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Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*: A Literary-Political Enterprise

In *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (2013), Jesmyn Ward sketches out her personal life story, reflecting on the untimely deaths of five beloved Black men in DeLisle, Mississippi. During this exploratory process, Ward contemplates her Black female identity in the South, which is underscored by her authorial presence for bearing witness to a long-standing grim reality in her hometown. She states that telling the story of her traumatic past in tandem with the DeLisle community's racial history gives a voice to those who are often silenced or overlooked. This essay examines the significance of bearing witness and characterization in Jesmyn Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped,* while referencing her second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), for an overall analysis of her work. To understand Ward's literary approach in her writing, I will analyze themes such as race, gender, class, and community. Therefore, I will argue that Jesmyn Ward's narrative structure in *Men We Reaped* renders her memoir as a literary-political enterprise, which, in turn, offers the reader a compelling perspective on the dynamics of race, gender, and socioeconomic class in rural Mississippi.

Jesmyn Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped*, has two "primary narrative strands" that are fundamentally two stories—the story of her family history and her upbringing in DeLisle and the story of the five young Black men who died between 2000 and 2004—which are braided together for the reader to understand the underlying message of emotional and psychological trauma (Keeble 47). As Keeble writes, "The unusual structure of *Men We Reaped* is linked to

another duality in the text: its impulses to narrate and work through the trauma of losing her brother while simultaneously examining the violence of systemic racism and inequality across generations" (47). This very framework illuminates the complex intertwined experiences of personal trauma and racial discrimination in the DeLisle community. Consider how the titled *"We Are…"* chapters are methodically interwoven into the layout of the book. Clearly, Ward's intent was to depict herself, her siblings, and the DeLisle community, or more broadly Black citizens in the South, as collective allegorical resonances that are symbolic of larger social issues within American culture. Her allegories of citizens neglected or abandoned by the American government in *Men We Reaped* are noteworthy because she presents the reader with not only a perspective of the self but a society. For instance, when reflecting on the Delisle community's troubled mindset in her memoir, she writes: "My entire community suffered from a lack of trust: we didn't trust society to provide the basics of a good education, safety, access to good jobs, fairness in the justice system. And even as we distrusted the society around us, the culture that cornered us and told us were perpetually less, we distrusted each other" (169). Additionally, in her essay, "My True South," Ward says that living in the American South has become a generational curse for her family— "so many accounts of racial terror, passed down over the decades" (41). She further states, "There is an American assumption underlying every bit of this terror: I see you, I know you, and you are nothing" (41).

Crucially though, in *Men We Reaped*, Ward punctuates her travel through time by weaving together past, present, and future in which she synchronizes the narration of her family history, chronologically, even as she tells the story of the five young Black men in reverse order. Ward's decision to deviate from the standard timeline for narrating these men's stories indeed affects the readability. However, Ward's multiplex passage of time "gets to the heart" of the

memoir when she "marches forward through the past and backward from the present," finally, meeting in the middle with her brother's death to emphasize her grief and loss. (*Men We Reaped* 8). The complicated timeline in *Men We Reaped* is an effective element for providing the reader with her intended purpose: "…I'll understand a bit better why this epidemic happened, about how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread here. Hopefully, I'll understand why my brother died while I live…" (*Men We Reaped* 8).

Moreover, the two modes of narratives demonstrate the "wider permutations and consequences" in the DeLisle community, whereby Ward builds the contexts of systemic issues related to poverty, racism, and state neglect, while simultaneously threading the stories of the five tragic deaths and the exploration of her Black female identity (Keeble 47). As Keeble elucidates: "The connections are systemic inequality, structural racism, and the absence of the state, and through the narrative's unique structure, [Ward] is able to make these connections visible" (48). Consequently, Ward's account of systemic racial discrimination in *Men We Reaped* demonstrates how her own psychological and emotional trauma is unresolved which, certainly, sets the stage for considering her fiction. This means that, there are many ways to map her progression as a writer because she is dealing with extreme grief and loss in her life. And arguably, her second novel, *Salvage the Bones*, was perhaps the catalyst for her writing this memoir.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward depicts the pre-existing socioeconomic challenges facing an African American family living along the Gulf Coast before a category five hurricane strikes the area. Over the course of the novel, she sheds light on how a natural disaster exacerbates the social and economic disparities within a community, especially for an impoverished African

American family. Ward thus addresses the "deeply embedded history of racism" in this novel (Clark 342). Clark argues that Ward's female protagonist, Ecsh Batiste, and her poor African American family are "more complex than a simple set of stereotypical perceptions," and more so, how Hurricane Katrina impacts the characters' social and cultural conditions in their fictional Mississippi town (349). Intriguingly, Katrina's aftermath is the catastrophic motif in which Ward also employs in *Men We Reaped* to further convey the message of the precarity of life in her DeLisle community. Ward writes, for instance: "There was an older Black man who set up shop with a card table and a folding chair outside the doors of the local supermarket in Pass Christian, a supermarket that would disappear after Hurricane Katrina, its steel beams bent to look like twisted, spindly trees" (244). Similarly, Ward, too, illustrates in *Salvage the Bones* how the changes in the environmental conditions in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi contribute to the lack of progress in the rural South, especially for African American families. In other words, the Batiste family's narrative in the novel reveals how a calamitous event, such as a hurricane, amplifies poor Black people's social and cultural neglect by the government. As Clark explains, "[T]he black family is literally lost in the woods, trapped in the lowlands that are susceptible, and will succumb to flood damage, whilst the white family evokes the American fantasy of the 'city upon a hill'" (346). As such, the catastrophic motif of Katrina's aftermath in the two texts highlights Ward's witnessing of state neglect with respect to an impoverished community in the South. In an interview with Gwen Ifill on *PBS Newshour,* Ward explained that she "'wanted to write about the experiences of the poor, and the black and the rural people of the South, so that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important, as theirs' (Bosman)" (Crawford 73).

In doing so, Ward situates her contemporary self in the history of the South wherein she excavates the darkest secrets about America's colonial past. According to Moynihan, Ward's strategy of characterization and narrative voice in her work facilitates "a critique of discourses surrounding the African American family" (556). Thus, Ward's fictional Bois Sauvage—that is, the mimicry of DeLisle—reveals a "narrative ruthlessness" for navigating one's traumatic past through the fiction genre (*Salvage the Bones* 266). Moynihan further states that Ward strategically invokes William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) to "confer on the characters" in *Salvage the Bones* a "dignity denied [African Americans] in the post-Katrina moment" (551). With Faulkner's model as her guide, Ward creates the semblance of a real-life world in which she challenges the "pathologizing of the African American family" (Moynihan 552). In this sense, the fictitious precursor to her memoir allots Ward a vehicle to combat those societal touchstones that are tormenting her.

Hence, in her memoir, Ward probes the "institutionalized madness of American racism" to address the devaluation of Black lives in the South (Fine 50). To fully capture the themes of racism and classicism in the characterization of her community and its people, she provides the reader acute insight into the gender roles within a rural landscape: "We did not trust our fathers to raise us, to provide for us. Because we trusted nothing, we endeavored to protect ourselves, boys becoming misogynistic and violent, girls turning duplicitous, all of us hopeless" (*Men We Reaped* 169). Consequently, Ward contextualizes America's long history of negative socio-political ideologies or policies infiltrating the lives of Black men and women in the South. According to Keeble, the "traumatic ruptures" of *Men We Reaped*, as in *Salvage the Bones*, are compounded by the "ongoing slow violence of neoliberalism: the lack of job opportunities, health care, support, and a pervasive poverty" (47). In *Salvage the Bones*, for instance, Ward

subtly interrogates the extreme ways that the "racialized histories of the South" shape Black masculinity (Clark 341). As Crawford explicates:

> With Mama's passing, conventional assumptions regarding gender roles would have Esch, now the only female in the family, step up and fill in as substitute maternal figure—especially once Esch discovers she is pregnant and herself becomes an expectant mother. Instead of Esch, that role mostly falls on her brothers. (77)

Objecting to "the conventional narrative assigned to poor, black, marginalized people in the South," Ward defiantly counters these harmful cultural assumptions about Black men as violent criminals or thugs by depicting the characters with more flattering dispositions (Crawford 75).

In stark contrast to *Salvage the Bones*, Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped*, is an explicit expression of how the legacy of racism affects young Black men and women in the American South. According to Swann, Ward is masterful at differentiating the gender differences, despite the overlap in their lived experiences in her hometown of DeLisle, Mississippi. Considering each young man's story and how they died—Roger's overdose, Ronald's suicide, C.J. and Joshua's car accidents—alongside the young women's individual struggles, specifically, Ward's constant battle with low self-esteem, we see a cohesively heartbreaking narrative of depression as well as alcohol and drug abuse. When discussing Ronald's addiction, Ward writes: "The hard facts of being a young Black man in the South, the endemic joblessness and poverty, and the ease of self-medicating with drugs disoriented him" (172). Because Ronald suffered from depression, his girlfriend, Selina, was the sole provider in taking care of their son. Accordingly, Swann points out: "As Ward makes clear, deep systemic oppression and gross institutional failures often claim

the very lives of young black men and culminate in the auspicious futures of young black women" (79).

And notably, the roles that men and women play in Ward's family and her community are significant to understanding how she transitions from the "personal to a regional and national context" (Keeble 48). When Ward recounts her father's departure from their family, she states: "This tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty. Sometimes color seems an accidental factor, but then it doesn't especially when one thinks of the forced fracturing of families that the earliest African Americans endured under the yoke of slavery" (131). Furthermore, Ward reveals "this tradition" and structural inequality in the memoir by vividly portraying her brother's limited opportunities in which he is forced to deal crack cocaine (131). In response to this revelation, Ward writes:

> I looked at the fine down over his top lip and his dark brown eyes and thought for the first time: *He knows something I don't*. Perhaps he'd looked into his own mirror and seen my father when I had only seen my father's absence. Perhaps my father taught my brother what it meant to be a Black man in the South too well: unsteady work, one dead-end job after another, institutions that systemically undervalue him as a worker, a citizen, a human being. (211)

Thus, as Keeble argues, "Moving precipitously from the personal to a regional and national context, Ward is explicit here that these are generational issues rooted in institutional racism and insists that the traumatic experiences of loss and violence she documents are understood in this context" (48).

Furthermore, in *Men We Reaped*, Ward recalls how their father's absence contributed to her low self-esteem as a Black female: "I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of

everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor, Black woman. Undervalued by her family, a perpetual workhorse. Undervalued by society regarding her labor and beauty" (135). That said, we must once again delve into *Salvage the Bones* to get a clearer picture of the writer's unresolved trauma. According to Fine, Ward writes "past the long history of stereotypical portrayals of African American girls and women" in literature (52). In this way, Ward and her female protagonist, Esch, journey together through the "myriad literary and cultural constructions of the maternal," particularly for African American girls (Fine 57). She tells this story from Esch's perspective, an African American pregnant fifteen-year-old, who is motherless and living in poverty with an alcoholic father and three brothers. Esch is perhaps Ward's alter-ego in literature wherein she creates a female character from her mother's anxiety and fears when she was a young Black girl in DeLisle: "My mother forbade me to date anyone (in or out of the school). Like most mothers in the Black South, she was terrified that I would become pregnant as a teenager" (*Men We Reaped* 206).

Fundamentally, in *Salvage the Bones*, Ward extends to the reader a poignant narrative about African American characters with "present-day cultural constructions of the African American community" (Fine 54). Hence, as Fine elucidates: "Through her complex portrayal of the African American response to Hurricane Katrina and of teenage, unwed, pregnant African American girls, Ward seeks to revisit not only literary representations but also popular conceptions of African American culture" (54). Lastly, when she later reflects on the memories of her mother in *Men We Reaped*, Ward provides the reader with an overall sense of her self-exploration coming full circle:

> I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of the poor southern Black woman. But as an adult, I see my mother's legacy anew. I

> see how all the burdens she bore, the burdens of her history and identity and of our country's history and identity, enabled her to manifest her greatest gifts…Without my mother's legacy, I would never have been able to look at this history of loss, this future where I will surely lose more, and write the narratives that remembers, write the narrative that says*: Hello. We are here. Listen*. (250-251)

After critically examining a few of the major thematic influences in both *Men We Reaped* and *Salvage the Bones,* my analysis reveals that Ward's writing is her platform for not only disputing conventional narratives about poor, African American people in the South but also a self-exploration for navigating her traumatic grief and loss as well. As a nonfiction writer, Ward's characterizations in her memoir about the collective trauma experienced by the citizens in her hometown community function as a social and political critique of American society at large. As such, her remembrance in *Men We Reaped* is indeed a literary-political enterprise because she exposes the exploitation and marginalization of a community that is often silenced by dominant interests and ideologies. Ultimately, Ward's memoir offers the reader a profound self-awareness for bearing witness to state abandonment or systemic racism in the rural South as well as an evocative journey for discovering the meaning of one's identity amid the dysfunction.

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