Apocalypse South
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IN A 1993 conversation published in the Village Voice Literary Supplement, Randall Kenan and Dorothy Allison held forth on a wide-range of topics, including snakes, their shared Carolina backgrounds, and ultimately, the political imperatives of their work. “What can you write about more urgently than some 70-year-old woman depending on her social security check?” asks Kenan, who rejects the attempt to locate this hypothetical woman “on the so-called margins” (27). Such people don’t exist on “the fringe of society,” in Kenan’s estimate; rather, “They are society.” Allison agrees: “People think that society is, like, Kathie Lee Gifford. No, she’s one of the ghosts on the edge of society. My sisters are society.”

Allison and Kenan, products and chroniclers of the South’s marginal spaces, have produced some of the most compelling writing about the region in the last generation. Along the margins, regional literature is not genre defined by old conventions and tropes, which are left only to be parodied; the decline of an idealized old South is not mourned, but celebrated.
From the vantage point of the margins, regional identity and history are the social forces to which—and against which—these writers respond. In this conversation, Kenan and Allison—a gay black man and white trash lesbian from the Carolinas—remind us that the aim of their work is not a feel-good multiculturalism in which diverse self-identified communities exist alongside one another in plural, utopian bliss. Rather, Allison and Kenan seek to recover the historical meaning that is silenced by the efforts to regulate the configurations of sex, race, and class. Both demand that in mapping social spaces—including the southern places in which their fiction is located—attention be paid to those people who have been exiled to the discursive margins and whose experiences have been concealed by the various surrogate realities of place.

Allison’s writerly concern with narration and revision is difficult to ignore. In her performative memoir *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, she writes, “Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. . . . Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear” (39). Indeed, much criticism and scholarship of *Bastard Out of Carolina* has focused on storytelling, whether through formal approaches to revision and narrativity or approaches that examine the book through the lens offered by trauma theory. However, no treatment has heretofore acknowledged or explored the role evangelical and apocalyptic discourse plays in the narrator’s efforts to understand and articulate her experiences—stories that defy the conventional southern discourses of place, class, and gender. Much like Richard Wright, Allison appropriates and reconfigures the apocalyptic narratives and images of southern religious culture in order to offer a historical vision in which her characters suffering is not silenced, but instead, given meaning by an ultimate victory. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the apocalyptic imaginary is central to Allison’s efforts to make us hear her story—almost from the very beginning.

While the bulk of the novel presents Bone’s increasing alienation from family and self, her individual voice is almost indistinct from the collective narration of familial history in the lyrical first chapter. Here, Bone introduces her family and herself through the recollection of stories so often repeated among her family that authorial attribution is impossible; the stories are never static and never remain long in the past but rather are conjured up, constantly revised and retold, to fit the needs of the family at a given moment. Among the family stories told in this opening chapter, the recollection of a catastrophic fire at the Greenville County Courthouse stands out—not because of the damage wrought by the flames, but because of the joy the family finds in its destruction. A specific psychic
need instigates the Boatwrights’ laughing recollection of the fire and leads someone, perhaps Bone, to ascribe to the fire the qualities of wish fulfillment. Presaging the painful visions of retribution that will haunt Bone, the collective voice remembers Anney’s apocalyptic fantasy: “An’t it time the Lord did something, rained fire and retribution on Greenville County? An’t there sin enough, grief enough, inch by inch of pain enough? An’t the measure made yet? Anney never said what she was thinking, but her mind was working all the time” (14). As the county’s central public space, the courthouse holds the documentary evidence of Greenville’s communal history—a history that categorizes Bone as a bastard and the Boatwright men as petty criminals. Moreover, it functions as the symbolic consolidation of collective identity, as it is the central structure in which many of the county’s most significant events would have occurred. The Boatwrights’ access to this history, however, is restricted: they can neither edit nor add to the documents of history (including Bone’s birth certificate) or the discourses of law and class that enact the script of abjection.

In the historical narrative offered from the marginal spaces in which the Boatwrights live, the destruction of the courthouse is a liberating event, not a moment of destruction. For the Boatwrights, this story provides an opportunity to revise their own history, to cast their experience into a narrative in which they are not damned but, in fact, will ultimately be vindicated. Like so many of the apocalyptic narratives introduced in *Apocalypse South*, this story provides order and meaning to pain, suffering, and trauma that would otherwise seem chaotic or incoherent.

Heretofore, I have proposed that the southern apocalyptic imaginary has been harnessed to often contradictory ends: just as it is used to regulate moments of undifferentiation and hybridity that contradict the dominant discourses of race and power in southern places and spaces, its historical vision nonetheless offers hope to oppressed communities when it is most needed. In both of these applications, Apocalypse signals the presence of concealed or displaced meaning—or the sort of stories Allison wishes she could tell directly. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*—as in Kenan’s Tims Creek narratives—Apocalypse signals the presence of a voice that has been silenced or a history that has been expunged, and, thus, a site to be excavated. Allison’s Bone endures experiences so ultimately horrifying and so contradictory to dominant systems of representation that they do not yield to easy articulation. These experiences—rape and incest and abuse—threaten the coherence of southern places and spaces, unsettling the discursive boundaries that are used to define fundamental entities like family and community, as well as the stable limits of the self. In order to
articulate her stories from the margins, Allison’s Bone turns inevitably to Apocalypse and to the cleansing and purging fires of Revelation, which she hopes will bring an end to an experience so awful that no narrative available offers the space adequate to contain it.

While the novel does not engage eschatological concerns with the consistency of the major works that I have examined thus far, Bone’s narrative is framed by Apocalyptic visions on either end: the vision of the flaming courthouse that begins it and a fiery, cataclysmic voice of condemnation and justice that concludes it. This chapter will interrogate the ways in which this frame and other manifestations of the apocalyptic imaginary map the apocalyptic possibilities of cataclysm and judgment onto southern spaces and places in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The chapter will begin by exploring the restrictions and limitations placed on her and her family by the gendered, classist discourses of southern spaces and places, and then it will address the Boatwrights’ various attempts to stake their own claim to those spaces by revising and retelling their own histories. The failure of these attempts leads Bone toward the apocalyptic imaginary: much as it does for Wright’s Aunt Sue and for Kenan’s Horace, the apocalyptic imaginary provides an alternative discursive space, open to possibilities beyond those offered by the dominant spatial and platial discourses. In the final section of this chapter, I will examine how Bone’s engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary allows her to provide narrative coherence to her story—and thus, herself—and how Allison’s engagement, more broadly, stakes its own claim to the landscape of the South and refuses to be located along its aberrant margins.

**The Limits and Restraints of Southern Spaces**

Before her audience can even approach the text of the novel, Allison demands they confront the limits of their own definitions of southern identities and southern places. The title, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, both locks her story into a place—Carolina, or more specifically, Greenville, South Carolina—and lays an affirmative claim to an identity, Bastard, that has been declared aberrant and pushed to the margins of that place. This initial invocation of place is indicative of the juxtapositions and contradictions that characterize the subsequent attempts of her narrator, Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright, to locate her traumatic past within the physical terrain that is coterminous with the social spaces that would restrict her story. As the second chapter opens, Allison’s narrator, the adult Bone, conjures up
her childhood by invoking the idealized, even Edenic southern space of her aunts’ homes: “Greenville, South Carolina, in 1955 was the most beautiful place in the world,” she says.

Black walnut trees dropped their green-black fuzzy bulbs on Aunt Ruth’s matted lawn, past where their knotty roots rose up out of the ground like the elbows and knees of dirty children suntanned dark and covered with scars. . . . Over at the house Aunt Raylene rented near the river, all the trees had been cut back and the scuppernong vines torn out. The clover grew in long sweeps of tiny white and yellow flowers that hid slender red-and-black striped caterpillars and fat gray-black slugs—the ones Uncle Earle swore would draw fish to a hook even in a thunderstorm. (17)

To access the memories of her family, Bone imaginatively reconstructs the places in which they existed—the physical geography upon which her cousins played and in which her uncle Earle collected grubs for bait. Both cognitive psychologists and literary scholars have long noted the spatial elements of memory: J. Gerald Kennedy writes that as “we reconstruct the past largely through the imagery of place . . . memory is less the retrieval of bygone time than a recovery of symbolic space” (500). This insight is complicated by Bone’s inability or unwillingness to linger upon the idyllic landscape of her childhood. Moving from Ruth’s and Raylene’s homes, Bone recalls her Aunt Alma’s yard, which had been rendered a “smoldering expanse of baked dirt and scattered rocks” by the spendthrift landlord who “had locked down the spigots so that the kids wouldn’t cost him a fortune in water bills” (17–18). Even in the imaginative landscape of memory, the places that give shape and context to her past can offer only limited space for her to articulate an empowered self; the textures of place are configured by the social and economic forces that shame Bone and ascribe the status of “poor white trash” to her family.

“I was born trash in a land where the people all believe themselves natural aristocrats,” Allison writes in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. “Ask any white Southerner. They’ll take you back two generations, say, ‘Yeah, we had a plantation.’ The hell we did” (32). Allison is less interested in why or how these hypothetical white southerners can make such claims of lapsed aristocratic origins than in the ways in which these claims are used to marginalize her. “I have no memories that can be bent so easily. I know where I come from, and it is not that part of the world.” Here, almost as if by force, Allison counters the production of social space that,
configured in terms of inclusion and exclusion, would alienate and even exile her from place. Refusing to yield to the imposition of placelessness, she locates her experience on the very southern geographies that reject her presence. Just as she demands that her audience acknowledge her claim to a southern past, so too does Bastard insist that we consider Bone’s story in its place, that is, in the rural edges and seedy apartments of Greenville in the ’50s. However, these places refuse to yield the space necessary to tell her story. It is a story that insists the listener confront the Boatwrights as more than legendary, hell-raising, hard-drinking men; more than women who endure until their bodies are broken; and more human—fraught with neither the degeneracy nor the sentimental nobility that representations of poverty often include.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned Scott Romine’s suggestion that much southern writing displays a peculiar eschatological anxiety—a constant worry that “the South is always expiring” (26). The geography of Greenville County is not that which these earlier generations of southern writers mourned, and, indeed, Allison’s novel betrays little interest in that brand of southern apocalypticism (or even the elegies offered by Kenan in A Visitation of Spirits). Indeed, her “sense of place” is quite different from her predecessors, as Minrose Gwin has compellingly argued. Gwin situates Bone’s narrative within the “convergences of material, textual, and cultural spaces” (416)—in particular, the material and cultural space in which a southern patriarchal power is enacted, home. Because the space of the home is the crucial site through which the formative memories of childhood are accessed, Gwin contends, the oppression and abuses suffered by women in that space are all the more troubling and oppressive for the female subject. For Gwin, region, like home, is a product of both material space (i.e., the physical geography) and cultural space (416)—that is, it exists in the ideologies and practices layered onto the southern landscape.1

In Gwin’s reading, Bastard exposes the oppressive consequences of southern cultural practices: inextricably connected to and determined by an ideology of absolute patriarchal rule, these practices restrict and regulate the movement of women within the social spaces of the region.

Geographers often distinguish space and place by degree of specificity; Wesley A. Kort “defines place in contrast to space as particular in contrast

1. Interestingly, Gwin employs the term “region” rather than “place.” I infer that this is an implicit recognition—and rejection—of the formulation of place as resistant to progressive political movement and to the generally “positive orientation” of the “sense of place” within the more traditional, conservative discourses of southern literature and southern literary studies (Romine 24).
to general” (14). In this formulation, non-specific concepts like home and hometown are spatial discourses that configure cultural practices and social interactions within particular and locatable places, such as Alma’s house or Greenville. These places, writes the geographer Linda McDowell, offer particular “living histories of past and current social relationships” (4). Thus, an invocation of a specific place does not simply reference a set of coordinates. Instead, it draws upon both a spatial discourse that inform and regulate social interactions at a category of location to which the site belongs (for instance, hometown) and the specific experiences that occurred in that location (that is to say, in Greenville). These experiences may either support the dominant spatial discourse, or they may challenge or disrupt its continued production. Allison’s claim to “know where I come from” denies the spatial discourse of the plantation as an adequate signifier of her southern experience and disrupts any effort to locate that particular experience as a geographic or cultural aberration. The subsequent exclamation, “The hell we did,” rejects the plantation myth as an accurate signifier of any southern place. Ultimately, this statement boldly clears out a space for Allison within the geography of the South: her experiences happened there, and she demands that they be included.

Another example from Two or Three Things offers some insight into the formulation of place, space, and margins. Midway through her fourth grade year (probably 1957 or 1958), a new teacher, “right out of college and full of ideas” (7), was assigned to Allison’s class. Her first attempt to encourage creative and critical thinking among her charges—a current events project—draws complaints: “the nightly news,” Allison tells us, “was full of Birmingham and Little Rock, burning buses and freedom marchers.” These images are probably too complex for eight- and nine-year-olds to grasp, but, more immediately, they are issues that their parents undoubtedly wished to avoid or ignore. In search of a safe solution, the idealistic teacher requires the students to create family trees and recommends that they look to family Bibles as sources. Allison describes her mother’s reaction to the assignment as a look of “exasperation,” as if she “was ready to throw something.” Her Aunt Dot, on the other hand, responds with amused sarcasm: “I can just see all those children putting down Mama’s name, and first daddy’s name and second daddy’s name. Could get complicated” (10). Allison’s aunt and mother work to reconstruct the family’s past from their incomplete and often contradictory memories. Nonplussed, Dot finally asks her sister, “What you think? Should we get a family Bible?” (11).

In Dot’s assessment—“This girl an’t from around here”—here does not refer to the South or even to Greenville County, but rather to the diffuse
community of farmers, mill workers, truck drivers, and diner waitresses on the margins of Greenville County whose children this elementary school serves. Allison’s mother reacts with exasperation because the assignment requires her daughter to bend their family history to the bourgeois narrative forms of the family tree and the family Bible. In many ways, the well-meaning teacher’s mistake is understandable; after all, as I have noted, southern religious culture is nothing if not Bible-centered. Thus, its use as the central document of family life—as a text that situates the individual within the earthly history of family and within the otherworldly narrative of sacred history—is appropriate to place, if we understand it as nearly synonymous with region. The problem posed by the assignment: their family history doesn’t fit into the blank space the Bible provides. Their genealogy does not match the form in its first pages and can be forced into that space only by simplifying certain elements and forgetting or denying others.

Similarly, the fictional Anney Boatwright’s engagement with the public spaces of Greenville County in the first chapter is indicative of the limited discursive, physical, and class mobility available on the margins of the community. In the county hospital, Bone is declared a “bastard” upon her birth, as her Aunt Ruth and her grandmother cannot agree on the identity of her father. From there, the forms are transmitted onto another public space, the courthouse, where the frustrated clerk rejects the pleas of the Boatwright women and “certifie[s]” Bone’s illegitimacy. Again and again, Anney seeks to have a certificate issued without the red “illegitimate” stamp, attempting to “deny what Greenville County wanted to name her,” but each time her request is rejected with moral condescension. “The facts have been established,” the clerk informs her (Bastard 4). Bone’s Uncle Earle counsels Anney to abandon her efforts: “The law never done us no good,” he tells her (5). Earle’s statement is not inaccurate, for neither the institutions nor the discourses of justice are accessible to the Boatwrights. Likewise, they are denied access to the physical places that characterize the collective experience of southern communities—the plantations, the town squares, or the courthouses. Even the access to their own homes is restricted, as Alma’s scorched yard attests. In these southern spaces, they are located as “aberrant,” placed on the margins of what the community considers acceptable, and denied the right to speak through that discourse. In the narrative of the community, the Boatwrights are white trash.

Bone’s mother Anney struggles with the Sisyphean task of pushing away the appellation and the associations it calls to mind: “No-good, lazy, shiftless. She’d work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile—anything to deny what Greenville
County wanted to name her,” Bone recalls (3–4). “Trash” elicits these moral qualities for Anney, but it is inescapably bound up with waste—material byproducts that are first contained for the health and purity of the community and then removed and confined to its outer edges. The Boatwrights are, in Patricia Yaeger’s terms, “throwaway bodies”\(^2\): the necessity of their presence is recognized, but the family cannot be considered an integral part of the community. Thus, their interaction with the larger community must be regulated. Only by keeping the Boatwrights at a safe physical and discursive distance can the rising middle class of 1950s Greenville County narrate its own triumph, or even delineate its difference from any other group.

The Boatwrights’ Attempts at Narrative Resistance

The script I have outlined above should be familiar: it is the same process of collective, narrative self-creation that occurs in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha and in Kenan’s Tims Creek. The limited social space through which the Boatwrights can move may offer more freedom that the horrifying racialized regulation of space in Wright’s Mississippi, but it is nonetheless similarly circumscribed. Like Wright’s work, and unlike Faulkner’s and Kenan’s, \textit{Bastard Out of Carolina}, does not offer the perspective of those who seek to confirm their own position at the center. Instead, the novel focuses wholly on the perspective of the marginalized, and neither the fictional Boatwrights nor the Gibsons in \textit{Two or Three Things} easily yield to their systematic abjection. In Allison’s memoir, Dot’s dismissive response to the genealogical assignment implies that, in the geographic and discursive margins of Greenville, people found alternative narrative spaces to articulate their family histories. From these marginal spaces, both Allison’s family and their fictional counterparts narrate stories (like the burning of the courthouse), telling and retelling them in an ongoing effort to counteract efforts to restrict their movement and to silence their experiences.

In addressing the novel’s interest with telling and retelling, most critical work engages the scholarly discourse of trauma studies. Rightly so:

\(^2\) Yaeger defines the throwaway body as “women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed—who are not symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference—neither important enough to be disavowed nor part of white southern culture’s dominant emotional economy” (68).
Bone’s story is composed of events so horrible that they defy the victim’s ability to articulate their meaning. Because it contradicts the prevailing discourses of place, gender, and family, this story has been silenced. For this reason, Allison’s reliance on the strategies of realistic fiction—brutally real, in fact—are perhaps surprising, as they seem to enact the very forms that serve to silence the expression of trauma. Queer theorists have long noted the similar limitations of realism as an appropriate discourse to the articulated queer stories and queer subjectivities, which are silenced by linear, realistic narrative conventions. Though the chronology of the novel is fairly conventional (and by that, I mean that it moves sequentially), the stories embedded in the text—the “relentless linear narratives” (King 122) through which Bone seeks to narrate a coherent identity that will make sense of the abuse she has suffered—are anything but conventional. “Bone must rewrite—and in some cases simply reject—the names and stories that make her vulnerable to violence,” according to Vincent King. We may also conceive of this spatially: lost in the family’s never-ending cycle of eviction and moving into new but sterile rental properties and alienated from her mother by Anney’s failure to prevent Glen’s sexual abuse, Bone becomes displaced—unhinged from family and from place. In response—in order to grant weight to her existence—Bone assumes exciting new personae and backgrounds at her new schools.

This ability to inhabit different identities transcends that conventional playacting of childhood and instead points to an effort to work through the stigma of her “white trash” class position and the traumatic sexual abuse inflicted by her stepfather, “Daddy Glen” Waddell. His failures precipitate both his violent rages and the family’s repeated moves from one rented home to another, and these events leave Bone displaced, feeling “ghostly, unreal and unimportant” (65)—a nonperson in nonplaces. Bone assumes new identities as she enters new schools, creating detailed but fictional personal histories that locate her outside the boundaries of Greenville. “It scared me that it was so easy—my records, after all, had not caught up with me—that people thought I could be Roseanne Carter from Atlanta, a city I had never visited. Everyone believed me, and I enjoyed a brief popularity as someone from a big city who could tell big-city stories” (67). When

3. Katrina Irving describes realism as “an interesting choice on Allison’s part, since it has been argued that the representational double-bind in which queer artists currently find themselves—the desire not to provide the dominant culture the marginal subjects it demands (‘positive images’), coupled with the desire to avoid collusion in the dominant culture’s ‘ghosting’ of the deviant—cannot be slipped within the parameters of the realist form” (94).
Bone’s stories are localizable to Greenville, they are necessarily constrained by the same sociospatial discourses that characterize her experience; an imagined Atlanta, on the other hand, offers limitless possibility.

Bone is initially thrilled with the freedom of being unplaced but is quickly terrified by the dissociation from place that ultimately constitutes an alienation from the self. Bone struggles between a claustrophobic desire to escape the marginal spaces inhabited by the Boatwrights (which results in alienation from the family) and a longing for a communion with them. In her isolation, however, she does not recognize that she has in fact imbibed the family’s legacy of resilience—particularly, the use of narrative as a mechanism of resistance among the Boatwright women. Her fantasies have much in common with the collective effort of her mother and aunts to revise and retell stories in order to transcend those confining spaces. Lamenting their financial struggles, Anney and Raylene find some solace—and laughter—by retelling and reliving their sister Alma’s refusal to yield to the sheriff’s efforts to repossess her furniture. Bone overhears Raylene recounting Alma “screaming to the neighbors how they were trying to rob her” (188). In their memory, Alma’s resistance is both dramatic and comic. Her fearless, even shameless, manipulation of gender and class codes emasculates the sheriff, who in Anney’s account “like to peed in his pants when he saw her [Alma] throwing her clothes out the window and yelling, ‘Take it all, why don’t you? Take the kids too, take it all.’” When the sisters debate whether Alma actually disrobed and threw her housedress at him, it becomes apparent that neither witnessed the event; the story has been told so many times that its details are no longer clear. However, both agree that the inclusion of the image of Alma, standing defiantly in her underwear, is an acceptable addition, as it not only makes the story better but also accurately represents the spirit of Alma’s resistance.

In retelling the story, Anney and Raylene attempt to narrate their own resistance and their own refusal to yield to the restrictions of class. In their telling, the repossession is understood as a robbery and thus becomes a metonym for the sort of intrusive abuses that disrupt their efforts to claim space within the geography of Greenville. However, the limitations of Alma’s opposition quickly become clear to Bone. The story turns from Alma’s resistance to the shame with which her daughter Temple responds to it: Temple, Anney says, “just didn’t want the neighbors to think they couldn’t keep up the payments.” Formulating the event in this manner shifts the moral characterization of the event from a violation of Alma’s home—her intimate personal space—to a failure on her part to maintain that place. Importantly, it is not the failure itself that concerns Temple
but the neighbors’ knowledge of it. Thus, she does not seek to prevent the repossession but rather attempts to silence it so that it might not be used to name her or her family. Anney and Raylene are quick to differentiate themselves and their sister from their niece and her attempt to silence this event: like her sisters, Alma “knows who she is,” Anney says. Bone realizes that she possesses neither this self-awareness nor the sense of collective identity that exists among her mother and aunts, and she wishes to “be more like them, easier in my body and not so angry all the time” (190).

Though the communion that exists among these women seems enviable from Bone’s position of alienation from self and family, she is aware of the costs necessary to reach an easy position in place: “. . . Through the steam they both looked older—two worn, tired women repeating old stories to each other and trying not to worry too much about things they couldn’t change anyway.” Bone—and the reader—are left to ponder the implications of the sisters’ knowledge of “who they are”: is this a defiant statement of the refusal to yield to the sheriff’s, the furniture salesman’s, and the neighbors’ efforts to name them, or does it amount to an acceptance of a “white trash” identity that allows only limited oppositional possibilities and little opportunity for meaningful resistance? Though Anney and Raylene delight in a story of defiance, enacting their own narrative resistance in its telling and retelling, how much space does it afford them to grow, change, and challenge their own subjection? What is the distinction between knowing “who” you are and “where” you belong?

Like Horace Cross and even Jimmy Greene in A Visitation of Spirits, Bone struggles mightily with the gendered notions of inheritance and legacy. She is profoundly ambivalent about what it means to be a Boatwright, and more specifically, a Boatwright woman. She wants to belong among them, to have a position for herself alongside her mother and her aunts, but she fears their legacy and the future to which it dooms her. These contradictory impulses are expressed both spatially and temporally: Bone wants to fit into the social space of family but is afraid of the limited outcomes that are possible within it—a restricted number of potential histories, each of which seems to end in stasis, suffering, or oblivion. In this regard, Bone shares much with many of the central characters in the works I have considered. Joe Christmas refuses to be located in the bivalent racial system of the South; the adolescent self that Wright describes in Black Boy realizes at any early age that he must struggle for his very life to live “in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked off” (169); Horace invents and ultimately becomes lost in the worlds he creates to escape the restrictions of his position in his family and community.
Recoiling from the Boatwright history, Bone attempts to insert herself into different narratives in a continuing project to generate a narrative that will give coherent form to her experiences of abuse. In this attempt, Bone displays an “instinctive” understanding of the postmodern insight “that her identity, far from being stable or fixed, is transactional,” according to King (126). That is not to say that Bone is not affected by the identities and names that others impose upon her; indeed, she obsesses over her physical appearance and over how she is perceived, particularly by Glen. “When I saw myself in Daddy Glen’s eyes, I wanted to die,” she says. “He looked at me, and I was ashamed of myself” (Bastard 209). Though she despises him, she mourns his absent affection and ascribes to it the properties of a psychic and emotional panacea. “Love would make me beautiful; a father’s love would purify my heart, turn my bitter soul sweet, and lighten my Cherokee eyes. If he loved me, if only he loved me. Why didn’t he love me?” Bone does not realize—at least, explicitly—that, through this agonizing longing for patriarchal acceptance, she joins the other Boatwright women in a communion of suffering.

Terrified of the future to which she believes that being a “Boatwright woman” destines her, Bone becomes fascinated with the seemingly unrestricted social spaces occupied by the men in her family. “Men could do anything,” she says, “and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. . . . What men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy” (23). She is not alone: Glen is thrilled by the possibility that he might “marry Black Earle’s sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers” and that, like them, he might “carry a knife in his pocket and kill any man who dared to touch” his wife (13). For Bone and Glen both, the Boatwright legacy of “white trash” offers an identity that openly and defiantly enacts the very behaviors that have been ascribed to them in order to affect that marginalization. As J. Brooks Bouson argued, the Boatwright legacy follows “a socially scripted and stereotypical role: that of the shamelessly defiant and angry white trash poor” (108). While this behavior “flaunts” the ascription of shamefulness, it is “is not to be without shame.” Instead, the Boatwrights enact a sort of feedback loop, internalizing their shame with each defiant display of shameful behavior. The “stubborn ‘pride’ and the defiant shamelessness of poor whites like the Boatwrights function to cover their social shame—their feelings of social powerlessness and inferiority,” writes Bouson (108), but never to counteract it or to offer the possibility of actual empowerment. Thus, when Bone visits Earle in prison, she seizes upon his
concealment of a knife as an emblem of nearly superheroic opposition: “We’re smart, I thought. 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).

Bone, it seems, has accepted the abjection of the family and even fashioned it into a subversive and empowering identity: if the family must live on the margins, at least the margins are theirs. In this sense, Bone’s white trash experience seems to exist on the same terrain as bell hooks’s childhood in the black community that existed on the edges of “a small Kentucky town.” “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body,” hooks writes. “This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and solidarity” (ix).

However, while the margins may offer an empowering vantage point, enacting the script of one’s own abjection offers a limited victory at best; at worst, this exacerbates the process of domination. Thus, in Raylene’s assessment, the knife is hardly an indication of Earle’s ingenuity: “All you kids think your uncles are so smart. If they’re so smart, why they all so goddam poor, huh?” (Bastard 217). By shamelessly living out the abject practices that delineate the marginal spaces afforded them, the Boatwright men only reinforce its boundaries. Furthermore, this feedback loop of shameful behavior silences the experiences of the Boatwright women and, ultimately, the abuse Bone suffers. In seeking to counteract the shameful emasculation wrought by his father’s rejection, Glen Waddell asserts a violent, masculine authority and assumes an identity that works, ultimately, at cross-purposes with his efforts to throw off the shame. His parents and siblings do not register his actions as a rejection of them or their social mores; instead, they view them as further evidence that he is a failure. Glen seeks to establish his own coherent identity in and through the series of rented homes through which the family moves in with regular and fairly rapid succession. As Minrose Gwin points out, while the space of the home is frequently characterized as maternal, it is also the site at which the discourses of legal ownership and patriarchal authority converge (419); a mother may maintain a space, but a father remains its master. For Glen, emasculated by the authority of his own father, the material success of his brother, and his inability to hold a job, the patriarchal mastery over family is all that stands in the way of utter impotence. Even in the home space, this limited power
is provisional at best, frequently disrupted by the demands of the landlord. Consequently, he works to silence any threat to this integrity, hoping to forestall its imminent collapse. He “whine[s],” according to Bone, when Anney takes Bone and her sister Reese to the Parsons, Reese’s paternal grandparents and the parents of Anney’s tragically dead husband, and he upsets the relationship between the girls and the Parsons by making a claim to their land on behalf of “our girl” (Bastard 56). Glen is further threatened by another source of potential disruptive narratives—Anney’s own mother, who, he tells Reese and Bone, “is the worst kind of liar” (52). “I’ll tell you what’s true,” he tells Bone, his grip emphasizing his authority. “You’re mine now” (52).

In Katrina Irving’s reading of the novel, Glen’s statement of possession is indicative of “a patriarchal system that needs marginal subjects in order to demarcate and suture its own boundaries” (95). Again, we turn to spatial formulations. For instance, in order for the Waddells to claim a place within the hegemonic, “moonlight and magnolia” narratives of southern places, they must be able to turn away someone at the plantation gates—that is, they must cast themselves against people like the Boatwrights who cannot access that narrative space. Likewise, in order to claim his own narrative space, Glen must locate someone as the object of his authority. Thus, the boundaries of his power are located in Bone and Reese: they constitute the furthest reaches of his claims of possession. However, when that authority appears to be on the verge of collapse, Glen seeks out a scapegoat—Bone. As I discussed earlier, instances of social crisis inevitably involve the failure of dominant discourses of authority, whether intricate cosmologies, secular narratives of nation, or, as in the case of Glen Waddell, a belief in one’s authority. Individuals in such cases, writes René Girard,

are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster but never look into the natural causes; the concept that they might affect those causes by learning more about them remains embryonic. Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes. . . . But, rather than blame themselves, people invariably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. (The Scapegoat 14)

Bone is “easily identifiable” in her alienation from family, her frequent escapes into books and imagination, and her resistance to Glen. In the
terms I have employed elsewhere, her presence constitutes an instance of undifferentiation that cannot be tolerated: though Bone exists within the physical place of the home, she will not yield to Glen’s authority. Thus, she disrupts the discursive configuration of the home as a patriarchal space. Glen does not seek to sacrifice her as a literal scapegoat but rather to erase the contradiction she poses by demanding his dominion over her in the most extreme and absolute manner imaginable.

The Alternative Narrative Space of Apocalypse

The psychic effect of Bone’s location within these geographies of power and patriarchy is suggested by the initial description of Alma’s scorched yard: even the spaces that she inhabits in memories afford a radically restricted sense of mobility and freedom. Likewise, most of the stories she tells end with the Boatwrights’ subjection to the law. Confinement and containment are thus the hallmarks of Bone’s narration. It should not surprise us, then, that these geographies are destroyed in the elaborate, apocalyptic fantasies she creates. While Apocalypse is frequently formulated temporally as the end of Time, that end occurs in a specific geographical location; it results in the destruction of the limitations of place and space and the end of the division between the world and the divine realm of heaven.

In her initial masturbatory fantasies—images of burning straw that threaten to consume her as she struggles to escape—Bone does not seem to be aware of the destructive, purging, or cleansing qualities of fire. Indeed, if she does already feel tainted by Glen’s abuse, she nonetheless struggles to preserve herself from the flames. These images do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are foreshadowed and perhaps informed by the retributive fantasy of the courthouse’s destruction that Bone attributes to her mother and by the story of her uncles reveling in the actual fire. In this context, it becomes clear that Bone’s daydreams engage an extant discourse of retribution and that her familiarity with it predates even her exposure to scripture. Consider the description of the weather in the collective narration of Lyle Parsons’s death—“the devil’s rain,” an ostensibly pleasant combination of rain and blinding sun that the highway patrolman says, leads to the wreck (7). In the short story “Clarence and the Dead” (And What Do They Tell You, Clarence? and The Dead Speak to Clarence), Randall Kenan deploys another variation of this saying—“the devil beats[ing] his wife” (3). From this benignly folksy aphorism, two crucial ideas emerge: first, the latent but nearly omnipresent influence of
a cosmology that anthropomorphizes Satan and situates him as a presence in the geography of the rural South, and second, the silenced presence of violence committed against female bodies. The abusive potential of the patriarchy and the flames of hell and judgment are sublimated but nonetheless present in the narrative and discursive production of the southern geography that Bone inhabits.

Though fire is a constant within Bone’s masturbatory fantasies, it is hardly limited to them. In fact, the fantasy of the courthouse’s destruction attributed to Anney in the first chapter presages Bone’s emotional response to Glen’s middle-class family, the Waddells: “I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn’t have, everything that made them think they were better than us” (Bastard 103). Bone recognizes that same heat—“the fire of outrage” (158)—in the eyes of her would-be friend, the albino Shannon Pearl. Shannon Pearl’s gruesome but brutally realistic stories of “decapitations, mutilations, murder, and mayhem” engage the apocalyptic discourse of retribution far more specifically than Bone’s initial fantastic daydreams: “Shannon Pearl simply and completely hated everyone who had ever hurt her and spent most of her time brooding on punishments either she or God would visit on them” (157–58). As she spends more time with Shannon Pearl’s family on the southern gospel circuit, as well as in the various evangelical churches that dot the geography of rural Greenville County, Bone’s own fantasies increasingly and more specifically engage the apocalyptic imaginary. The world of southern gospel music seems to offer Bone everything that the familial stories lack: the possibility of financial success; models of independent women who are able to create something positive out of the heartache wrought by their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons; and perhaps most importantly, the possibility of a divine justice that would deliver her from her abuse and punish Glen for his crimes.

Critical work on Bastard Out of Carolina has surprisingly neglected the novel’s invocations of Apocalypse. In an otherwise insightful essay, Laurie Vickeroy reduces Bone’s obsession with southern gospel music (both in its content and the circuit) as evidence of “her need to be cocooned by narrow, predictable thinking” (154). This condescending assessment fails to recognize the significance of revivalism and southern gospel music among the southern working class of the U.S. South. For Bone, as for many southerners, the revival tent functions as a mobile, unrestricted space in which working-class southerners are able to articulate an identity distinct from the aberrant, “white trash” labels ascribed to them elsewhere.
In the revival tent, individuals can claim an identity as a member of God’s Chosen people and articulate their own experiences within the sacred historical narrative of redemption and resurrection—a deep contrast to the shame lumped onto them in the conventional, secular documents of history, such as Bone’s birth certificate. Bone’s experiences at the revival tent occur during the gospel boom of the 1940s and 1950s, a point at which working-class southerners had created a nearly independent, impressively influential, and financially thriving gospel music industry. This industry offered them a pathway to the middle class successes that they had been denied (Graves and Fillingim, Introduction 10). Prompted by the end of wartime rationing and the new interstate highway system, gospel musicians cut more records, shipped them cheaply, and traveled across the country to promote them; new, nationally broadcast radio ministries transmitted the music ahead of them (Goff 157–59). “By the middle of the twentieth century,” Michael Graves and David Fillingim write, “Southern Gospel was an established genre in print, broadcast, and recorded media” (13).

Bone’s interest in religion and in southern gospel music, then, should not be reduced to a turn from the complexities of her experiences toward a realm of “narrow, predictable thinking,” as Vickeroy contends; rather, it must be contextualized within Bone’s continuing exploration of the various discourses available to her and within Allison’s efforts to map out the geography of Greenville County. Bone is thrilled by the possibility of deliverance and salvation: she dreams of both saving her family through the earthly, material successes a career as a gospel singer might bring and spiritually redeeming them by introducing them to the church. Moreover, she is thrilled by the possibility of being wanted. “There was something heady and enthralling about being the object of all that attention,” and so Bone comes “close to being saved about fourteen times . . . in fourteen different churches,” continually prolonging her flirtation with religion (Bastard 149). The state of being wanted is deeply gratifying, it seems, and provides a balm for the absence of fatherly love and the awful sting of shame that she feels at the Waddells’. This community’s desire for her presence within their boundaries is an antidote for her abjection. Bone only vaguely understands this desire, but Earle seems to be able to articulate it: “They want you, oh yes, they want you. . . . I’ll tell you, Bone, I like it that they want me, Catholics and Baptists and Church of Gods and Methodists and Seventh-Day Adventists, all of them hungry for my dirty white hide, my pitiful human soul.” Earle, however, remains assured that the world is “irredeemably corrupt” and that no congregation “would give
two drops of piss for me if I was already part of their saggy-assed congrega-
tion” (148). Despite his protestations otherwise, Bone believes that “the
hunger, the lust, and the yearning” that she feels (but which she doesn’t
understand completely) are also “palpable” in Earle’s voice. “As it was, all
I could think was how marvelous it would be when he finally heard God
speaking through me and felt Jesus come into his life” (149).

Just as there are limitations to the oppositional identity constructed in
the family stories of the Boatwrights, the psychic balm offered by a gospel
identity is incomplete. Bone never steps forward to declare her faith; rather
than feeling “[w]hatever magic Jesus’ grace promised,” these moments are
“cold and empty” (152). It seems that Bone is unable to shake her initial
reaction to gospel music—the sense that it is intended to “make you hate
and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified” (136).
The thrill of chosen-ness conjured by the music is contradicted by the
awareness of her inadequacy. Again, Earle’s explanation of his refusal to
accept religion offers insight that Bone, on her own, cannot obtain: “Reli-
gion gets you and milks you dry. Won’t let you drink a little whiskey. Won’t
let you make no fat-assed girls grin and giggle. Won’t let you do a damn
thing except work for what you’ll get in the hereafter” (148). In the physi-
cal space of the revival tent and in the narrative space of gospel music, the
rural poor are free to articulate an identity outside the marginalizing con-
ventions and prerogatives of class shame. Paradoxically, the identity can
be claimed only if Bone accepts as shameful the very things that define the
Boatwright legacy.

While Earle’s explanation appears to be little more than a rejection of
the strict moralism of southern evangelical Protestantism, we can begin
to further develop the specific limitations of this faith as a vehicle for an
oppositional subjectivity by examining it as a statement of the theodicy of
gospel music. In stark contrast to slave spirituals and African American
gospel, which often locate evil as the consequence of earthly oppression,
the southern gospel music of the white working class responds to evil by
rejecting the suffering of this world, “emphasiz[ing] the believer’s eternal
home in heaven,” and encouraging “believers to trust Jesus to soothe their
affections while waiting for their heavenly reward . . . ” (Fillingim 50).
By ignoring the material and earthly causes of suffering, this cosmology
establishes evil as a matter of human morality, and the responsibility for
earthly misery is displaced onto the individual enduring it. By this reason-
ing, Earle not only deserves the initial pain that is derived from his wife’s
abandonment but also the ongoing sense of lack he seeks to heal through
women and booze. Likewise, the theodicy of southern gospel music serves to further shame Bone and to silence the articulation of her abuse; if evil has no external cause, then she believes that it must be a consequence of her own moral failings.

While Bone ultimately fails to consummate the public assumption of a “glorified” gospel identity, her fascination with the fantastic imagery of apocalyptic, retributive destruction becomes increasingly elaborate. Mourning “the loss of something I had never really had” (i.e., a fixed identity within the gospel narrative), Bone “take[s] comfort in the hope of the apocalypse, God’s retribution on the wicked. I liked Revelations, loved the Whore of Babylon and the promised rivers of blood and fire. It struck me like gospel music, it promised vindication” (Bastard 152). Apocalypse provides solace even before she begins to explore the text of John’s vision. The vague interest begins with the hope for the courthouse’s destruction, attributed to Anney in the first chapter; it develops into the ethereal, if frightening, flames of her masturbatory fantasies, and finally it becomes a wish for some otherworldly force—“God or magic” or even the doctor who sees her wounds—to confront Glen with the truth of his abuse, demand his repentance, and cause him to “weep tears of blood” (116).

This daydream is complicated. In it, Glen’s fate is her decision, and Bone is thus endowed with the agency and narrative control his abuse seeks to deny her. However, the fantasy is also self-annihilative and even culminates in her death. Certainly, we might formulate Bone’s image of death as simply a fantasy of escape, but its recurrence, as well as her rejection of it following Shannon Pearl’s horrific immolation, suggests that elaboration is necessary. Frank Kermode writes that Apocalypse amounts to a macrocosmic figuration of our own deaths—the necessary end of the fiction we use to impart sequence, consequence, and coherence upon a human life (7). Bone’s dreams of her own death seem to reverse this: in them, her death ends the threat that she poses to the narrative of a happy family. Unable to articulate a story in which she exists happily within this framework, she internalizes Glen’s abusive attempts to locate her as the source of any incoherence within the patriarchal order he seeks to establish in their home. The trauma she endures destabilizes the boundaries of this space, and Bone locates herself as the source of this instability.

Let us return for a moment to the notion, discussed both by Kennedy and Gwin, that memories are accessed by imaginatively reconstructing the geographies in which past events occurred. Certain places—her aunts Ruth’s and Raylene’s homes, for instance—serves as oases of stability both
for Bone and the reader as each moves through the imaginative landscapes of the text. For the most part, however, Bone is alienated from place; the small measure of stability that does exist amid their repeated moves is translated either as a gut-wrenching stasis and immobility, which Bone believes is her birthright as a Boatwright woman, or as the claustrophobia consolidated in the grip of Glen’s overlarge hands. This incongruity is profoundly troubling for Bone’s developing sense of her self. She either has no place in which to locate herself, or she is confined to places that offer no room to move and no space to speak. Again, we can consider the image of Alma’s scorched yard where the spigots serve as constant emblem of the ideological and material forces that weigh upon the Boatwrights as well as their ultimate dislocation from the places which they inhabit. In Bone’s memory, the boundaries between place and self are rendered incoherent by the twinned effects of displacement and claustrophobia. For a child, this all translates into a simple idea: she does not fit anywhere.

In her initial apocalyptic fantasy, she imagines herself as the element of dissonance and positions her death as the apocalyptic reconstitution of an originary harmony. Shannon Pearl’s death initiates a shift in these self-annihilative fantasies; confronted with the “dull thudding sound of her life shutting down, everything stopping,” Bone determines to resist the negation of her own existence (205). At first, she simply integrates the burning courthouse into her masturbatory dreams:

I thought about fire, purifying, raging, sweeping though Greenville and clearing the earth. . . .

“Fire,” I whispered. “Burn it all.” I rolled over, putting both my hands under me. I clamped my teeth and rocked, seeing the blaze in my head, haystacks burning and nowhere to run, people falling behind and the flames coming on, my own body pinned down and the fire roaring closer. (253–54)

Ultimately, Bone abandons the self-annihilative component of the fantasy altogether. Though Glen’s climactic rape of Bone seems to be about to happen throughout the text, it erupts onto the page with a startling brutality. Bone, however, responds in an even more startling fashion, abandoning her former silence and discovering the voice necessary to articulate the emotions that have so confounded her throughout the text. That voice is unmistakably apocalyptic, and it is not dissimilar to the angry defiance that Wright’s Dan Taylor assumes after his own beating. Like Taylor, Bone
no longer awaits deliverance from above. Rather, Bone assumes the role of avenging angel herself, damning Glen for every act he has committed and defying his authority with each blow:

“You'll die, you'll die,” I screamed inside. “You will rot and stink and cave in on yourself. God will give you to me. Your bones will melt and your blood will catch fire. I'll rip you open and feed you to the dogs. Like in the Bible, like the way it ought to be, God will give you to me. God will give you to me!” (285)

Bone defies Glen's attempt at physical possession by demanding a discursive possession of her stepfather, claiming the authority to name him within the divine narrative of redemption and retribution.

Of course, as cataclysmic as the rape is for Bone and for Anney, the Apocalypse is never realized. It is, however, not confined to the realm of Bone's fantasies. Following the rape, Bone cannot tell her story to the sheriff. In the terms of trauma theory, this experience defies assimilation and cannot be represented through language. We can also understand this in terms of the sociospatial process of marginalization and its silencing effects: Bone imagines Sheriff Cole as just “Daddy Glen in a uniform” (296)—that is, as the authority maintaining the very cultural practices that limit her ability to tell her own story. This encounter, confined to the institutional space of the hospital room, simply is not big enough to contain Bone's suffering. Instead, any effort to fit the limited textual spaces of a police report would reduce the enormity of her suffering and would continue the abjection of her family, further exiling them to the aberrant margins of their community. Raylene is once again Bone's ultimate defender, and she surprisingly appropriates the language of Apocalypse:

“She's just twelve years old, you fool. Right now she needs to feel safe and loved, not alone and terrified. You're right, there has to be justice. There has to be a judgment day too, when God will judge us all. What you gonna tell him you did to this child when that day comes?”

“There's no need—” he began, but she interrupted him.

“There's need,” she said. “God knows there's need.” Her voice was awesome, biblical. “God knows.” (298)

Among the commonplace materialist criticisms of religion, generally, and of southern evangelical Christianity, specifically, is the contention that, by stressing an afterlife and a judgment to come, religion defers concerns
with the oppression of this world and minimizes issues of social justice. Certainly, that is the critique of religion offered by Wright’s work.

Thus, while readers may initially disapprove of Raylene’s (and Allison’s) reliance upon God’s otherworldly judgment rather than immediate, this-worldly retribution that they would like to see visited upon Glen, we should not be frustrated or interpret this as an apocalyptic cop-out. Rather, Apocalypse here functions as the only narrative realm sufficient to articulate Glen’s crime and Bone’s suffering. The discourses of discipline and punishment, the mechanisms of the law, have only worked to enact the abjection of the Boatwrights heretofore. Calling upon them now to mete out their retribution would ultimately reinforce their white trash identity, reinscribe the aberrant, shameful behaviors, including incest, that have been attributed to them, and bulwark the boundaries that restrict them to the community’s margins. However, constructions such as margin and center cease to exist in the apocalyptic narrative Raylene invokes, and the institutional effort to locate the individual is supplanted by divine judgment. The disruption of margin and center is critical to the novel—and perhaps, to Bone’s survival. In A Visitation of Spirits, Horace Cross turns to the apocalyptic imaginary in hopes of writing some narrative in which he might be able to articulate a coherent sense of himself and his place in the word, in which the contradictions and confusion of his experience might not tear him to pieces. However, he fails to find that narrative, and in the end, he cannot envision anything other than his apocalyptic end. Raylene, on the other hand, provides Bone with a story in which her suffering is given meaning, form, coherence, and a measure of closure, thanks to the divine distribution of justice it promises. In this way, Bastard Out of Carolina offers something of a corrective to the broadest implications of a text like “Blueprint for Negro Writing”: while discursive resistance alone may not be sufficient to actualize social and political change, the spiritual and psychological sustenance that narrative solutions to suffering provide can be crucial for victims to work through and live beyond those experiences. And their survival is necessary for action to happen.

Allison’s engagement with Apocalypse is not merely formal, and it is not simply about providing a satisfying end to her novel. By invoking the southern apocalyptic imaginary, Allison lays her own affirmative claim to her native ground, demanding that Bone’s story and her story be included, not along the aberrant margins of the South, but fully within it. For Allison, then, the South is hardly the grounds for parody; Bastard Out of Carolina evokes the textures of place with neither romanticism nor irony but instead with fury, frustration, longing, and love. By defiantly excavating
experiences from the marginal spaces of southern community, this post-
southern novel articulates a “sense of place” that is, to borrow Barbara
Ladd’s term, “emancipatory” (48): Allison activates the regional and the
particular as vehicle for liberation rather than as a mechanism to resist
change. The possibilities for this sort of recovery are rich, and once again,
Apocalypse signals a site worthy of investigation.