

## Teaching Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* in the Age of the Trigger Warning

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The debate over trigger warnings has been ongoing, mostly among faculty (and administrators) who are either in favor of these warnings for protecting students against triggering material or opposed to these warnings for impinging on academic freedom. After a series of articles on the topic of trigger warnings appeared in *The Chronicle*, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a [statement](#), in August of 2014, indicating that these warnings pose a “threat to academic freedom,” and that “the demand for trigger warnings creates a repressive, ‘chilly climate’ for critical thinking in the classroom.” Since then, the conversation has continued, most notably at [American University](#), where the faculty voted against warning students about controversial material, claiming that “the academy must stand firm as a place that is open to diverse ideas and free expression” (qtd. in Friedersdorf). In fall of 2016, The University of Chicago sent out a [letter](#) to entering freshmen declaring the college a trigger warning free zone, in the name of protecting the “free exchange of ideas.” The ongoing debate and the responses from the AAUP, American University, and The University of Chicago have made me wonder: If I offer a trigger warning when teaching texts such as Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, am I alienating students from the novel unnecessarily? Am I prohibiting critical thinking? Am I limiting diversity and freedom? Am I reducing students to

victims? Or, am I acting responsibly to ensure that my students can make an informed decision about what kinds of content they consume?

In her essay, "[Trigger Happy](#)," Jenny Jarvie explains that trigger warnings originated in "self-help and feminist forums to help readers who might have post traumatic stress disorder to avoid graphic content that might cause painful memories, flashbacks, or panic attacks." These warnings have trickled over from feminist forums onto course syllabi. According to [Robin Wilson](#), students' requests for trigger warnings have grown more varied and some professors have responded by removing "sensitive material altogether, before students even ask for warnings." While it would be a shame to remove Allison's novel from my syllabus, it seems as though faculty and students are at odds on the issue of trigger warnings. The academy is still largely undecided on whether to include these warnings on syllabi, state them verbally, or leave them out of the conversation altogether. One of the issues at hand is how to decide what should be considered "sensitive material." As Jarvie points out, topics as diverse as colonialism, addiction, suicide, homophobia, ableism, and alcoholism have the potential to elicit unwanted, emotional reactions. While I believe in providing a safe space for learning in the classroom, I want to ensure that I am not limiting critical thinking and intellectual growth.

The debate over trigger warnings is particularly significant given the current cultural climate. In November of 2014, *Rolling Stone* published a story about the gang rape of a University of Virginia student. The story, which detailed a brutal attack, was later [recalled](#) after evidence suggested that it might have been fabricated. Even if the story was [not true](#), it served to bring to the forefront questions about rape on college campuses, including the alarming number

of incidents and the improper procedures for handling accusations. There are currently hundreds of institutions being investigated for [Title IX violations](#), specifically regarding cases of sexual assault and rape. This, the [Larry Nassar case](#), and the [#MeToo movement](#), is the alarming backdrop for discussions over trigger warnings on syllabi and/or on college campuses. This backdrop can hardly be ignored when teaching a novel about a girl who is violently raped. In what follows, I discuss trigger warnings from the perspective of faculty on both sides of the debate. I argue for the importance of teaching potentially uncomfortable but culturally meaningful texts, such as Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and for the necessity of considering the material conditions and cultural circumstances—the embodied experiences of our students—when deciding whether to offer trigger warnings.

Whenever I have taught Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I have warned my students, on the first day of class, that it includes graphic descriptions of traumatic physical abuse and sexual violence. I warned students—verbally—about the content of Allison's novel long before trigger warnings became a hot-button issue, before I even knew what a trigger warning was. As a woman who is sensitive to [rape culture](#), I wanted my students to know ahead of time that we are going to be reading about physical violence and rape. That said, I was also concerned about potentially denying my students the opportunity to engage with difficult but culturally salient topics. Speaking specifically on the topic of teaching Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Rachel N. Spear explains, "I recognized that trauma narratives open up transformative opportunities for *all* course participants, and ultimately, these texts become catalysts for learning, self-actualization, and social consciousness" (53). It has been my

experience that students engage with texts more deeply (and learn more) when I openly acknowledge the difficulties involved in reading and discussing sensitive material.

Many of the articles written by faculty have pointed to experiences with students who have demanded that they provide warnings on topics ranging from abortion to incest to abuse to the Holocaust ([Essig](#), [Stokes](#), [Wilson](#), [Roff](#)). For example, [Laurie Essig](#) points out that many students and professors believe that “nearly everything should come with a trigger warning” but that these warnings “are a very dangerous form of censorship because they’re done in the name of civility.” She writes, “I insist that there is a difference between an act and its representation” and calls for classrooms to be spaces where we can “talk about it, think about it, write about it, analyze it, and, in the end, learn to engage fully with all of it, even those parts that cause us to curl up in pain and sob.” I cannot be certain, but I think Dorothy Allison would agree with that latter sentiment. I agree with it too. The idea behind the trigger warning is not to scare my students away from certain kinds of texts, but to provide them with the opportunity to prepare to engage with materials that they may find disturbing.

As [Kate Manne](#) suggests, providing trigger warnings allows students the opportunity to manage any reactions that may occur as a result of reading or viewing disturbing content. She likens the experience of being triggered to becoming nauseated. One does not choose, she argues, to become nauseous. It just happens, suddenly and (usually) unpredictably. You cannot rationalize your way out of a sick stomach any more than you can a panic attack. The cost of providing a trigger warning, Manne suggests, outweighs any benefit of not allowing students the time to plan strategies for managing their stress and anxiety. While she worries about the

problem that mandating trigger warnings may pose to academic freedom, she also believes that professors should pay attention to something students seem to want and need. Anticipating all potential triggers is impossible, and it is certainly important not to reduce our students to victims, but I think providing a trigger warning is an act of kindness that accounts for the cultural conditions of our students' lives.

The first time I taught Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* was when I was a graduate student instructor in a composition class. Thinking back, this seems like a risky move. Despite the difficult content of the novel, I wanted to teach it because it tackles issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality in ways that allow readers to live in the world of its characters. And, it is exquisitely written. Take for example the following lines: "Hunger makes you restless. You dream about food—not just any food, but perfect food, the best food, magical meals, famous and awe-inspiring, the one piece of meat, the exact taste of buttery corn, tomatoes so ripe they split and sweeten the air, beans so crisp they snap between the teeth, gravy like mother's milk singing to your bloodstream" (71). With these words, Allison captures both the heartbreaking pain of hunger and the redemptive power of the imagination. She engages the senses in a way that embodies the reader within the magical world of the text. This novel has the means not only to captivate an audience but also to open the door for conversations about complex and intersecting cultural issues and anxieties. While I want to open this door, I also want to ensure that my students feel comfortable when examining the troubling circumstances the novel reveals.

Teaching *Bastard Out of Carolina* has always been an interesting endeavor. The novel is told from the point of view of Ruth Anne Boatwright, affectionately known as Bone, who is physically and sexually abused and raped by her stepfather. Through Bone's narration, readers learn about the Boatwright clan, composed of hardened women, roughneck men, and troubled children. Allison's careful and compassionate construction of members of the Boatwright family, born and raised in rural South Carolina and struggling to maintain family ties in the face of profound poverty, provides students with a counter-cultural perspective of people who have been unfairly labeled as "trash." As Allison explains in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, "Peasants, that's what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us. Make it pretty or sad, laughable or haunting" (1). While *Bastard Out of Carolina* is more haunting than laughable, it offers a means to teach students about the intersections of cultural categories and trauma in ways that resonate because, as Allison writes, "fiction can be a harder piece of truth" (3). Effectively teaching this text requires open conversations about the power of storytelling to represent trauma as well as how we can learn from these representations.

Pairing Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* with *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* provides the broader cultural context in which Allison's novel is produced. In this latter text, Allison presents the family history, definitions of womanhood, shame of poverty, struggles with sexuality, trauma of child abuse, and the necessity of storytelling that inform the novel. She explains, in *Two or Three Things*, "All the things I can say about sexual abuse—about rape—

none of them are reasons. The words do not explain. Explanations almost drove me crazy, other people's explanations and my own" (44). Stories, on the other hand, provide a means by which to "talk about" it, to explain how "sex and violence, love and hatred" come together (45). These tensions appear in the novel in the juxtapositions between beauty and ugliness, physical pain and emotional escape, abuse and masturbation, and familial affection and maternal rejection.

Providing the cultural context helps students to recognize and to understand the reasons for telling (and reading) what Allison calls "mean" stories (38).

While students have expressed that reading this novel is difficult because of the vivid descriptions of sexual violence, they are generally receptive to working out the answers to the questions Allison raises over the course of the narrative, including: What does it mean to be poor? How are poor people perceived and treated by the larger culture? How does being poor affect self-perception and self-esteem? Why are poor people, especially girls and women, vulnerable to violence? I use these questions not only to ground students in the context of the novel but also to guide our discussions of some of the more difficult-to-read moments. I also ask students to write along with Bone—their questions and their reactions—in order to surface their ideas for small group work or large class discussions. Sometimes their writing includes more personal reflections. These often include important insights that lend to complex understandings of our world as it is revealed through the world of the text.

There are so many moments in the text that make for useful classroom discussions. My students have been drawn to the mother-daughter relationship depicted in the novel. They have a difficult time understanding how a mother could make the choice, repeatedly, to stay with a man

who is hurting her daughter. As Natalie Carter explains, Anney loves her daughters, “however all of that love does not equate into Anney knowing how to protect or provide for them” (889). After a fierce beating by “Daddy Glen,” Bone wishes her mother would “love me enough to leave him, to pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be” (107). Instead, Bone’s “Mama” is drawn into Daddy Glen’s arms, quieted by his pleas, and convinced he is sorry by his sobbing. Indeed, Bone’s mother has few options. She is driven by necessity to rely on Glen’s unsteady income and to work long hours to support her daughters. Because she is away so much, Bone is left with Daddy Glen and his restless hands. Bone explains, after the severe beating, “I tried to be careful, but something had come apart” (108). And, she is unable, for the rest of novel, to quell either his rage or his desire. Allison describes Bone’s experience in visceral terms the reader understands: “Daddy Glen smelled of sweat and Coca-Cola, of after-shave and cigarettes, but mostly of something I could not name—something acid, bitter, and sharp. Fear. It might have been fear. But I could have said if it was his fear or mine. I could not say anything” (109). Bone never tells her mom that Glen is molesting her. For her part, Anney mostly looks the other way when Glen beats her, begging Bone “not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad” (110). But, Bone cannot avoid making him mad, and Mama cannot make the decision to leave him.

Even the most difficult-to-read moments, in which Bone recalls the grisly details of being beaten and raped by her stepfather, lead to some of the greatest insights of the novel. For example, following a description of a horrific series of beatings, Bone explains,



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 world of shame. I hid my bruises as if they were evidence of crimes I had committed. I knew I was a sick disgusting person. I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but *I* was the one who masturbated. (113)

When teaching this text, I work with my students to explicate the ways in which Bone's shame is connected to being poor and being abused. I also help them to understand Bone's response to the trauma of physical and sexual abuse and violence she experiences, and we talk about the contradicting themes of self-love and self-hate that are present in the text. When students are aware of the themes present in the novel before they read it, they are better equipped to participate in the classroom conversations that lead to significant insights about the characters' experiences.

Teaching Allison's novel also allows for interesting discussions of the role that storytelling and spirituality play in the lives of the characters. In fact, the Boatwright clan is chock-full of storytellers. As Allison explains, Granny and Aunt Alma were always telling stories, "over and over again" (52). Uncle Earle is a storyteller. "He talked like Aunt Ruth did, as if he were continuing a conversation that was going on in his head all the time, musing, reminiscing, talking on and on" (125). Bone is, of course, a storyteller. She narrates her own story in the novel, but she also tells herself stories and involves her cousins in elaborate plots to pass the time, forget the stifling southern heat, and ignore the pain of hunger, loneliness, and despair (210). In the world of the text, storytelling is cathartic if not redemptive. When the

gospel revival tent goes up, Bone is drawn to the “soul-saving stories” within the music and in “pamphlets the Christian Ladies’ Aid Society passed out” (146). While her Uncle Earle is hell-bent on the idea that there is no God, he likes to talk about Jesus. Bone likes to listen, even “though every word out of his mouth was blasphemy” (146). Going to Sunday services resonates with Bone. As she explains, “The hunger, the lust, and the yearning were palpable. I understood that hunger as I understood nothing else, though I could not tell if what I truly hungered for was God or love or absolution. Salvation was complicated” (148). As Courtney George notes, “Allison’s fervent depictions of gospel revival tents and country radio stars invite readers to recover a musical portion of southern history where music acts not only as a space to reflect on the trauma of childhood abuse but also as a site to criticize and revise the exclusivity of an imagined southern community dependent on the hierarchies of race, class, and gender” (127). Indeed, Bone longs for a savior, and storytelling and spirituality offer palpable possibilities for salvation.

I am usually pleased with my students’ mature responses to the complex issues presented in the novel. My hope is that my students will begin to question the stereotypes and consider the complex characterizations of the members of the Boatwright family, of rural life, and of Bone’s response to the trauma of being abused. In response papers written for my class, students have pointed out that the Boatwright family lives up to and challenges stereotypical views of poor, southern white people. While the characters struggle with alcoholism and have a tendency towards violence, they are also loving and protective of their large, extended family. Students have also illustrated an understanding of how shame operates in the text, explaining that Bone

feels as though she is worthless and is sexually confused because of the abuse she endures. As these examples demonstrate, my students have been relatively successful in analyzing Allison's language and in recognizing the intersecting cultural problems at work in the text.

Despite the ongoing debate over trigger warnings in academia, we have not yet reached a consensus on whether to provide them to our students. My purpose here is not to develop a definitive answer, but to stress the importance of teaching texts dealing with troubling but pressing cultural problems. As much as I believe the university should be a safe place for students, I also believe that it should be a safe space for negotiating difficult texts and contexts. I will continue teaching Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and I will continue providing trigger warnings when teaching texts that include sensitive material. I do not believe that providing such warnings precludes students from reading the text and participating in the work of the course. I have never had a student choose to leave the class or to not read along. We (my students and I) have publicly acknowledged, as a group of scholars, that some of the passages depicting physical violence and rape are difficult to read, but we have agreed to study the text together anyway. I think airing these kinds of hesitations, openly in the classroom, can dispel feelings of discomfort and allow for more open communication about the important issues at stake in the text. While we have to be sure that our students feel as though they are in a safe environment on college campuses, it is also our responsibility to remind students that part of being safe is being free to read and study a diverse range of materials and texts.

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