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Bertha Harris' *Confessions of Cherubino*: From *L'Écriture Féminine* to the Gothic South

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Languages

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Kara M. Russell

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## ABSTRACT

Bertha Harris' *Confessions of Cherubino*: From *L'Écriture Féminine* to the Gothic South

by

Kara M. Russell

Inspired by her obsession with the South and informed by the liberating socio-political changes born from the 1970s lesbian feminist movement, North Carolinian author Bertha Harris (1937-2005) provides a poetic exploration of Southern Gothic Sapphism in her complex and tormented novel *Confessions of Cherubino* (1972). Despite fleeting second-wave era recognition as “one of the most stylistically innovative American fiction writers to emerge since Stonewall,” Harris’s innovation remains largely neglected by readers and cultural theorists alike. Nearly all academic engagements with her work, of which there are few, address her 1976 novel *Lover*. Instead, this thesis focuses on *Confessions of Cherubino* and examines the novel’s relationship to poststructural feminist thought that led to a critical but undervalued position within contemporary literature of the queer South, particularly through the work of Dorothy Allison, who has noted Harris’s influence on her writing.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Despite fleeting second-wave era recognition as “one of the most stylistically innovative American fiction writers to emerge since Stonewall,” feminist lesbian author Bertha Harris remains largely neglected by readers and cultural theorists alike (*The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* 361). Harris, born in North Carolina in 1937, published three novels: *Catching Saradove* (1969), *Confessions of Cherubino* (1972), and *Lover* (1976). Harris claimed two obsessions: opera and the South, and both extend throughout her works (361). Themes of performance, intrigue, and fantasy meet with frank sexuality characterized by its geographical and political contexts. The semi-autobiographical *Catching Saradove* explores the nuances of a strained mother/daughter relationship and the search for identity that inspires Saradove to leave home for New York, only to battle an abusive husband, single motherhood, and her flourishing lesbianism. *Lover* likewise probes the questions of love and identity, and the nature of performance of the two, in oblique storylines of lover and beloved.

As an effort to expand the critical response to Harris’s oeuvre, this thesis focuses on *Confessions of Cherubino*. While the liberating socio-political changes born from the 1960s and ’70s lesbian feminist movement inform all of Harris’s novels, *Confessions of Cherubino* provides a poetic exploration of Southern Gothic Sapphism with resolute connection to feminist cultural theory. Settings and circumstance inform the dramatics of *Confessions of Cherubino*, but Harris’s elusive prose solidifies the work as a bold representation of *l’écriture féminine*, offered three years before Hélène Cixous published the term. This thesis focuses on *Confessions of Cherubino* in a two-part analysis. Part one examines the novel’s relationship to poststructural feminist and proto-queer thought, engaging particularly with the philosophies of the French

Feminists because of their synchronous relationship to the novel. In addition to celebrating the aggressive sexuality and elusive narratives characteristic of *l'écriture féminine*, Harris demonstrates with *Confessions of Cherubino* that lesbian literature is a necessarily nebulous and “monstrous” creation always in conversation with origins and the nature of its self-creation.

Part two contemporizes these relationships that evidence a critical but undervalued position within the context of more recent literature of the queer South, notably through work by Dorothy Allison. Allison, student of Harris at the 1975 Sagaris Feminist Institute, has credited Harris with stirring her to both write and engage in the lesbian feminist movements. The thematic links and stylistic divergences among works by Harris and Allison remain rich and understudied realms of potential critical analysis; this thesis remedies part of this neglect. A comparative study of Harris and Allison indicates a synchronicity of Southern lesbian narratives. Long-overdue critical attention to Harris both achieves a more robust conversation surrounding her brilliant fiction and works to give a more nuanced consideration of her role specifically within the genres of Southern, lesbian, and women’s writings.

## CHAPTER 2

### *CONFESSIONS OF CHERUBINO: POSTSTRUCTURAL CONNECTIONS*

#### *L'Écriture Féminine*

Simone's de Beauvoir's claim that "One is not born but becomes a woman" (*The Second Sex* 330) gave voice to the construction of femininity and acknowledged the cultural forces that manipulate male and female identity. Jessica Benjamin characterizes the divide de Beauvoir describes as a "split between transcendence and immanence" (188). Western women have persistently been trapped in immanence, relegated to passive lives centered on motherhood and self-sacrifice. For de Beauvoir, prioritizing the "masculine" drive to transcendence, to individual mythologizing of the self, is women's key to breaking free from cultural norms that limit expression and understanding of identity.

The oppositions of male as transcendence, power, action, logic, and public and female as immanence, submission, passivity, irrationality, and intimate are well documented and borne out in society so thoroughly that I call attention to them only for the sake of outlining the general framework against which the prominent (or at least canonized) feminist philosophies were rebelling. While later French Feminists concur with de Beauvoir's observation of the cultural separation of the sexes (and later genders), the ones that I wish to discuss, those I consider most relevant to readings of Harris, are those feminist philosophers who, instead of advocating for a reclamation of all that has been traditionally male, reject the hierarchized (to borrow Cixous's neologism) system of desire altogether. The most prominent discussions surrounding *l'écriture féminine* do not seek to "level the playing field" and deliver that which has been masculine back to the feminine. Instead, Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, to name a few, call dramatic attention not only to differences between the masculine and feminine but to the preservation of those differences as well.

Cixous, among others, cautions against accepting the “essentialist ideological interpretation” of feminine sexuality that culminates in a “‘natural,’ anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition”—the interpretation Freudian psychoanalysts have championed and used to dissect pervasive conceptualizations that “make of woman an imperfect man” (“Sorties” 93). Certainly, placing so much power in difference is dangerous. Defining acceptable existence as *this* and decidedly not *that* has led to essentialist concepts of identity that serve to exclude and harm, but I believe it is possible to champion difference without limiting what we acknowledge as a certain identity. Instead of privileging an essentialist identity and culling expressions that do not conform, giving attention to difference acknowledges, much like de Beauvoir’s claim, the socio-cultural pressures at play in identity formation. The focus shifts from differences and definitions of essence—that ultimate definition of woman and man, what is female and male—to differences and definitions of experiences.

Women’s writing, however defined, has always been key to this expansion of identity beyond essentialist hierarchies. Theorists championed the linguistic cultural creation of woman as creator and subject of text. Cixous’s 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” urges woman to “forge for herself the antilogos weapon” and write herself into being (1947). Perhaps most important to this new being is an unapologetic and even aggressive sexuality that Cixous posits has been repressed or altogether ignored throughout history. Unleashing this sexuality and its theoretical implications takes precedence over direct and accessible (masculine) writing. In lieu of traditional composition, Cixous urges women:

Let’s leave it to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and its obsession with how to dominate the way things work . . . . For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to “fly.” (1953)



As well as “to fly,” Cixous presses woman “to steal” (the French *voler* signifies both actions). De Beauvoir’s call to action has evolved into not a re-appropriation of the masculine, but a theft of identity denied and made impossible because of forced definitions of femininity. Kristeva tackles this impossible tradition of singular identity in “Woman Can Never Be Defined:” “In ‘woman’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies” (137). It is through this ineffable quality of “woman” that theft without possession becomes possible; no experience is definitive, yet all experiences define.

With *Confessions of Cherubino*, Harris soars and claims the subject-power of both woman and lesbian. The novel gives prominence to the antilogos self-creation and sexual delirium of *l’écriture féminine*. Harris’s experimental fiction is steeped in stylistic and philosophical considerations that span the waves of feminism and, like Cixous, provide examples of intersectional and queer identity formation before they were formally considered by contemporary theorists.

### Lesbians and Feminism

Nestled within this overarching question of culturally constructed and expressed identities is the further parsing of a specifically lesbian identity. Julia Penelope asserts: “The Lesbian Perspective originates in our sense of difference” (72). Penelope’s proclamation leads to the question of identifying and defining said difference(s), problematizing the desire or need to acknowledge different lived experience. The careful interrogation of an essentialized being characteristic of feminist theory at large and the drive to claim an identity have punctuated much of lesbian feminist discourse and led to various interpretations. In her recount of lesbian groups in the Parisian feminist movement, Claudie Lesselier explains, “Such ambivalence and tension concretely express the contradictions between an affirmative demand for an ‘identity’ category,

and the need to deconstruct an oppressive system of categorization” (44). Different factions of feminist thought have contextualized the question of sexuality in different ways, but perhaps many of the considerations can be summarized with the prevailing belief that the “personal is political.” This framework seems to be best represented within the lesbian feminist community; affirmation of “the political dimension of lesbianism,” Lesselier contends, serves as “the dialectical resolution of this contradiction” of simultaneously seeking definition of identity and working to dismantle the system within which it holds significance (44).

Marie-Jo Bonnet challenges, “Feminists have always been afraid of lesbians” (45). Bonnet attributes this fear to the attention that lesbians have historically (since at least the nineteenth century) given to “sexual freedom” instead of the “concept of moral liberty.” Feminist theorists have not altogether ignored sexual freedom, of course—Cixous champions a bisexuality that encourages philosophical (and physical?) freedom—but their focus on it as a facet of resistance against the “socio-sexual organization of dominance” has been less aggressive in comparison with the prominence given it within the specifically lesbian discourse (Lesselier 44).

### Bertha Harris’s Lesbian as Literature

While more contemporary feminist discussions of the 1990s and 2000s have shifted to “queer” as a nearly all-encompassing term of identity, Harris’s fiction bears witness to the historical imperative of naming and claiming “lesbian” as a lived experience, despite the attendant philosophical paradox. In “Bertha Harris, a Memoir,” Dorothy Allison recounts her impression of Harris from her 1975 course at Sagaris. She characterizes Harris’s lesbianism as a willingness to be *bad*. Harris offered an “uncompromising vision of writing as a revolutionary act,” much in the vein of *l’écriture féminine*, but she was critical of “goddess worship... moon-

womb crap”—what she called the uncritical celebratory trends that characterized second-wave attentions (204). Instead, Allison explains,

Bertha wanted authenticity, our own culture, reality in life and the arts, and for us not to lose our specialness, our badness, our monstrosity, our affront to that appealing middle-class mind that she knew was incapable of making great art. (“Bertha Harris, a Memoir” 205)

At Sagaris, Harris instructed, “*There is no lesbian literature.*” Allison specifies, “The relevant word was *literature*, real literature that came out of an authentic lesbian culture” (204, emphases in the original). The existence of such literature was predicated on a culture that heralded the truthful exploration of “specialness, badness, monstrosity” that none had dared create; a void remained where the “lesbian” in literature fell to models of relationships that merely “inverted” heterosexuality and did little beyond replacing pronouns (Smith 70). Harris works to fill this void and give voice to anything but benign lesbians with *Confessions of Cherubino*. In his review of *Confessions of Cherubino*, entitled “Erotic Force in a Brilliant New Novel,” Fred Chappell praises the novel’s “relentless and ceaseless variety of eroticism” (*The Charlotte Observer* 5F). *Confessions* certainly provides rich examples for the decidedly lesbian and affectionately overwrought dramatics of the “literary.” Allison affirms that *Confessions of Cherubino*, along with Harris’s first novel, 1969’s *Catching Saradove*,

had been critiqued as Southern Gothic, decadent, difficult, elitist, and queer—meaning not only homosexual, but strange. [Harris] was a Southern working-class female who created women protagonists who bordered on madness, whose voices were confusingly lush, and who, by the way, spoke mostly to each other. What was inherently lesbian about *Catching Saradove* and [*Confessions of*] *Cherubino* was that their heroines were

female lovers, women-focused women... The mainstream literary world, as well as the so-called avant-garde and burgeoning feminist critical aristocracy, saw her as a lesbian writer who refused to obey the rules. (Allison 203-04)

Harris's "frequent theme" of lesbianism reflects her "ideal of the 'androgynous' human being, capable of expressing both 'masculine' and 'feminine' sexuality" (Paddock). Harris told *The Charlotte Observer* in 1972 that through her writing, particularly in *Confessions of Cherubino*, she hoped for "women and men to come closer—to liberate in women what's really there, the aggressive as well as passive sexuality, and to bring out both in men" (ibid). Echoing the contingency of identity characteristic of poststructural feminists, Harris offers, "There's no rejection or acceptance of anything... just an attempt to weave them all together" (ibid). Her interest in redefining identity without perpetuating established or creating new hierarchical systems of power links Harris to Lesselier's "political dimension of lesbianism" through literature (44).

*Confessions of Cherubino* protagonists Ellen and Margaret are the mad, lush women representative of "lesbians as literature." Harris fulfills her checklist for distinctly lesbian literary greatness with these elusive and unpredictable characters: Ellen and Margaret are both "unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different"; in a word, "distinguished" (Hendin 227). Ellen and Margaret achieve these accolades through their embodiment of feminist philosophies as they "approach the conditions of perfect love" (Harris 211) by challenging the limits of violence against others and self. Harris devotes Ellen and Margaret to "the rituals of human relationships, the unconscious ceremonies by which we keep ourselves going, the impacts we make on one another" (Harris qtd. Doar). From affairs with teachers and attempted murder to obsessive sex and mental breaks, Ellen and Margaret sift through their "senses of difference" in

their coming-of-age drama and indulge the monstrosity Harris associates with true lesbian literary success.

Judith Butler, drawing upon the work of Barbara Christian, urges us to “consider literary narrative as a place where theory takes place” (*Bodies that Matter* 182). Indeed, Ellen and Margaret serve as literary and political theorists exploring the ins and outs of the considerations of identity, morality, agency, and powerlessness that have punctuated much of contemporary lesbian/feminist debates. Most significant to this exploration, both that of the novel itself and the lesbian/feminist theoretical community at large, is the expression of sexuality. In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle S. Rubin asserts that “a radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression” (11). Within the practice of lesbian literary politics, *Confessions of Cherubino* serves as this radicalization, and Margaret and Ellen are the revolutionaries. Feminist and lesbian discussions surrounding sexuality routinely acknowledge the “liberatory possibility of authentic female sexuality,” just as Harris expressed a desire to “liberate what’s really there” in women (*Feminist Philosophies* 181; Paddock). *Confessions of Cherubino* then becomes a testament to this authenticity. Lesbians “remain opaque even to our Selves because we haven’t yet developed a language that describes our experience” (Penelope 73). Harris has done substantial work in developing this language of authenticity and claiming a lesbian experience through literature.

The subject matter alone establishes Harris as a radical feminist lesbian writer, but with *Confessions of Cherubino* she has seemingly taken Cixous’s injunction to wield the “antilogos weapon” and amplified it. Harris’s prose is experimental and convoluted, so much so that *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* expresses confusion: “The novel tells of the emotional turmoil of a darkly comic group of characters, including [protagonist(s)] Ellen and Margaret,

who may be lovers or different aspects of the same person” (362). The linguistic ambivalence of the novel blurs the straightforward production of individual identities and speaks to the poststructural interest in breaking “historico-cultural limit[s]” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 1949). Penelope offers, “The Lesbian situation is essentially ambiguous, and that ambiguity provides the foundation of the Lesbian perspective” (78). Ambiguity abounds in *Confessions of Cherubino*; the only way Ellen and Margaret are simply two is to follow Cixous’s model of *tous les deux*, that is, all the twos, which is never really just two, but all the “between/s” as well (“Rootprints” 292). *Confessions* divulges the secrets of all the Margarets and all the Ellens.

Ellen’s multiplicity speaks to what Kristeva names “traversal”—a pursuit of truth in which the subject experiences sexuality as a “process of differentiation” (“Oscillation Between Power and Denial” 165). The differentiation propels love that manifests as violence, manipulation, and neglect. Harris has made of Ellen her lesbian monster immune to “purification”—the dangerous circumstance of the lesbian becoming like everyone else: assimilated into heterosexual attitudes, or “phallic socialization” (“Bertha Harris, a Memoir” 205). Ellen’s introduction, “I am Ellen, describing the self I have become,” marks the beginning and end of any semblance of singularity in Harris’s creation. She continues: “I am also Ellen who is describing Margaret. I have her now, as I have myself now, the way we are now; and I am holding us up and together...” (Harris 3). In her search for love, Ellen’s discontinuity furthers as her sexual exploits become increasingly complicated. Each of her three infatuates—her teacher Sanctissima, a nameless Soldier Boy who impregnates her, and finally her lifelong friend Margaret—meet with an unstable and contradictory Ellen. In her search for love, Ellen embodies Kristeva’s theoretical “I,” who, “subject of a conceptual quest, is also a subject of

differentiation—of sexual contradictions” (“Oscillation Between Power and Denial” 167). Ellen seeks love most but acts upon her desire in conniving ways.

In her relationship with Sanctissima, Ellen performs the roles of coy ingénue and victimized innocent with both devotion and indifference, alternating between the personal and the dramatics of love. After Ellen and Sanctissima’s first encounter, Ellen tells Margaret: “I’ve never been so happy in my life...for such a wild old savage, she makes such serious love” (Harris 12). After feeling neglected by Sanctissima—who beds other students regularly—Ellen, in the middle of her scene in the school play “with all that chorus following” behind her, stabs Sanctissima in the chest (67). She survives the attack, woefully robbed of tragedy, but by whose hands? Ellen as lover and Ellen as dramatic character meld beyond recognition, and their affair with Sanctissima, both as seducer and prey, ends; however, Ellen maintains elements of her Sanctissima-informed self throughout her evolution as subject.

Ellen flees the scene of her attempt at murder and runs to a bar, where an awkward soldier boy who also indulges in the dramatics takes interest. He tells her, “...you ain’t the first little lady I pulled out of a bad spot...scratch the superficial and there ain’t a thing different about you from any other hot-blooded woman I ever run with” (73). Ellen again becomes one of several other objects of affection with no distinctive qualities, as she had been with Sanctissima. She furthers her confounded self by assuming a false identity, Eustacia Vye, whom she does not abandon despite the soldier boy’s growing intimacy. Though they share more than a brief encounter and will be forever bound by child, the soldier boy never knows Ellen as Ellen, nor she him as a named subject.

Sanctissima and Soldier Boy eventually grow disinterested in the tumultuously dramatic Ellen, but her performances as lover, assailant, and manipulator meet with a rapturous audience

in Margaret. In Margaret's "twenty-one years' worth of painted days...she had expressed nearly nothing but a need to become like Ellen" (101). Becoming like Ellen intensifies to an obsession with *becoming* Ellen. Margaret's attempts to become Ellen, to negotiate a performable nature, result in a dramatic "undoing" that leaves her with the "wide-awake stare of the successfully escaped lunatic" (209). Ellen as object of imitation proves impossible, as she "became soon undone" in her many iterations of the self (144). Unlike Margaret, Ellen's "coming undone" merely initiates a moment to alter her performance.

Etymology also links "perfection" with performance, from the Latin *facere*, meaning "to make, do, perform." Here the seeming opposites of perfection and imperfection overlap. Ellen's obsession with performance positions Harris's characterization of the young girl as a proto-queer theory exploration of identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler carries the poststructural interest in an essentialized sexuality into the postmodern arena by further parsing identity as a performance of gender in addition to the historico-cultural attachments of biological sex. The performance depends upon "the parody...of the very notion of an original" (2550). A performer must constantly search for a nonexistent essence, an elusive "epistemic *a priori*" to emulate (2543). The performance is always a negotiation of understanding: an incomplete—that is, imperfect—work in progress. While Harris's fiction predates any formal discussions (that is, any widespread print in "the academy") of "gender trouble," Ellen and Margaret, in their dramatics, exemplify perhaps the limits of the general poststructural conversation that more or less conflated (or at least did not rigorously distinguish) sex and gender.

Ellen exists too ambiguously, too queerly, to offer an essential: thus, the unavailing pursuit drives Margaret to lunacy, or what Colette Guillaumin names "the mystique of 'love': an



attempt to escape into some minimal unity.” We fail in reaching this unity “*because socially we do not have possession of our own bodies*” (106). Margaret surrenders her body in her pursuit of Ellen. Though aware of his fetishistic aim of corrupting her innocence, Margaret sleeps with another teacher, Mr. Pathways, in an effort to “learn the distinguished feelings of the body” (Harris 101). Margaret yearns to

curse the man, and leave him, were it not that this country where he had taken her, this wet country of games where the geography could burst out of shape in a moment, where there were new rules for every hour, was the best place to wait for Ellen, to find the right way to become like Ellen...to become Ellen. (101)

In her calculated anticipation of Ellen, Margaret draws attention to her subject’s elusive identity enactment: the emotional rules of interplay and the physical representation of sexuality—the body—are always in flux, but Margaret’s willingness to wait and participate in this strange, ritualistic sex affirms that Ellen resides within this ambiguity.

Finally, for Margaret, “Ellen no longer wished to accomplish friendship.” Thus, Margaret longs to prove during their physical encounter that their union will be emotional as well. If Margaret endures Mr. Pathways’ machinations and prepares well to make love, “Ellen would know without a doubt that they were one and the same. It was right that she have Ellen. Be Ellen” (101). “As Cécile Sauvage puts it: ‘Woman must forget her own personality when she is in love. It is a law of nature’” (qtd. “The Mother” 23). Margaret dedicates more than her mind; she devotes her body and its performance entirely to becoming Ellen.

Margaret’s dispossession of her own body literally drives her out of the text. Harris complements content with form by employing narrative “modifications” such as “ruptures, holes, blank spaces in language” that mirror Margaret’s absence as or inability to act as subject—as an

“I” separate from Ellen (Kristeva, “Interview” 165). Margaret’s puzzling absence—a narrative gap in the text both for reader and Ellen—furthered Harris’s lesbian as a distinctively literary creation that amplifies ambiguity and uneasy definition. Kristeva explains that these “modifications in the linguistic fabric are the sign of a force that has not been grasped by the linguistic or ideological system” (“Interview” 165). Ellen exists beyond the tropes of teenage love, heterosexual exchange, and easy obsession, both for tender Margaret and for readers curious as to where the latter has gone.

Margaret later resurfaces on a train with Ellen, and the former exposes her genitals in an apparent episode of lunacy. In this exposure, Margaret enacts what Cixous recognizes as a stage of woman in a love still concerned with differences—perhaps the only stage to be considered “lesbian”—where she is unable to mesh fully with Ellen and leave their “separate” identities behind. Ellen’s response to Margaret’s display on the train highlights a fragmentation of the girls’ experiences in attempting to coalesce as a unit, whether metaphorically or physically.

Before Ellen could take her, hide her in the seat, Margaret had jacked her knees to her chin, had parted the folds of her genitals with her brown fingers, had whispered, in delight, “Somebody love me!”

At the sight of the rosy sex, Ellen expected the scent of roses to arise around her.

Instead, the stale train air began to smell like a salted Atlantic wave, and she felt it break over her. (Harris 208)

This public scene of exposure of Margaret’s body reflects the tensions of conceptualizing feminine sexuality “within the dominant phallic economy” which Irigaray considers in “This Sex Which Is Not One” (183). Irigaray tackles the aforementioned problems of traditional psychoanalytic treatment of female sexuality—“‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and

‘penis envy’”—by underscoring the already double and complete physiology of “woman’s autoeroticism” (183). Irigaray explains woman

touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman touches herself all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other. (183)

Margaret serves as her own “violent break-in” that disrupts this autoeroticism by indulging the search for excess pleasure or excess *specialness*, to revisit Harris’s language (183). In Irigaray’s terms, Margaret is already “special,” but by attempting to separate that which is not divisible and reenter into the public (masculine) sphere in an effort to negotiate identity as an object of desire for the strangers on the train, she experiences a mental break and ironically impedes her own goal of becoming Ellen.

After her initial inaction, Ellen acts as hysterical Margaret’s caretaker and cries for help to catch her as she runs down the aisle. Neither conductor nor passengers come to her aid: “Nobody loved her; many touched her” (Harris 209). Ellen’s response, coupled with the physical assault by other passengers, furthers the “intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman [Margaret, in this case] from this ‘self-caressing’ she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations” (Irigaray 183). That Ellen’s rosy expectations are not met indicates the disparity between the two girls in this scene, as opposed to other scenes where their identities are more convoluted and intertwined. Ellen’s lack of knowledge of Margaret’s body, which Margaret hoped would be synonymous with Ellen’s knowledge of her (Ellen’s) self, suggests that Margaret has disrupted the “self-caressing”

potential of her relationship with Ellen, as subject, object, or both, by bringing their activities into the phallic, heterosexual setting. Notably, Margaret disappears in this male world similarly to how she sacrifices herself for Ellen in more private scenes. This inevitable disappearance speaks to Harris's interest in the dramatically elusive lesbian that must always have some contingency of identity.

Beyond her initial plea for help in stopping Margaret, Ellen abandons the latter to the whim of encroaching travelers, particularly soldiers "who had been good enough, when they had finished with her, to get Margaret back into her dress" (Harris 209). With Ellen's pitiless abandonment, "Margaret became the indulgence of as many secret dreams as there were passengers; at last the passengers could handle and kiss and violate their own dreams" (209). Violated by both the soldiers and Ellen's unconventional—monstrous—depiction of love, and failing in her performance of Ellen, Margaret surrenders possession of her own body.

Such dispossession gives rise to "the extreme fragmentation of our acts, which have a reality not as much in connection with us who perform them as in connection with a relationship within which we perform them," Guillaumin explains ("The Question of Difference" 106). Margaret imitates Ellen, but her imitation does not facilitate her becoming Ellen. Both girls sleep with teachers, but Ellen passionately and Margaret clinically. Ellen's affair with Soldier Boy, while in many ways a farce, has been consensual. Ellen draws attention to the disconnect between the self dependent upon action (performance) and the self established from interactional relationships: "Margaret, the soft rabbit reflection of Ellen's own lion self...trembling bunny Margaret frightened by the dogs, and stupid enough to want a lion's solace" (Harris 131). In addition to Ellen's use of third person, the drastically different appearance of her reflection visually illustrates her fragmented and inessential self. If Margaret were able to fulfill "a

passionate desire to transcend the limitations of self” and unify with Ellen, the achievement would go unrecognized (“The Woman in Love” 28).

With indifference to mere actions—like those taken by Margaret—Ellen invests in relationships, however imperfectly. She reveals an interest in her subjectivity, as a being who can relate and be related to, in considering her origins: her father, Roger, and mother, May-Ellen. In another nod to *Confessions of Cherubino’s* insufficiently acknowledged participation in feminist conversations of its time, Harris’s characters reflect some of the most pervasive concerns surrounding origins and their significance. Cixous condemns “that false question of origin, that tall tale sustained by male privilege,” with her criticism of Freudian psychoanalysis both in culture at large and specifically in literary history, where “all refers back to man...his desire to be (at) the origin” (“Sorties” 92-93). Harris, however, effectively upends the traditional interest in (male) origins by eliminating the heterosexual male altogether. As such, she provides a means of representing the lesbian outside of the confines of an argument that ultimately leads back to a phallogocentric definition of power. This decidedly lesbian treatment—to originate ambiguously and from a point which is already outcast and deviant, an origin inherently inessential—creates a literature in which lesbian experience can be separated from male privilege, echoing Kristeva’s assertion that woman exists beyond such ideological frameworks.

Roger’s bisexuality is a creation of Ellen’s remembrance of him after she steps into his boots and imagines an amalgamation of her father and herself that propositions men and women along her father’s mail delivery route. Ellen is able to enact multiple identities, or several fragments of one, through her integration of Roger’s desire into her own. Harris offers a Roger who exists primarily in recollections by family members or Ellen’s fantastical imaginings, and as

such, (the male half of) Ellen's origins become self-created and ambiguous, much like women's and lesbian literature in both Cixous's and Harris's estimations.

Ellen's interactions with her mother are more grounded and less fantastical, though still highly dramatic. In a tense moment with the "dirty old woman" (124) after her father's death, Ellen belittles her mother's grief: "Just shut up, Mama...I said, just shut up, Mama..." and swallows a pearl from a necklace that breaks as May-Ellen jerks it from her own neck (139). The pearls serve as symbols of divided and destroyed origins as May-Ellen "began pitching them, one by one, against her daughter" as she recalls all of Roger's faults and shortcomings (136). Ellen collects all thirty pearls from around the room and tastes one found in her father's boots, foretelling the bizarre vision of her father she will later have when wearing them. Since Ellen asserts she "stopped having a mother" once she has ceased to be a virgin, Ellen seeks to reclaim at least a symbolic purity, and in turn a new symbolic mother, by swallowing the pearl (Harris 31). Despite changing experiences of sexuality, Ellen continues to link purity with virginity in preservation of those "monstrously" lesbian qualities; Harris cannot "purify" Ellen and relinquish her to benign lesbianism in which sex makes her the "good girl."

Ellen's understanding of herself as sexual being drives her to attempt to eliminate half of her biological make-up, and Ellen's conflation of mother and lover speak to this competition. Ellen's mental conceptions of her mother become muddled with memories of Sanctissima, both women who produce competing versions of Ellen: pre- and post-lesbian action. Ellen becomes preoccupied with an identity represented by mutual exclusivity; she is either daughter or lesbian but must reconcile both parts of herself. In a vivid daydream, Ellen makes her choice of what will inform her next performance:

Ellen, cool, while her family choked with smoke in their beds, opened the door to her new home, the only home henceforth, the home of her self. Childhood burned around her; and mother, father, all the attendant blood that had fashioned the color of her eyes, the texture of her hair, the nature of her games until this moment, went, at her command, into the blaze with no greater value than carved sticks of walnut. Beneath her eyelids, Ellen set her house on fire. When she opened her eyes, she was grown and free. (132)

Ellen's creation of a "home of the self" speaks to an evolving understanding of love, as suggested by Cixous in "Rootprints." Cixous equates "scenes of origin" with "scenes of love" and recognizes the "proof [of love] is to bring back to the origin" (295). Instead of preserving physical roots that have been restrictive and disappointing, allowing them to define her, Ellen's new home shows her commitment to imperfectly perfect love. Leaving the scene of her imagination and re-birth, Ellen "took Sanctissima, Margaret, the nameless soldier and her own benign future all in her arms and leaped, so slowly it was quite like flying, from the burning house" (Harris 132). Here Ellen's careful preservation of her lovers exemplifies the conscious self-creation and self-possession of *l'écriture féminine*, particularly because this self-possession necessitates rejection and destruction of home: the institution which has been most definitive of women and their entrapment in the "heterosexual matrix," in immanence.

Ellen's destruction of the home in which she enacts the roles of chaste and displeasing daughter gives rise to an "undomesticated" Ellen as performer negotiating new characters. Teresa de Lauretis cites Elaine Marks in her explanation that "to undomesticate the female body, one must dare reinscribe it in excess—as excess—in provocative counterimages sufficiently outrageous, passionate, verbally violent, and formally complex to both destroy the male [heterosexual] discourse on love and redesign the universe" (qtd. Smith 69). Ellen and Margaret

live and breathe excess: too many performances of too many selves; too much sex; too much love. The universe in which they live, the novel itself, has been redesigned from a straightforward narrative of girl-meets-girl to elusive dreams, expansive identities, and (im)perfect love.

Stripped of structure with no way of recognizing the “absolute at the heart,” coupled with her vicious treatment of paramours, how can Ellen approach anything recognized as love? The authors’ idiosyncrasies address this tension of *Confessions of Cherubino*. Wholly unconcerned with “making lesbian literature in any way acceptable to mainstream culture,” Harris creates an “unnatural creature” for which literature had provided no sufficient model: a “lesbian” “lover” (Hendin 227; Smith 69). Just as Margaret fails to mimic Ellen without losing her sanity because no stable Ellen exists, *Confessions of Cherubino* cannot copy a literary identity yet to be invented. With no model to guide the performance of an essence, Ellen and Margaret exist in imperfect perfection: a constant reimagining and compromise between love of the self and love of the other, always already within and without. To echo Nicole Brossard, “If it were not lesbian, this text would make no sense” (qtd. Lauretis 155).

#### Furthering the Critical Response

Through Ellen and Margaret, Harris delivers highly artistic examples of that creature left alone by most of literature and even feminist investigations: the “lesbian as literature.” Though undoubtedly indulgent and dramatically fantastical, Ellen and Margaret represent an element of truth—key to Harris’s conception of real literature—for a lesbian experience. Lesbians exist ambiguously, contentiously, and in constant dispute with their self-creation and possession. *Confessions of Cherubino* acts as microcosm of the discourses occurring among prominent feminist theorists at the time of its publication and reception.



Despite its rich content and contemporary relevance, the novel, with Harris herself, remains inadequately acknowledged. This discussion of *Confessions of Cherubino* and its contextualization within its concurrent philosophies serves as an invitation to (re)visit Harris and her work. Many pieces present themselves to be sorted in continuing focus on *Confessions of Cherubino* as well as integrating study of the novel within a larger discussion of Harris's oeuvre. *Confessions of Cherubino*'s title and epigraph, taken from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, invite comparative character studies between the operatic Cherubino, a woman trickster in men's clothing, and Harris's own, young Ellen. Harris explains, "The characters are aspects of Cherubino, of the music" (Doar). With *Confessions of Cherubino*, she searches for "the ecstatic excitement" of Mozart's opera (Doar). For Fred Chappell, the musical ties are most important: "Without the music, the plot is utterly ridiculous: so many fresh and complicated alliances, so many changes of sex and meter" ("Erotic Force"). In addition to her seeming embrace of the French Feminists, Harris also draws upon the *flâneur/flâneuse* tradition evident in referencing the poems of Renée Vivien. The pregnant question of whether or not Ellen and Margaret are separate people or blended traces of the same person also remains.

To further contemporize the critical assessment of *Confessions of Cherubino*, elements of class and race theory must also be addressed. Harris's characters are precocious in their experiments in sexuality and gender presentations, but *Confessions of Cherubino* also offers brutal navigation of class relations and a progressive nod to malleable intersections of identity. Ellen's family, the Fairbankses, present several markers for class. The novel begins with Ellen at a boarding school receiving a "classical" education in Greek poetics and French literature. She adopts a different name and (particularly sexual) personality when she flees the upper-class melancholia of boarding school and shares company with a sordid barkeep and a poor soldier

boy. At home, the Fairbankses indulge aggrandizement. Her grandmother likens herself to a Parisian socialite tending her salon: “*Now* for me it’s Madame Récamier—stunning, immortal female, so much like *me!*” (Harris 124). Ellen’s uncles seem similarly transplanted from the *libertine* tradition—“style, elegance, upper class” punctuated by drug use and sexual indecency (141). For all the Fairbankses’ grandeur, the family contends with Ellen’s father’s illegitimate, biracial child, Venusberg, whose mother had been their housekeeper. Harris’s treatment of Venusberg’s sexuality provides a contrast to the dramatic glorification of Ellen’s and Margaret’s lesbianism.

With the seriousness necessitated by such convoluted plotlines of love, abuse, and marginalized identities, Bertha Harris seemingly would fall into that tired image of the classically humorless lesbian; unsurprisingly, however, Harris resists easy categorization. Dorothy Allison relates the Harris she knew: “Playful, passionate, she was the living example of a lesbian who was trying to enjoy her life, not give it over to the revolution” (203). So, to some extent, we are cautioned against taking any of these explorations and indulgences of lesbian love and lust too seriously. Demanding a seriousness at the exclusion of *interplay* risks repeating the dangers of a hierarchized system of exclusionary power, no less dangerous even if it were based on lesbian ambiguity instead of phallogocentric politics. Harris has revolutionized lesbian literature so thoroughly that we hardly know what to do with it, and this confusion among readers and critics is perhaps the funniest piece of this puzzle of difference and identity negotiation, since she has left so much for us in her wake.

## CHAPTER 3

### *CONFESSIONS OF CHERUBINO: CONTEMPORIZING THE CONVERSATION*

#### Bertha Harris and Dorothy Allison

As much as Bertha Harris's *Confessions of Cherubino* operates comfortably in poststructural feminist theory, the text is undeniably a Southern Gothic telling of a Sapphic coming-of-age. Ellen and Margaret's unconventional love story revels in duplicitous characters, ambiguous ethics, and artful violence. Beyond her own literary offerings, perhaps most significant and direct to her positioning as apotheosis of Sapphic Southern Gothic is Harris's influence upon another Carolinian, Dorothy Allison. Allison's writing has received widespread acclaim, including three Lambda Literary Awards, and her 1992 semi-autobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* was a National Book Award Finalist. Allison has credited Bertha Harris with catalyzing both her writing and participation in the lesbian feminist movements, but little critical attention has been given to tracing thematic connections among their respective works.

In "Bertha Harris, a Memoir," Allison describes Harris and details her experience as Harris's student in a writing class at the Sagaris Feminist Institute in 1975. Harris was an anxious and restless chain-smoker who aggressively condemned "good-girl literature, banal fiction where the woman is saved by the love of a good man (or a bad man, but a man anyway)" (201). In Harris's estimation, these contemptible stories were "cock-sucking literature" that jeopardized the specialness and authenticity of the lesbian experience of women who were not lost to men or treated simply (201). Instead of these "good-girl" stories, lesbian literature was supposed to tell the truth, give raw treatment to the reality of sexuality as well as its relationship to the social and political context within which it existed, especially if that existence was largely a struggle of self-assertion. Harris's aggressive teaching style and unforgiving estimation of the sentimental

“good girls” who kept lesbians and their literature void of power plays and violent sexuality met with a terrified but fascinated and receptive Allison.

Allison took “Bertha’s attitude and her admonition” as “a challenge to believe in herself,” and by proxy, her writing (Boone 24). Several of Allison’s writings speak to Harris’s influence, both implicitly and explicitly. In 1988’s *Trash*, Allison presents essays that reveal an exploration and development of personal and public identity reminiscent of Harris’s own Ellen and Margaret, but with evolution that reveals the changing political sentiment surrounding stories of survival, which have always been linked to the question of lesbian visibility and how one chooses to enact such visibility. Most prominently, many of the same questions of identity surrounding Harris’s protagonists of *Confessions of Cherubino* characterize the tension of young Ruth Anne “Bone,” Allison’s narrator of *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Published in 1992, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a violent work at once deeply linked to and divergent from Harris’s model.

Although seemingly far-removed from the ambiguous, conceptual lesbian extolled in Harris’s work, Allison’s writing is also inherently representative of the continuum of *l’écriture féminine*. To demonstrate this assertion and speak to the complementary relationship between form and function, this section offers a stylistic comparison of Harris and Allison’s writing that proves to bolster the concepts of identity formation born from traditional literary analysis. This section also furthers the project of engaging *Confessions of Cherubino* with works with which it is in thematic conversation. While lesbianism is a common topic in all writings by both Harris and Allison, *Confessions of Cherubino* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* center on women and their relationships with one another before adulthood, during their earliest investigations of self and sexuality.

The troubled construction of lesbian identity punctuates writings by both Harris and Allison. Comparative readings of Harris and Allison reveal that despite an evolution from nebulous, convoluted moments of construction to straightforward narration, the interest in or demonstration of fragmented identity remains constant. In company with coming-of-age narratives that bespeak the complex formation of identities at once fragile and aggressive, Harris and Allison, in their shared concern for creating the lesbian as serious literary subject, both illustrate the imperative to engage narrative with contemporary social and political themes and influences.

#### Language and Identity in *Confessions of Cherubino* and *Trash*

Harris and Allison achieve the “lesbian as literature” by related but different means. In keeping with the poststructural interest in *l’écriture féminine* established in section one, this section initiates the comparative analysis of Ellen’s and Allison’s narrator’s identities with a linguistic evaluation of how each character first asserts herself within the respective texts. Each narrator communicates a fragmented identity reflected in linguistic form: the traditional literary analyses of Harris’s work are supported by close analysis of linguistic features. Harris’s first treatment of Ellen’s and Margaret’s identities at the beginning of *Confessions* and Allison’s introduction of herself in the semi-autobiographical collection *Trash* provide rich examples of linguistic divergence despite similarity in content.

As noted in section one of this thesis, Harris’s construction of the two main characters of *Confessions of Cherubino* is so convoluted that *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* remarks on the uncertainty of whether Ellen and Margaret are separate people or separate aspects of one person. Techniques whereby Harris blurs the straightforward production of individual identities

include her use of pronouns and adjectival phrases. This tension of self begins the novel [each sentence numbered for easy referral]:

[1] I am Ellen, describing the self I have become. [2] I am also Ellen who is describing Margaret. [3] I have her now, as I have myself now, the way we are now; and I am holding us up and together, pushing us through hot sun to my house where my family, my lovers, my son, friends are clustered in their various sounds, sounds that Margaret and I are rejoining, will add to, will modify and make our own: song, piano notes, the glider's mental screech, sucking, the paintbrush's slap screaming, a gasp for breath, more screaming. [4] I have her now, taking her home the way she is now; but this is the way I was, and she was. (Harris 3)

Sentences [1] and [2] establish a parallel structure with which to consider the “individuals” Ellen and Margaret, differing only in the phrase or clause that gives additional adjectival or adverbial information. In sentence [1], “describing the self I have become” is a nonfinite verb phrase functioning adverbially, introduced by a present participle. The independent clause “I am Ellen” and the nonfinite verb phrase “describing the self I have become” can be inverted in order, but Harris effects a more determined and aggressive sense of self with the simple assertion “I am Ellen.” The act of being Ellen is more important than the act of description, and at the sentence level, the linking verb equates “I” with Ellen, instead of “I” with the act of describing. The privileging of “being Ellen” communicated through this structure may also suggest an inability to comprehend elements or influences beyond the self in a way that would allow the act of description, inherently dependent upon cognitive abilities of discernment, to feature more prominently in the sentence's syntax.

Instead, the act of description as a central element of identity is communicated by sentence [2] with the relative clause “who is describing Margaret,” introduced by the relative pronoun “who,” which serves to suggest that only after the assertion of the first sentence may identity expand to include the act of describing. This grammatical evolution reflects the continual forming and renegotiation of identity with which Ellen and Margaret dramatically grapple throughout the novel.

Compound-complex sentence [3] continues with a parallel framework for reading identities of Ellen and Margaret. “I have her” and “I have myself” mirror each other in both form and content. Both require a direct object, because “have” is a transitive verb. In the parallel structure, “her” is equated with “myself.” The dual, inseparable possession that plagues Ellen and Margaret’s relationships as subjects and objects is achieved by a philosophical understanding of the verb “have” as well as the necessitated direct object.

Sentence [3] also convolutes Margaret and Ellen’s identities with information rendered extraneous within a syntactic framework. After “I have her now,” the rest of the adverbial and adjectival clauses are grammatically unnecessary; Harris presents none of the information communicated in a way that stylistically or structurally suggests that it is essential to the reader’s construction of the characters. Instead, the adverbial “as I have myself now” and the adjectival “the way we are now” give secondary knowledge to the fact of Ellen’s simple possession of Margaret, a tense and inescapable possession of mind and body.

The second independent clause of sentence [3], “I am holding us up and together,” again relies upon a first-person personal pronoun and linking “be” verb to establish a strong-willed narrator, but one who can linguistically be reduced or replaced, suggesting a fragmented identity even at the sentence level. Additionally, the verb is fragmented: “holding up” communicates a

broken action that relies upon an adverbial particle for specificity. With Ellen and Margaret's violence and self-indulgence throughout *Confessions*, this sentence serves as a grammatical portension of chaotic action and weak or removed justifications.

Sentence [3] also speaks to this suggestion of tumultuous action with continual listing of verbs that gradually reveal progressive or future action and situate the narrator in the realm of potential or hypothetical action instead of the assertiveness established in sentences [1] and [2]. None of the actions that inform the girls' identities has been completed and communicated through past tense verbs; instead, their activity, like their selves, is fluid and perpetually nebulous.

Sentence [4] dilutes some of this ambiguity by offering a more direct declaration, though still compound-complex. "I have her now" is more reminiscent of the self-assurity of sentences [1] and [2], but the transitive verb denotes again an incomplete subject and action. That the direct object, Margaret, is the required element of the sentence grammatically offers an inseparable Ellen and Margaret, signifying the great tension between separate and blurred identities throughout the novel. With the closing sentence, Harris finally offers a verb marked for past tense, indicating that Margaret and Ellen are capable of completing and reconciling past circumstances in their constructions of identity, but again their state is inseparable. "This is the way I was, and she was," Harris writes. The way they have been is the same, solidifying within the first paragraph the complex, amorphous identities that permeate *Confessions* through language and style that mirror the girls' characteristic erratic actions—attempting murder and fantasizing bizarre sex acts, to name a few.

Given that Allison's material is semi-autobiographical and her writing style more direct than Harris's, her narrator appears less capricious than Ellen and Margaret, but the assertion of



identity is still a multi-step process reflected at the level of the sentence. Allison's *Trash* presents a narrator who explores identity through extensive and emotional writing as a way to cope with childhood abuse and to reconcile a lesbian sexuality with Southern identity. A telling excerpt from the preface, "Deciding to Live," encapsulates this process:

[1] I wrote out my memories of the women. [2] My terror and lust for my own kind; the shouts and arguments; the long, slow glances and slower approaches; the way my hands always shook when I would finally touch the flesh I could barely admit I wanted, the way I could never ask for what I wanted, never accept it if they offered. [3] I twisted my fingers and chewed my lips over the subtle and deliberate lies I had told myself and them, the hidden stories of my life that lay in disguise behind the mocking stories I did tell—all the stories of my family, my childhood, and the relentless deadening poverty and shame I had always tried to hide because I knew no one would believe what I could tell them about it. (Allison 3)

Like Harris's Ellen, Allison's narrator's construction of identity in this selection depends upon relation to a love interest rendered incomplete, taboo, and problematic by hegemonic masculinity and culturally compulsive heterosexuality. The most glaring difference is found in verb tenses; while Margaret and Ellen operate most within the present and present progressive, Allison's narrator contends with only finished action, verbs inflected for past tense. The latter narrator thus exhibits an ability to synthesize events and recognize a beginning and end, skills Harris' characters arguably lack or neglect, much to their detriment.

Allison's sentence [1] more assertively establishes an identity separate from what follows and surrounds. Harris uses linking verbs; instead, Allison's "wrote" can operate as both an intransitive and transitive verb. Allison could have simply begun with "I wrote" and subject and

verb are able to stand alone and communicate a perhaps tumultuous but more solid identity. Allison uses “wrote” as a transitive verb, however, with “memories” as direct object. The possessive pronoun determiner “my” reinforces the power of the subject “I”—she is able to act as possessor instead of possessed, she is able to recognize two selves: one in the present and one in the past of memories. Allison’s action is fragmented, similarly to Harris’s, but since the verb is not linking and “out” has double meaning as both an adverbial particle and a visible sexuality, Allison’s narrator’s self-assertion is not diminished in the way Harris’s is.

Additionally, the prepositional phrase “of the women” relegates the content of the memories to a syntactic position less prominent than her memories. As Allison has written, the narrator’s identity as subject is most important to the sentence. She writes memories of women, but the women are not granted as much power as if Allison had composed “I write out the women of my memories.” Instead, Allison gives no indication, as Harris does, that her narrator’s identity as a single being is threatened with dissolution by outside women. Others inform her construction of identity, but their influences do not convolute her individuality.

Sentence [2] continues the solidity of the narrator’s identity: she can possess not only external concepts (women in her memories), but her own sensibilities as well. She must wrestle with *her* terror, *her* lust, *her* own kind. The repetition of possessive pronoun determiners reinforces the distinct self she is able to understand and operate as. A pivotal moment and possible independent clause, “I would finally touch the flesh,” is couched in a subordinate clause functioning adverbially, introduced by the subordinating conjunction “when.” The other instances of “I” all function in restrictive relative clauses (“I could barely admit I wanted, the way I could never ask for what I wanted”) with elided relative pronouns.

Sentence [3] continues in a similar length with another compound-complex structure, but the insecurity and alienation of the dangling modifiers that precede it are dissipated. The narrator adopts once more an assured sense of self: “I twisted my fingers and chewed my lips” asserts the same fixed identity of Allison’s first sentence. The verb “twisted” accomplishes self-ownership regardless of whether it is read as transitive or intransitive; in both functions, the self and its elements twist. The possessive pronoun determiner reiterates her self-ownership. “Chewed” cannot be read as flexibly, but the direct object, “lips,” which belong to her, does not disrupt the assertion that has been regained by the narrator.

The following verb constructions in past tense again indicate an ownership that extends from the physical self to past events and the psychological implications therein. Allison employs the *have* and *do* auxiliaries for emphasis among the different ways of telling in which she has been involved, usually depicted as whole, truthful tellings, or incomplete revealings through lies of omission. The auxiliaries draw the distinction between the untold stories and the ones “I *had* told myself,” the “hidden stories of my life that lay in disguise behind the mocking stories I *did* tell” (emphasis mine). While this duality of visible and veiled stories influences Allison’s narrator and connects her to a similarly ambiguous identity which Harris’s Ellen and Margaret exhibit, the former demonstrates an ability to distinguish between the two; neither Ellen nor Margaret display the same self-awareness or self-separation.

In *Confessions of Cherubino* and *Trash* alike, Sapphic Southerners battle with outside forces of violence and discrimination as well as internal struggles of self- and dispossession. The latter conflicts of the self can never be fully removed from the cultural atmosphere but take precedent in these writings and speak to a conceptual synchronicity of Southern women’s writing achieved through different methods of language. Differences in genre alone do not account for

the diverging approaches to Southern lesbian identity exploration. While Ellen and Margaret may be wholly fictional creations (although perhaps inspired by Harris's experiences as a lesbian), and therefore perhaps more easily or dramatically manipulated, Allison's narrator in *Trash* remains primarily a literary creation inspired by autobiographical content.

Despite their geographic and contextual similarities, the stories of Harris and Allison develop differently; Allison's language reflects a departure from the overwrought obsession of "literariness" indulged by Harris in *Confessions of Cherubino* and perhaps necessitated by the political atmosphere of the 1970s lesbian/feminist movements. Instead, Allison's self-assertion and direct language signal the burgeoning aggressiveness that has come to characterize the 1990s answer to seventies-era "conceptual lesbianism," offering in its place an erasure of the distinctions between theory and practice. Allison explains in "Conceptual Lesbianism," which appears in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature*:

Ever since I heard the Ti-Grace Atkinson quote about feminism being the theory and lesbianism the practice, I've been uncomfortable with the odd glamour applied to the term *lesbian*. I use the word *glamour* deliberately, since I believe that what has grown up around the concept of lesbianism is not only an illusion of excitement, romance, and power, but an obscuring mystery. (Allison 136)

Allison's ruthless honesty that has become characteristic of her depiction of Southern lesbianism and its intersections with class is an obvious departure from the mysterious and conceptual "high art" invention employed by Harris, who took her cues from the likes of Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and Natalie Clifford Barney: magical "lesbians of the golden age of the 1920s" (Cherry 127). Harris explains in "The More Profound Nation" that these women "spent their time in refined enactment of that which was beautiful and fleeing from that which they knew as

ugliness” (79 qtd. Cherry 127-28). For Harris, the “truth” imperative of her writing, at the time of *Confessions of Cherubino*, involved a refashioning of the self that mirrored the ethereal ideal provided by these golden-age lesbians and a reconciliation of the “ugliness” of her own circumstance, particularly “the self [she] was...before the women’s movement happened to [her]” (Harris “My Real Life”). In a proclamation that connects her immediately to Ellen’s own moment of self-assertion, Harris affirms, “Really, I am remembering what I thought of as a ‘self’—for, in reality, like every other woman who has not experienced liberation, I did not really exist” (Harris). *Confessions of Cherubino* is committed to explorations of both an idealized classical art and the politically-charged experience of self-possession that necessitates difficult, but liberating, realization of a lesbian self as “other.”

What Harris does to obscure and refine ugliness of identity construction, Allison tackles unsentimentally in both more autobiographical pieces like “Deciding to Live” and works of (more) fiction like *Bastard Out of Carolina*, as discussed below. Harris’s convoluted prose demonstrates her receptiveness to these almost mythical refinement of these lesbians, but she later critiqued her own indulgence of elaborate artistry in *Confessions of Cherubino*: the novel, along with *Catching Saradove*, “was still entrenched in the themes of Southern Gothic and Lesbian Gothick.... Both genres tend to be soaked in booze, blood, and tears; both are thick with madness, violence, suicide, and love’s tragic finales. I was perversely laboring to apply, perfected, my version of a literary technique that had died...” (Introduction to *Lover* xxvii-xxviii). With her self-criticism, we can hypothesize without too irresponsible a leap that Harris would welcome the shift Allison has offered upon the real, in-the-flesh and de-conceptualized, Southern lesbian. Harris’s willingness to reprimand her own offerings of lesbian literature hearken back to Allison’s depiction of her in “Bertha Harris, a Memoir:” Harris’s lesbian

literature is always changing to answer to the flux of the social and political conditions with which a marginalized lesbian identity must contend.

For all their differences, Harris's instantiation of the "lesbian as literature" and Allison's contrasting representation are not in conflict with one another. Instead of a rejection of her predecessor's approach, Allison's departure from Harris's style of deliberate obfuscation demonstrates that both conceptions of Sapphic identities operate, to some extent, as socio-political responses influenced by personal experience. No matter the decade, lesbian writing remains true to perhaps its most defining design; the personal is, and always has been, political.

#### Love and Trauma in *Confessions of Cherubino* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*

While some may argue that to characterize Harris' *Confessions of Cherubino* and Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* as largely explorations of love and identity is reductive, given that much anti-feminist (and even perhaps certain feminist) criticism of women centers on over-sentimentality, such an exploration instead acknowledges and gives critical treatment to themes made prominent in each text. *Not* to discuss love, when both novels so clearly focus on its presentation and enactment, would be irresponsible and reductive in that without such a line of investigation, little is left for consideration of young Margaret, Ellen, and Bone. We, the collective consciousness of reader or lesbian who live among everyday (hetero)sexism and phallogocentric ideologies, remain in that part of our scholarship where attention to stories of lesbian life—particularly from the "unprogressive" south—represent significant and radical contributions to the goals of honest visibility.

Also attendant with patriarchal ideologies, and invariably significant to conceptions of love, is the issue of abuse and suffering. In "'A Southern Expendable': Cultural Patriarchy, Maternal Abandonment, and Narrativization in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*,"

Natalie Carter asserts that this suffering is due to “a particularly Southern tradition of masculinity and violence” that characterizes “this heartbreaking tale of a daughter’s trauma and a mother’s abandonment” (Carter 1). Investigation of this abusive masculinity necessitates a reading of *Ellen and Bone* that draws upon trauma theory—significantly another indication of the fragmented nature of identity and the difficult influence of origins heralded by poststructural feminist theorists. Without opposing the critical links between *Confessions of Cherubino* and its contemporaneous philosophies, this section progresses the novel’s position within literary theory by incorporating Harris into the ongoing discussion of *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

In each of these depictions of Southern lesbians, the notion of love takes primacy for Ellen Fairbanks, Harris’ protagonist, and Allison’s Ruth Anne “Bone.” How the two girls understand, enact, and manipulate love provide the most significant instances of identity formation. The events that influence the characters’ perceptions of love are the same moments that involve prominent negotiations of self in relation to others. Ellen identifies love as “what I want most,” and in her eagerness, despite indulging in violence, infidelity, and manipulation, she, with Margaret in her arms, feels the two “approaching the conditions of perfect love” by the end of *Confessions of Cherubino* (Harris 211).

Similarly, drama and violence characterize Bone’s understanding of love. She intimates, “Love, at least love for a man not already part of the family, was something I was a little unsure about” (Allison 32). Bone’s hesitation proves warranted after her mother’s husband begins to abuse her, often citing his love for her and her mother as justification for such violence. Harris and Allison both demonstrate the complexity of the concept of love for Ellen and Bone through emerging sexual identities often punctuated by sexual abuse and their relationships with parental figures.

Ellen's understanding of her mother, May-Ellen, is immediately bound up in her sexual identity. Ellen asserts she "stopped having a mother" once she has ceased to be a virgin (Harris 31), and their most prominent exchange centers on sexual symbolism. Ellen's mother and Ellen's sexuality cannot coincide. Ellen also notes that after sex with another woman, her drama teacher Janet Sanctissima Hart, Margaret stopped loving her (31). If an invention of Ellen's psyche or subconscious, Margaret's abandonment highlights Ellen's understanding of sexual identity as a fragmentation.

Ellen's mental conceptions of her mother also become muddled with memories of Sanctissima. Ellen links the two in her description of her mother's music making as "the Sanctissima touch" (211). Ellen connects Margaret back to her mother through Sanctissima as well. Hallmark of the confusion as to whether or not Margaret is a separate entity or a psychological invention of Ellen's identity construction, the latter often characterizes Margaret as a ghost or ethereal being. In a dramatic scene with Sanctissima in which Ellen condemns her sexual proclivities and predatory inclinations, Ellen declares, "If I could get me a ghost... then I wouldn't need you or anything like you for the rest of my days" (44). Ellen rejects Sanctissima in much the same way she rejects her mother, and both abandonments are caught up in her developing sexual identity. May-Ellen, along with her other representatives, functions primarily as a way for Ellen to reject notions of a stable or satisfying origin.

Ironically, May-Ellen acknowledges her own fragmented identity and could potentially lessen the feelings of restless alienation Ellen experiences in "coming undone." May-Ellen also appears to have a mental break of sorts in her recollection of her romance with Ellen's father, Roger. "She looks through her daughter" and is transported to a time when "her daughter was no longer in the room; she hadn't even been born" (135). Like Ellen, at the onset of this scene, she



experiences the realization of the loss of a self constructed through abandonment of home and newfound sexuality. Ellen rejects any maternal wisdom May-Ellen could offer and perhaps revels in her coming-of-age marked by violence and manipulation of her own lovers.

Correspondingly, *Bastard Out of Carolina* immediately establishes the power of the maternal figure and becomes a relentless exercise in simultaneous defiance of and longing for it. Bone's mother, Anney, is absent from her daughter's naming: "My mama didn't have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasn't there" (Allison 1). Carter reads this first instance of maternal absence as both "symbolic and literal" because, in addition to her unconsciousness during Bone's birth, Anney remains (willfully) ignorant of step-father Glen's abuse of her daughter and takes minimal action to protect Bone (Carter 2). Whereas Ellen instigates her mother's symbolic and literal absence by forcefully denying May-Ellen's participation in her life and swallowing the pearl, the younger Bone has less influence over her circumstance.

Anney's absence also leads to confusion over how to spell Bone's real name, Ruth Anne, and from the beginning, Bone's identity is made all the more contentious over the "bastard" annotation marking her birth records, which Anney longs to destroy. Anney's role in not only the formation of but also destruction and manipulation of her daughter's identity foreshadows the struggles Bone will have regarding her place in the Boatwright family as well as her construction of personal identity.

An oddball among her family—"the strangest girl-child [the Boatwrights] got"—Bone recognizes the value of performance in identity in order to form a relationship with her mother (27). Bone's desire to connect with and be loved by her mother drives much of her identity negotiations and realizations of self *performed*, the outward enactment of herself, versus self *experienced*, the interior identity often kept from others. Bone longs for Anney's attention

enough that she is willing to keep her long, tangled hair and tolerate the pain of grooming it so she is guaranteed time with her mother: “I would have cut off my head before I let them cut my hair and lost the unspeakable pleasure of being drawn up onto Mama’s lap every evening” (30-31). The sacrifice of avoiding a haircut may seem trivial, but this small compromise of identity, represented by a longstanding symbol of femininity and intergenerational communication among women, establishes the relationship of sacrifice Bone endures for the sake of her mother’s happiness, for the sake of her love for her mother.

The most devastating sacrifice comes when, after Aunt Raylene coaxes, “You be happy for her, Bone. You let your mama know you are happy so she can heal her heart” (49), Bone remains silent about Glen’s abuse that has begun once Anney has lost their baby. She understands love for her mother as a relationship in which she endures vicious pain without rescue. Throughout the novel, Anney chooses Glen over Bone, further solidifying Bone’s tragic conception of love: a force of violence. After one of Glen’s particularly brutal beatings, Bone draws attention to the shortcomings of her relationship with her mother and articulates her interpretation of love as violence: “I wanted her to go on talking and understand without me saying anything. I wanted her to love me enough to leave him, to pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be” (107). Bone’s wishes also demonstrate how the figure of the father, like that of the mother, is inherently bound up in origins and identities. While Anney’s fixation on Bone’s bastard status suggests the need for a father, Boatwright family lore establishes Bone’s rejection of her father early in her life. Aunt Alma laughs over recounting the one time Bone met her real father. Bone looks at him “like he wasn’t nothing but a servant,” then “let loose and pissed a pailful all down his sleeves, the front of his shirt, and right down his pants

halfway to his knees.” Alma exclaims, “You peed all over the son of a bitch!” (25) Even an infant Bone seems aware of the impending disconnect between daughter and father.

Bone asserts that her main interest in her father’s story is to bring her closer to her mother, who has “shut her mouth on her life.” Bone asks, “Do I look like my daddy?” Anney ignores the question, and Bone, dejected, admits, “It wasn’t even that I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn’t have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told” (31). That, for Bone, her father’s primary function is to access a silenced part of her mother exemplifies the extent to which Anney’s absence limits Bone’s own self-construction. Furthermore, the integral role of the father in this construction, even when that role is primarily one of absence (which is true for both Bone’s biological father and Glen’s violence as representative of the absence of functional fathering), reflects Carter’s assertion that “a ‘Southern’ identity is predicated upon concepts of hyper-masculinity and violence” (4). This dependency upon hyper-masculinity and violence demonstrates the continued privileging of the male as reference points for female identity as well as the sustained relevance of “liberatory politics” of lesbian writing as a means of renegotiating self-possession against a framework of masculine transcendence.

Anney’s marriage to Glen acts as an invitation to such violence “because patriarchal violence is so intrinsic to Southern culture—and particularly to the culture of this text’s era—Daddy Glen’s abuse of Bone may be horrifying and repulsive, but it is not entirely unexpected” (1-2). After the marriage—what Anney tells the children is “a marriage of all of us”—the text reflects the forced relationship of Glen as father to Bone and her sister Reese (42). Glen becomes Daddy Glen, even if Bone cannot call him “Daddy” herself; she tries to say it, “but it sounded funny in [her] head” (51). Glen exploits the children as pawns in his manipulation of Anney. She

is attracted to his fatherly attention to the girls, and he often vocalizes an interest in the girls being his and wanting them to love him. When he makes up with Anney after several bouts of aggressive behavior, he enacts his newfound fatherhood by forcing possession of the girls and demanding recognition as father. Glen whispers to Bone and Reese, “Call me Daddy. [...] You’re mine, all of you, mine” (36). However, everyone but Anney seems aware that Glen’s love is dangerous (41). Early on, before routine abuse and violence dominates her life, Bone astutely calls attention to the disparity between Glen’s vocal performance of fatherhood and his physical behavior at the wedding: “Mama’s eyes were soft with old hurt and new hope; Glen’s eyes told nothing” (43). The empty indifference Bone notices in Glen at a moment symbolic of union and love foretells the unconcern Glen displays when Bone searches his mannerisms for clues to indicate the validity of her experience of abuse, the truth in her recollections. She finds nothing.

Glen, of course, is no father: he first molests Bone in the parking lot of the hospital while Anney suffers a miscarriage; the abuse continues and evolves throughout the novel (46). Through the years of sexual abuse and emotional manipulation, Bone exhibits the sort of identity crises typical of sufferers of traumatic events: Bone’s sense of time becomes distorted as she struggles to recall the details of abuse, leading to doubt and denial (Carter 8). These feelings are further complicated by instances of Bone’s identification with her abuser. She expresses her desire to have strong hands like his and that both she and Glen benefit from a reputation gained by an intimidating temper. Bone embraces the fact that “a reputation for quick rages wasn’t necessarily a disadvantage. It could do you some good. Daddy Glen’s reputation for a hot temper made people very careful how they talked to him” (55). Bone, often relegated to positions of powerlessness, is drawn to the authority Glen performs even if she is the primary victim.

Accompanying abuse and gaslighting, Bone struggles to develop her conception of herself beyond Glen's toxicity; many times, she is defenseless against his insults and internalizes the identity he constructs for her. She comes to consider herself worthless, a problem to eradicate, somehow deserving of the abuse she endures. It is perhaps this acceptance of Glen's abuse coupled with the need for self-identification with a parental figure that leads to tragic, uncomfortable moments of compassion or sentimentality for Glen. Bone explains that when Glen touched her, "I would stand rigid, ashamed but unable to pull away, afraid of making him angry, afraid of what he might tell Mama, and at the same time, afraid of hurting his feelings" (108). This tension Bone identifies connects her experiences with Glen to those with her mother; although each parental figure treats Bone drastically differently, Bone must always contend with an outward identity often at odds with her inward understanding of herself. Ellen exhibits the same conflict of self in her attempts to reconcile an identity that is both a daughter (which she equates with celibacy) and a sexual being. Both Ellen and Bone turn to fantasies to aid in their processes of reconciliation and identity negotiation in the face of traumatic events.

In her reading of Anney and Bone's relationship, Carter posits that while the physical trauma of "childhood sexual abuse is a trauma which will almost unquestionably destroy the victim's entire sense of identity," it is the heartbreak of "Anney's abandonment, and not Glen's prolonged physical and sexual abuse, that is the source of [Bone's] most grievous trauma" (2). Owing to Harris's elusive prose and Ellen's nonlinear narrative, Ellen's "most grievous trauma" becomes more difficult to trace than Bone's, but Harris notes a similar significance of the disappearance of Ellen's origin as a traumatic event.

With their experiences of respective symbolic and literal absences of their homes, both Ellen's and Bone's fantasies represent cathartic enactment of scriptotherapy (writing about

trauma). Implementing trauma theorist Laurie Vickroy in her discussion of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Carter describes scriptotherapy's significance to understanding Allison's work because the technique

offers the possibility of reinventing the self, reconstructing the subject ideologically, and reassessing the past; this pertains well to many fictional narratives that focus on protagonists, like Bone, who attempt to survive domestic abuse by creating enabling stories and self-concepts, thereby recovering a sense of self and agency in the face of devastating losses. (Vickroy 8; Carter 2)

Each girl's fantasies serve to disrupt the power dynamics of their lived realities. Bone experiences a physical impetus for action but is ultimately unable to follow through. She is confused about what she would do to assert herself against Glen in real life (Allison 69), but as the abuse continues, Bone begins to live out fantasies in which she enacts an otherwise inaccessible power against him. In her daydreams, she defies Glen (116) and controls their interactions. She decides to forgive Glen, at the price of her death, but she still makes the decision, unlike her reality of indecision which surrounds the moments of abuse. Uncertainty clouds Bone's memories of the events, and she begins to question the validity of her own recollections. From the beginning, she characterizes the obscurity that tinges her experiences: "I remembered those moments in the hospital parking lot like a bad dream, hazy and shadowed" (51). The abstruse quality remains with Bone throughout the novel. Years later she explains that "sometimes I could almost convince myself that he had never held me tight to his hips, never put his hands down inside my clothes. I pretended it had all been a bad dream that would never come back" (142). Bone's desire to recast her experience and convince herself of a different

circumstance indicates her need for scriptotherapy, and her “almost” success speaks to the transformative power of self-possession without ignoring the reality of trauma.

Glen’s absence of acknowledgement of the violence he inflicts aids in Bone’s confusion and bolsters the power she derives from her fantasies as a way of identity formation. However, Bone’s fantasies in which she asserts herself over her abuser do not represent a sort of utopia of reclamation of power. Instead, the fantasies, like her real life, reflect a marred understanding of love that must involve self-sacrifice and violence. In addition to defying Glen in her fantasies, Bone explains that she is the only one in her family who would forgive him (116). The inclusion of her family here demonstrates that self-possession comes at the expense of familial accord and speaks to the prominence often given to family influence in the Southern Gothic genre in general (Carter 4). Whereas in her real life—from keeping her hair long and matted to denying Glen’s abuse—Bone routinely chooses the path of least resistance in her dealings with her family and sacrifices a truer identity expression, the fantasies depict Bone privileging her own sentiments, but she admits that after such a feat, “Then probably I would die” (116). Bone’s appropriation of power in fantasy does not neglect the complex reality of her situation. The fantasies then come to represent microcosms of lesbian literature as a whole in that their development is still in conversation with circumstances of their creation; lesbian power does not exist in isolation.

*Confessions of Cherubino*’s Ellen must likewise contend with an absent father (Harris 106) and construct his identity before reaching a fuller understanding of her own. Harris’s assertion of Roger’s abuse of Ellen is certainly less direct than Allison’s detail, but hints permeate the text. As with Bone, Ellen’s exchanges with her father in which she is most present or able to enact some sense of agency occur in fantasies. A ghostly exchange between Ellen and her dead father most strongly indicates that their relationship to one another has been similarly

plagued by abuse, and the reader, like Ellen, is charged with distinguishing reality from invention. The imagined or recollected Roger tells Ellen,

All that sexy stuff you been stuffing in your bonnet these last weeks—you started going at it right, but I was right there with you pushing, shoving it in, all that sugar candy that got you so hot—*it brought me back!* You got my number all right, baby—first time you thought *Fuck*, old Roger started crawling out of that grave. You said you'd do it, you did it—my sweet Resurrection-Baby! (158)

Ellen tells her father, “Stay dead, Daddy—I got better things to do with my time!” but Roger, a mailman who used his route as means of adultery, leads Ellen through a visitation of clients, both male and female (158). Winifred deGray Cherry asserts in “‘Outlaws with charm’: The Evolution of the Southern Lesbian Voice” that this scene serves as proof of Ellen’s embodiment of Cherubino, Mozart’s gender-bending character, and “allows Ellen to experiment with a masculine persona” but does not press upon the nature of the relationship between Roger and Ellen (142-43). Perhaps Ellen’s interest in sex with women serves as adequate explanation of such an experimentation, and Harris certainly provides ample material for a study of Ellen’s performance of gender, but the sexual matter suggests something amiss in the father/daughter relationship. Roger’s language towards Ellen—which could be either his or Ellen’s own spoken through him—gives an uncomfortable tone of sexualization to her relationship to her father.

It is Ellen who instigates action in her fantasy, and when Roger reprimands her desire to have sex with a man, he tells her, “Won’t you remember that as long as I’m here with you in these boots *you’re a man!*” Ellen’s retort mirrors Bone’s agency that has been relegated to fantasy: “‘Daddy, won’t you remember that as long as I’m here with you in these boots *you’re a girl!*” (Harris 161). In her fantasy, Ellen manifests the tumultuous reality of her sexuality but



exhibits a self-assertion she had never expressed to her father in real life. Similar to Bone's complicated, hate-riddled desire to be like Daddy Glen—or at least acknowledgement of similarities between the two—Ellen tells her uncle, “‘I would like to be the resurrection and the life of the mailman,’ believing it as she spoke it” (143). Ellen reveals this desire while she is naked, which implies the vulnerable nature of contending with one's origins as well as the sexual overtones that pollute her relationship to her father.

Another key moment in the exploration of the father figure occurs when Ellen, unsure of her own truth, posits, “‘Perhaps the nameless soldier's name was Roger” (189). A nameless Soldier Boy is not only the father of Ellen's child, but a potential referent to any of the soldiers who violate Margaret on the train. If we contend here that Margaret is indeed an underdeveloped or repressed aspect of Ellen's identity, the soldiers' rape of Margaret on the train becomes perhaps a reenactment (or renegotiation) of events from Ellen's childhood in a similar way that Bone recasts herself as the one with power in her own fantasies.

Both Ellen's and Bone's recastings indicate an underlying interest in understanding origin stories for the sake of identity creation. Owing to the violence at home and the general neglect still pervasive during times of relative calm at both the Boatwright and Fairbank households, each girl expresses eager interest in destroying her origins, both symbolically and physically. Bone began her life as a marked bastard and spends the majority of the novel fighting against the father figure literally forced upon her and at times aided by her mother. Through her fantasies she reclaims memory and creates an alternative to the helplessness she feels in her physical encounters with not only Glen, but her mother and aunts as well. Her desire to separate from home—the location of which often changes but is always linked to her mother, sister, and Glen—evolves into physical separation from her family when she moves in with Aunt Ruth.

Anney, to varying degrees aware of something sinister between her husband and daughter, advocates for Bone's removal from the household. The mother's push for destruction of the home—in essence a self-sacrifice—further evidences the necessity of dissolution of the origin in order for Bone to establish an identity crafted by instead of given her.

Just as identity formation is an ongoing process, Bone's notion of and feelings toward home change and fluctuate throughout the novel. Proof of important identity work can be found in Bone's heretofore uncharacteristic resistance to her mother's wishes. Instead of complying with Anney's wishes at her own expense, Bone demonstrates a newfound self-possession after her time living with Aunt Ruth away from her mother, sister, and Glen. She explains to her mother that she will not go back with her no matter what Anney wishes for herself.

Ellen's destruction of home is limited more to hazy daydreams than Bone's because the former girl's removal from home is necessitated by school instead of instigated by explicit traumatic events. The most salient evidence of Ellen's destruction comes from her imaginings that detail a bitter fire that destroys the blood that made her. She systematically culls the elements of her origins that have no part of her new, intentionally crafted identity:

Ellen, cool, while her family choked with smoke in their beds, opened the door to her new home, the only home henceforth, the home of her self. Childhood burned around her; and mother, father, all the attendant blood that had fashioned the color of her eyes, the texture of her hair, the nature of her games until this moment, went, at her command, into the blaze with no greater value than carved sticks of walnut. Beneath her eyelids, Ellen set her house on fire. When she opened her eyes, she was grown and free. (132)

Like Bone, Ellen must separate herself from the limitations of her origins to allow for a more authentic (but, importantly, still malleable) identity.

While Carter and Vickroy, among others, have acknowledged the role of trauma theory and particularly scriptotherapy in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, no such discussion involves *Confessions of Cherubino* and a comparison of Allison's and Harris's treatment of similar circumstance. For both Bone and Ellen, fire plays a prominent role in these fantasies of destruction and new birth of self. Beyond the symbolism of total destruction and "phoenix from the ashes"-type rebirths, fire also entails a markedly sexual quality impossible to ignore. While the connection, if any, between sexual abuse and sexual identity remains a subject of contentious debate among feminist scholars and trauma psychologists, both texts nevertheless suggest a link between the two that deserves examination and situation within the larger paradigm of identity formation through an understanding of love.

Bone's fantasies make possible an otherwise inaccessible self-possession that is almost always communicated as sexual release brought on by scenes of bondage and power dynamics that may or may not involve Glen himself. Power is obviously the motivator for abuse, not any sort of sexual attraction; however, Allison suggests that young Bone has conflated the two because of not only the sexual gratification that comes from fantasies involving her own abuse but also Bone's feelings of shame surrounding her masturbation. Bone struggles,

I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. I lived in a world of shame.... I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but *I* was the one who masturbated. *I* did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it? (Allison 113)

In “Celebrating Queer and Lesbian Desires with Dorothy Allison: From Moral Monstrosity to the Beautiful Materiality of the Body,” Mélanie Grué asserts that, as evidenced above, “pleasure and violence uneasily associate” (135). Allison’s work suggests that a conflation of lover and sexual pleasure with abuser and the power he enacts has been a hallmark of her exercises in scriptotherapy. Like Carter, Grué recognizes the power of (re)invention of not only the self, but sexual pleasure, Bone allows herself in her fantasies (Carter 2; Grué 134).

Harris also integrates elements of sexual pleasure into Ellen’s daydreams involving her own sufferings. If Margaret is an aspect of Ellen’s identity as opposed to a separate person altogether, then Ellen’s interactions with Margaret can be understood as masturbatory fantasies of sorts—exchanges beyond what is strictly real. Ellen wants to have sex with Margaret (101) and realizes that Margaret’s mental break is her own fault because of this intense, unsatisfied desire. Since Margaret represents Ellen’s mother, her lover, and the part of herself that acknowledges abuse by her father, as mentioned before, Ellen’s daydreams involve a sadomasochist self-manipulation for the purpose of sexual gratification.

An important consideration for the types of sexual gratification explored within these texts is the fact that they are undoubtedly lesbian, and both published within a time and communities historically violent towards women who enacted sexual desire with other women. If this marginal positioning of the lesbian identity signifies an inherently traumatic experience—the absence of self and the struggle of self-creation—then trauma theory’s suggestion of scriptotherapy as a lens with which to understand *Bastard Out of Carolina* and in turn *Confessions of Cherubino* serves to expand the cultural purpose of lesbian women’s writing. Carter notes the validity of the assertion “that the entirety of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is an act of scriptotherapy for Allison, largely due to the fact that the author herself claims that the novel is a

work of fictional autobiography” (2n2). While this explanation of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is tempting and plausible, lesbian writing also demands privileging of the ambiguous origin, the uneasy but celebrated acceptance of the contingency of identity. These demands caution against seeking an *a priori* source of information, an essence. Whether *Bastard Out of Carolina* is Allison’s scriptotherapy or not, the novel remains, in true Harris fashion, a self-created lesbian as literature, wrought fantastically, in every sense of the word.

Although the details of Harris’s personal life remain elusive, so we cannot necessarily assert that she experienced similar trauma to that of Allison, Harris’s early fixation with the socialite lesbians of modernity (and just how far her own reality was from their ideal) and her personal revolution inspired by the women’s movement that led to her creation of *Confessions of Cherubino* position the novel within a space characterized by a conceptual trauma perhaps exemplified in all lesbian writing. If women’s and lesbian literature have always been inherently liberatory acts, then they have by necessity resisted a traumatic silencing and embodied the renegotiation of identity, as contextualized within the considerations of love and origins, that characterizes scriptotherapy, a contemporary instantiation of self-possession: a means to survival and reimagining of the self.

#### An Evolving Lesbian as Literature

The works of Bertha Harris and Dorothy Allison exemplify an evolution of Southern lesbian narratives from the conceptual identity politics at play during the 1970s to the relentless honesty and unsentimental depiction of poverty as it intersects with sexuality. While stylistically different, both Harris and Allison diverge from the “good-girl” banality of stories that simplified the lesbian experience for the comfort of others. Instead, each author reverences the complexity and ambiguity illustrative of lesbian identity without neglecting the traumatic elements that

accompany such identity formation for the sake of a comfortable ideal. Harris and Allison invite and glorify contradictory discomfort. Without attention to trauma, in whatever form it takes, neither Harris nor Allison would have accessed the liberatory power of such texts because they would have committed, for Harris at least, the literary equivalent of a mortal sin: dishonesty. “We’ve got to tell the truth,” Harris repeated to Allison’s class at Sagaris (“Memoir” 205). For Harris and Allison, like many lesbians, truth of their lives was only accessed through investigation and reconciliation of sexuality with other parts of their identities (like class or regional affiliations). In their recastings of origins and the love, or in many cases absence of love, experienced within the family dynamics of home, Harris and Allison honor that most affectionately monstrous invention: the “lesbian as literature.”

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Literary engagement with the expansive *Confessions of Cherubino* invites a revisitation to one of the most formative periods of critical discourse within feminist and lesbian literatures and demonstrates how that discourse extended beyond the philosophical theory of contemporary France to the Gothic South. Bertha Harris has not gone wholly underappreciated, but much work remains to be done to honor her grievously neglected oeuvre. Revitalizing the literary conversation surrounding Harris, which should extend well beyond this thesis, recasts the landscape of lesbian and Southern literatures to include the quarrelsome, overwrought, dramatically artistic *Confessions of Cherubino*. Harris's engagement with sexuality as it intersects with regional and class identities ensures that her work transcends the limitations of its contemporaneous philosophies of the 1970s and would serve the contemporary, intersectional critic equally as well.

Critical negligence stems perhaps from Harris's indulgent and purposeful obscuring of the narrative to give reverence to the "lesbian as literature," the ambiguous and monstrous creation she considered it to be. However, to align Harris with only the theoretical lesbian is a great injustice. Her fiction blends elements of high art with sordid matters of real life: sex, abuse, and the ambiguity of identity. For Harris, the impetus of such blending, and for presumably all of her fiction, was the obligation to communicate the truth(s) of lesbian experience. Harris's own truth encompassed reconciling the mythical socialite lesbian of her obsessions with her own poor and unglamorous circumstance. Just as Harris worked to preserve and transform the ethereal energies of Djuna Barnes and Natalie Clifford Barney and reconcile those differences with her own experience, lesbian authors who followed have taken cue from Harris's insistence on truth

and made it their own. The traces from Harris's influences to Harris's own work, and further still to Harris's successors, offer an abundant area of study beyond the scope of this project.

What this project does accomplish, however, is to draw attention to a seemingly pivotal author among lesbian social and literary movements, who, despite momentary recognition, remains understudied and largely uninvestigated. Queer and women's communities are still experiencing an invigorating period of critical self-examination and assertion of powerful participation in social and literary histories that has gone unacknowledged or intentionally neglected because of societal pressures or restrictions on giving voice to queer experience.



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