] you hate and love

yourself at the same time make you ashamed and glorified” (136). The gospel music not only reminds her of her home life and the shame she feels when around her mother and Daddy Glen but also seems to promise her redemption from the life she is born into. Bone holds close to this promise even when the Church does not always align with what the gospel makes her feel. In the article “Religion as the Grotesque in Flannery O’Connor and Dorothy Allison” by Margaret Cipriano, she identifies the “unfulfilling religiosity situated in the working poor” (107) which is reflected in the void Bone feels after each time she is baptized. She wants to feel necessary and a part of something, yet every time she is ostensibly saved and baptized all fourteen times, the same feelings of “shame and nervous terror” (*Bastard*, 152) flood back into her. The illusion of community and attention washes away each time, and “the smell of watery ammonia would blot out the orange blossoms” (152). Bone runs out of the churches, angry that she does not feel saved. She remembers that her Uncle Earle tells her that religion does not care about you once you are a part of its congregation. Yet the next week she continues to go to a new church, hoping that this time is different and the magic of Jesus will continue after the baptism. In the end the gothic reality is that she does not belong to any congregation and that she does not feel “whatever magic Jesus’ grace promised” (152). Instead she recedes into the Bible, specifically the Book of Revelation, in which the “promised rivers of blood and fire... [strikes her] like gospel music, it promised vindication” (152). The Bible is separate from the Church and is something Bone can interpret on her own and finds comfort in outside of the gothic space of the church.

For Bone suburban houses and neighborhoods are gothic, as every house she lives in with Daddy Glen is an unsafe place of frequent danger and punishment. In Peggy Dunn Bailey’s article “Female Gothic fiction, grotesque realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison

revises the Southern Gothic,” Dunn explores how “Bone's identity and (from her perspective at least) her destiny are forged by blood and history, but they are also formed by place, by "home" in a larger sense,” meaning that her home life with Daddy Glen directly correlates to how Bone feels about herself. She can never relax in their houses for fear that Glen will beat her or molest her. The houses that Daddy Glen picks for the family and the frequent moving from house to house is a reminder of their family's financial state. All of the houses Daddy Glenn picks for Anney and the children are run down or cheaply made, “small and close and damp smelling no matter how many times Mama aired [them] out” (79), meant to imitate the richer neighborhoods that his family have all grown up in and live in now. His brothers “lived in big houses they owned, with fenced-in yards and flowering bushes” (80) and he believes that “this is how people ought to live” (80-81). None feel like actual homes for Bone, especially since most of the time they cannot even unpack all the boxes before having to move out again. The neighborhoods they move into are also isolated and “well away from the rest of the family” (51). Daddy Glen hates when Bone runs around or makes a fuss at his house and he frequently punishes her for actions that are common at Aunt Ruth's or Aunt Alma's house and “didn't like us listening to all those stories Granny and Aunt Alma were always telling over and over” (52). He also condescends the houses her aunts choose to live in, calling their houses “shant[ies]” (82) and insisting that “he wouldn't put [his family] in such a house” (82). Instead he moves them into a cinder-block house that was falling apart but was at least in “a decent neighborhood” (83). Appearance is all that matters to Daddy Glen, even if the interior does not match what he presents to the people around him. Moreover, no one seems to visit the houses they move to. If Bone's nuclear family wants to see Daddy Glen's side of the family, they always travel to his brother's house or his parents' house. At the same time, Anney drops Bone off at her Aunt's house if she needs to be looked

after. All of this adds to these suburban neighborhoods becoming isolating and anxiety ridden for Bone, who never feels relaxed or safe compared to her aunt's homes.

While Aunt Alma's and Aunt Ruth's house are places of respite and safety for Bone throughout the majority of the novel, tragedy violates these spaces and ruins their safety for Bone. Even though the rest of Bone's family is in a similar position as Daddy Glen - dirt poor and the "aunts were always moving too" (79) - the houses they choose always feel like home for Bone. At her aunts' houses "there were always kids on the porch, cousins going in and out of screen doors... there was always something to do" (80). These houses are consistently filled with family and for Bone, "it [is] alive over at the aunts' houses, warm, always humming with voices and laughter, and children" (80). The safety of Bone's Aunts' homes fractures though after Daddy Glen rapes her in Aunt Alma's kitchen, destroying the safe zone that Bone has negotiated for herself. Throughout the novel, Bone has been able to retreat to her aunts' houses when she could no longer live with Daddy Glen. According to Patricia Yaeger in her book *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, The kitchen is a "tame domestic space" (152) associated with women and a place void of men. Bone repeatedly helps her aunts in the kitchen, "pick[ing] over these beans and wash[ing] those tomatoes" (80) and generally learning familial stories and histories while in the confines of the kitchen. It is here that Daddy Glen attack and rapes her. On the kitchen floor is where his "hands spread what was left of my blouse and ripped at the zipper on my pants, pulling them down my thighs" (284) and his eyes remind her "of Alma with the razor in her hand and madness in her eyes. Daddy Glen's eyes were just as crazy, more crazy" (283). He no longer hides his intentions behind the thin excuses of punishing her bad behavior; he calls Bone a "goddam little bastard" (284) and confesses that "I've prayed for you to die... just die and leave us alone" (284). Her rape effectively shatters the safety Bone

feels in her aunts' homes. Aunt Alma's thus becomes a gothic space of physical abuse that is compounded as a horrific space where her mother chooses Daddy Glen over Bone. Even after seeing her daughter raped by her own husband, Anney cannot leave him, instead "holding him, his head pressed to her belly" (291) before taking Bone to the hospital. Anney cannot escape the mentality that she cannot survive without a man to protect and provide for her and she decided that the only way to remove Bone from the gothic spaces inhabited by Daddy Glen is to leave Bone with her Aunt Raylene while Anney stays with her husband. Aunt Raylene's house is the only house that is not tainted by Daddy Glen, yet her house is also the place that Anney leaves Bone for the last time, "back[ing] away quickly" (308) and "start[ing] the Pontiac in the darkness" (308). While she leaves Bone with the "blank, unmarked, unstamped" (309) birth certificate, Anney finalizes "who [Bone] was going to be, someone like [Raylene], like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309). Raylene's house now marks Bone transition into the seemingly inescapable pattern of Boatwright women who "seemed old, worn-down" (23) because they grow up too quickly.

While *Bastard out of Carolina* primarily transitions ordinary or safe spaces into gothic places, *Cavedweller* treats the gothic differently. In this novel, a mother, Delia, abandons her two eldest daughters, Amanda and Dede, as babies because her husband Clint was abusive. She returns from the west coast a decade later with a new child, Cece to try and make amends with her daughters and battles with her guilt and shame. Delia's hometown of Cayro, Georgia is gothic for Delia and her three daughters, and is saturated with the memories of abuse for Delia and is a constant reminder that she left her daughters in the hands of an abusive husband and his strict, religious mother, Grandma Windsor. At the start of *Cavedweller* places such as churches, caves, trackhouses, and storefronts within Cayro are gothicized, each one echoing the shame

back to Delia and the rage back to her daughters, who resent her for both leaving and coming back. These gothic spaces also reflect the economic status of Delia, who returns to Cayro with only a few hundred dollars to her name. As the novel progresses though, Delia and her daughters begin to reconcile with the past, the spaces redeem themselves as the women learn to trust each other, and Delia also becomes financially stable, even profitable. By the end of the novel, The gothic spaces that Delia once feared to even look at, are now places of family, safety, and community.

Similar to *Bastard out of Carolina*, churches and religion are also a central focus in *Cavedweller*, in which Delia initially views churches as gothic spaces that house judgment and ridicule. For Delia, her mother-in-law's church, Holiness Redeemer, is a place of contempt. Grandma Windsor dislikes Delia for dating her son Clint, and resents her even more when she abandons him and their daughters. Holiness Redeemer is Grandma Windsor's territory; that is the congregation she grows up in and raises her son and granddaughters in, and also gains support in her judgment of her daughter-in-law. Delia fears going inside and being judged by the congregation. They remind Delia of her guilt and shame and "these strangers look[ing] at her with such loathing" (78). The eyes again become Allison's focus, as she describes the congregation's ridicule. Even the children who do not even know who Delia is keep shifting "their big, curious eyes" (77) towards her as she listens to the service. People who did not even know her, only the gossip surrounding Delia's return to Cayro, judge her. Delia initially goes to Holiness Redeemer to see her daughters to "put her hand out and touch them, lift her eyes and see their faces when they [realize] who she was" (77), yet could not face them because of her shame that surrounds her the entire service. At the same time that the Holiness Redeemer congregation "look[s] at her with such loathing" (78), similar to how the clerk looks at Anney in

Bastard out of Carolina. This forces Delia to leave half way through the service because she cannot deal with the shame and judgment. At the same time that the congregation of Holiness Redeemer ridicules Delia, Cayro Baptist Tabernacle church becomes a place of opportunity and hope. Delia's old employer, Mrs. Pearlman, inquires after Delia hoping to give her a business opportunity that can benefit both Delia's need for money and also help her standing within the community. Mrs. Pearlman's arthritis is too severe and can no longer run her hair salon, the Bonnet, by herself and wants Delia to run the salon. While there is opposition at first from women such as Nadine Reitower, who warns Mrs. Pearlman that "you don't want to take that hussy into your business" (78), Marcia (M.T.), Delia's oldest friend, defends the hair dresser's decision. She berates the church womens' judgment, telling them that "there's no scandal in repentance, no scandal in working hard and paying your bills" (79). She challenges them with their own religion, calling them out as religious hypocrites if they continue to punish Delia. The kindness of M.T. and Mrs. Pearlman transforms churches for Delia, who finds business and opportunity from the friends she can make through the church. Thus, Delia associates Cayro Baptist Tabernacle with her future financial success.

While Delia cannot stand the judgment of the Holiness Redeemer church and sees it as a source of grief and guilt, Amanda finds comfort in the church and safety from the sinful lives of her family. She does not view churches as gothic spaces to fear and hate; instead she welcomes the judgment of others and especially of God, presuming her own righteousness. It is in the church that she meets her husband, Michael, who eventually becomes a pastor himself. She engrains her life in the church and strives to be as holy as possible, if only to prove to her family that they are wrong to dismiss religion. For Amanda, her faith in God controls most of her life and she believes that God is going to kill her to set an example to her family of how holy she is.

She battles through pain every day, praying for Jesus to “take her up like the sword she was” (333). Eventually, she passes out from the pain and thinks herself dead and is “most heartily glad” (336). In reality, Amanda had large gallstones and is not dying. When she wakes up from surgery and realizes that she is not a martyr, Amanda’s faith is shaken. For her, the hospital takes away a bit of her faith. It could be argued though that her extreme faith is gothic, as it leads her to the hospital and surgery from undiagnosed gallstones, but she redeems herself by moving away from the church after the surgery. When she goes back home, she begins to drink and ignore her sons, and opens herself up to the sin she had sworn off for the entirety of the novel before the hospital. Amanda’s transformation is not negative, but instead makes her more realistic and human, dulling the gothic comedy of her righteous behavior seen throughout the entirety of the novel. With her faith shaken, Amanda explores aspects of life she had always denied herself, going “to the mall... peewee golf, and the videogames center” (373) in fear of God’s wrath and her sisters’ judgment. The hospital, which begins as a gothic space, serves as a catalyst for Amanda’s religious transformation and ultimately changes her for the better.

Similar to the hospital, the jailhouse begins as a place of rejection and hatred for middle daughter Dede, but later is a space that allows Dede to finally form a connection with her mother. After highschool, she struggles to find her place or career in Cayro, and cannot find a job that suits her. Dede wants to apply for deputy sheriff but is immediately turned away by Emmet Tyler, who tells her that she “an’t got the right attitude” (263) for police work. Emmet reminds her of her petty crimes and her place in Cayro as beneath the law. Her mother, Delia, also struggles with Emmet’s authority, refusing to date him after he arrested Dede twice. Dede tells her friend M.T. that she “can’t date a man put handcuffs on my child” (264). This becomes prevalent later in the novel after Dede shoots her boyfriend Nolan and ends up behind bars. Even

though Dede knows this is the consequences of her actions, Delia cannot stand the sight of her daughter in jail. When Emmet brings Dede to an office to see Delia, “it barely mattered that her hands were free, that the office had typewriters and chairs instead of bars and a guard” (385). The office becomes a pseudo-prison, and Dede becomes anxious seeing her daughter in such a place. Even for Dede, who is not cuffed anymore at this point, “her hands clenched together as if she were still wearing the cuffs” (385). She cannot escape the memory of being arrested and her body reacts to the memory. Yet, as the mother and daughter begin to talk about the circumstances leading up to Dede shooting Nolan, both open up about their experiences with love and Delia comforts her daughter. Dede leans into her mother’s words, and “what she heard was the reassuring voice, what she felt was the cool balm of mama love... for the first time in weeks, Dede let go of her fear” (387). As the pair continues to talk, Delia opens up for the first time about her relationship with Clint and “how much we loved each other... how it was for a while, loving him and trusting him” (389) and her decision to abandon her two daughters. Both connect over their trust issues. Delia’s stemming from abuse, and Dede’s stemming from her mother. This conversation enables Dede to admit to Nolan that she is pregnant, still loves him, and will “try to forgive [herself] (431) for pushing him away. The jailhouse transforms from a gothic space of restriction to a place of confession and forgiveness.

Unlike the aunts’ houses in *Bastard out of Carolina*, Clint’s house begins as a gothic site, filled with bad memories and anxiety, but is redeemed by the end of the novel for Delia as she remakes the house to suit herself. The yellow tract house is where Clint beats and abuses Delia and where she abandons her daughters before the novel starts. When Delia looks at the house for the first time in a decade since leaving, she only feels shame for what she has done and tries “to keep the shame out of her voice” (111) when talking to Cece about the house. The house itself is

a very typical gothic structure: “run-down now, yellow paint flaking off the plank walls, the yard scraggly and bare in patches” (109) and haunted by awful memories and people since Cline still lives there. While Clint still resides in the house, the odor of his incoming death fills every crevice, a “sour smell of sweat and sickness in the floor itself” (152). No matter how many times Delia washes the walls and cleans his sheets, death permeates the house. Having to live in the same house as the man who abuses her is excruciating, especially as he continues to live and grow a relationship with her daughter, Cissy, who believes that “every time [she] stepped into that room, his eyes ate her up, not hatefully but with something like love - something like Jesus’ lover earned through suffering and long patience” (117). After Clint’s death though, Delia can ultimately change the image of the yellow tract house and transform the house into her own place again. Without his looming presence, Delia turns the house into a legitimate home for her and her three daughters. Free from her abuser, she fixes up the structure and the furniture, adding “spool tables behind the house under the strings of colored lights” (433) and allowing her daughters to decorate their rooms. By the end of the novel, Delia still lives in the house and has a full garden surrounding the entire area, effectively symbolizing how she has grown beyond Clint’s abuse and has become a new person. The tract house no longer carries fear and shame for Delia, who seems to have overcome her earlier guilt and has accepted the past. The novel ends with Delia’s grandsons playing at her house and running “to Delia and reach[ing] up to her extended arms” (434). The house becomes completely her own and reflects her familial stability and her financial stability as she owns the house once Clint dies.

Overall, Allison's construction of gothic spaces is a contemporary vision and focuses more on class and familial drama and challenges the stereotypes associated with the gothic. She focuses on what is personal for herself and her characters and asserts that anything and anywhere

can be a gothic space, especially for the poor, working class. Bone has no stability in her home life; any place becomes a threat to her safety since her mother cannot protect her. Anney's reliance on Daddy Glen for financial support ultimately separates her from Bone, leaving her daughter to grow up viewing every space she enters as potentially gothic and dangerous, by the end of the novel. Conversely, Delia begins the novel saturated with fear every time she enters a building in Cayro. She enters the town dirt poor and filled with guilt over her past, but as her financial situation improves and so does her relationships with her daughter, Cayro redeems itself as a town for Delia. Cayro becomes her home again and she feels safe and a part of the community as the novel closes. While Allison's portrayal of gothic poverty is vastly different in *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Cavedweller*, her commentary on class and the danger of ordinary spaces remains stable throughout both novels and speaks to her contemporary understanding of southern gothic in relation to class differences.

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