"Siblings, kinship and allegory in Jesmyn Ward's fiction and nonfiction"

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Abstract: This article examines the centrality of sibling relationships in Jesmyn Ward's fiction and nonfiction, focusing specifically on her second novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) but referencing all of her long-form works. It analyzes Ward's repeated depictions of siblings supporting each other in the absence of protective or nurturing parents, and argues that this can be read allegorically – as citizens supporting each other in the absence of the state. Using and developing Gary Johnson's notion of "intradiegetic allegory," it argues that Ward's specific narrative strategies reveal intersections between the experience of traumatic violence and systemic or "slow violence." Furthermore it examines Ward's writing in the context of critical debates about the enduring uses of trauma as an interpretive framework. For instance, while Lauren Berlant's influential argument for "moving away from the discourse of trauma… when describing what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts," suggests an emerging impasse between trauma and a new emphasis on the systemic, Ward's writing urges us to consider the ways traumatic events are experienced in the context of systemic violence.

"Siblings, kinship and allegory in Jesmyn Ward's fiction and nonfiction"

This article examines the centrality of sibling relationships in Jesmyn Ward's writing, with a particular focus on her novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013)..

Ward's abiding interest in these kinds of relationships has been constant even as she has worked across different genres and forms. Her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), is a coming of age story about twin brothers, raised by their blind grandmother. As the boys graduate high school and enter adulthood, the severely limited opportunities available to them put pressure on their lives. *Salvage the Bones* is, I argue, using Susan Fraiman's and Kristen J. Jacobson's definitions, a "domestic" novel, about the lives of teenage siblings surviving and supporting each other in the face of both everyday precarity and the imminent landfall of Hurricane Katrina. *Men We Reaped* is structured around the deaths of five young black men – Ward's own brother, Joshua Dedeaux, a cousin and three close family friends – who all died violent deaths between 2000-2004. Finally, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is a road novel in which a young teenager cares for his toddler-aged sister while their mother grapples with addiction and the trauma of having lost her own brother, Given, whose ghost haunts her throughout the narrative. Broadly then, we might classify these works in terms of genre or hybrid genre: a bildungsroman, domestic/disaster narrative, a memoir, and road novel/ghost story, all of which focus on intense sibling relationships. Just as Ward has worked across and within different genres adopting different formal and narrative strategies, her writing is also,

as several scholars have noted, richly and variously intertextual.[1] It is dense with literary allusion, explicit and oblique, and characters appear across the novels which all are set in the same fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi – an inner coastal town that in many ways approximates Ward's hometown of DeLisle, Mississippi. These intertextual strategies are often linked to Ward's thematic interest in sibling relationships and kinship. For example, there is a striking moment near the end of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, where characters from *Salvage the Bones* – Skeetah and Esch Batiste, the brother and sister whose relationship is at the heart of that novel – appear briefly in the story. This ephemeral moment occurs when hope is at its lowest ebb. Leonie, the drug-addicted, traumatized (by the violent death of her own brother) and struggling mother of Jojo and Kayla, spots Skeetah and Esch out of the window of her car. As she passes she recognizes them: "I see who it is. Skeetah and Eschelle, a brother and sister from the neighborhood. The siblings walk in sync, both of them bouncing. Esch says something, and Skeetah laughs…" (197). It is a small moment, but it is significant to the meanings of both novels. It reinforces the importance of sibling relationships as sources of strength in the absence of caring or nurturing parents. It also suggests there is hope for Jojo and Kayla in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* as Skeetah and Esch are "in sync," laughing and "bouncing" despite the systemic and traumatic violence they endure in *Salvage the Bones.* If Skeetah and Esch are surviving, then so can Kayla and Jojo.

In this article I argue that Ward's depictions of sibling relationships are rich with allegorical meaning and that this aspect of the texts illuminates intersections and overlaps between traumatic violence and systemic or "slow violence." Ward's work repeatedly depicts

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[1] Essays by Sinead Moynihan (2015) and Benjamin Eldon Stevens (2016) focus respectively on *Salvage The Bones*'s key diegetic intertexts: William Falkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and the Medea myth as it appears in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942). Other essays by Mary Ruth Marotte (2015) and Holly Cade Brown (2017) discuss Ward's intertextual references to other African American pregnancy narratives such as Toni Morrisson's *Beloved* (1987.

siblings struggling to support each other in the absence of protective parents, allegorizing the wider need for citizens to support each other in the absence of state or government protection or any kind of social safety net. In making this argument I note that the allegorical power of her writing is strengthened when her work is read and considered together, and that the shared settings of the texts invite such a reading (and I include the DeLisle of *Men We Reaped* as at least a major inspiration for the fictional Bois Sauvage). But here we arrive at a central question in the practice of reading allegory, and one that is often not adequately or explicitly addressed: is allegory an inherent part of the text(s) or is it a strategy for reading that is imposed on or applied to the texts? In this article, I follow and develop Gary Johnson's notion of "intradiegetic allegory," and will elaborate on this shortly (237). Fundamentally, though, I argue that allegory is a part of Ward's narrative strategies. This said, it is undoubtedly the case that Ward's allegories are strengthened when the texts are read together and this itself, of course, amounts to a kind of reading strategy. Ward's novels and memoir dramatize the lives of young people struggling with poverty, ill health, addiction, racial discrimination, limited opportunity, police brutality and natural disasters, and parents, while usually loving, are absent or preoccupied, ineffectual and sometimes violent. Even *Men We Reaped,* which celebrates Ward's mother's fortitude and resilience, also repeatedly emphasizes the consequences of the distractions she faced: the necessity of working multiple jobs while trying to sustain a fractious relationship and manage a home and four children mostly alone. In the text, Ward reveals this to be an endemic issue related to the systemic poverty faced by black citizens in the south and she describes her parent's experiences as generational: "both of my parents were given adult responsibilities too early, a necessity of growing up in fatherless households" (16). Crucially though, and as in her fiction, *Men We Reaped* consistently depicts sibling relationships as sources of strength in the absence of parental protection. This scene describing the young Ward and her brother is a good example:

"He was shaking, and I was shaking, but we could not cry. I hugged my brother in the dark. I was his big sister. My mother and father yelled at each other in the house, and as the bats fluttered overhead, dry as paper, I heard the sound of glass shattering, of wood splintering, of things breaking" (61). Here and across Ward's oeuvre, young siblings look to each other for strength while parents are distracted, neglectful or absent.

In none of Ward's works is there any support or intervention from the American state. In fact, government agencies are almost entirely invisible accept for when they pose a violent threat and there is certainly, for Ward's protagonists, the perennial threat of police brutality and/or incarceration.[2] Aside from posing a threat to wellbeing, though, the state is absent. Characters fend for themselves in a USA that has hollowed out its government services, stripped away welfare programs and removed its social safety nets. They inhabit what Anna Hartnell has called a "disenchanted America," where marginalization and inequality are structural. As Hartnell notes, Ward's protagonists are "victims of the fallout of globalization which outsourced US jobs overseas," decimating "vast swathes of urban and rural America alike" ("Cars Become Churches," p. 209). This reality is vivid in the depictions of Bois Sauvage in Ward's fiction, and its real world model, DeLisle in *Men We Reaped*. It also means that the allegorical narratives of citizens abandoned by or neglected by the state, are in dialogue with key aspects of the surface narratives of these texts: their settings and backdrops. Where relationships between characters (and the absence of relationships) allegorize state neglect, this is also vivid in the surface realism of the texts and indeed many critics and scholars have noted that Bois Sauvage is "like a character" in Ward's fiction, an aspect of her work that has drawn comparisons to William Falkner. Indeed, in foregrounding the allegorical nature of these works, I do not intend to diminish the power of their realism or

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[2] One vivid example of this is the unsettling scene in *Sing, Unburied Sing* when Leonie, Jojo, Kayla and Leonie's friend Misty are pulled over by a state trooper who draws his gun on the vulnerable Jojo.

other figurative modes. Rather, I want to point to connections between the distinct narrative modes. A starting point for this is the fact that across these texts, and particularly in *Salvage the Bones* and *Men We Reaped*, which I focus centrally on in this article, sibling relationships are intertwined with close family friendships to characters like Big Henry and Marquise in the former and an extended community of friends and family in the latter. Sibling relationships are thus closely related to wider experiences of kinship and community making the allegorical story of siblings representing citizens and community more compelling. More importantly, though, are subtle but powerful moments that emphasize this backdrop of state neglect in which these allegorical narratives are situated. For instance, in *Salvage the Bones*, as the siblings walk to the park in Bois Sauvage to socialize and play basketball, Esch describes how maintenance workers would annually, and "halfheartedly," tend to the overgrown space. Esch emphasizes their absence more than their work and concluding the passage with an evocative phrase, she links her siblings, community and family to the wild growth that is out of the control, care or proper concern of the state: "The wild things of Bois Sauvage ignore them; we are left to seed another year" (117). This depiction of abandonment, which is shown vividly here in this image of the novel's setting, speaks to and reverberates against the allegorical narrative of abandonment. It is worth noting here, also, that on the previous page, as the Batiste siblings walk to the park, Esch describes the houses of their friends, Big Henry and Marquise, and of the twins Christophe and Joshua, who are the main protagonists of *Where the Line Bleeds,* building a picture of community and kinship. The park scene opens up a variation of what Gary Johnson calls "intradiegetic allegory" where "one narrative structure is embedded within another," or the "allegorical narrative resides within the primary work's diegesis" (237). What makes Ward's work particularly rich and gives the allegorical narratives specificity and force is this dialogue between the two narrative modes: the realistic settings and backdrops that subtly point to state neglect, and the

allegories of state neglect through the story of sibling relationships and parental absence. The function of this dialogue between narrative modes, I argue, is to reveal intersections between systemic or "slow violence," and traumatic rupture. These intersections open up lines of sight in both directions. Though clearly allegorical, the human relationships in *Salvage the Bones* and *Men We Reaped* are also realistic, and therefore give drama to the often less visible or dramatic acts of slow violence they allegorize – the stripping away of state support and abandonment of communities that has resulted in extreme precarity. Simultaneously, the settings of these texts, which bear all the markers of these less visceral but still violent acts, give the experience of trauma specific textures. However, before developing this point through close textual analysis, it is necessary to examine two important (and connected) literary and cultural contexts.

Allegorical antecedents: traumatic ruptures and slow violence

Ward's allegories of citizens abandoned or neglected by the state can also be brought into focus by attending to two broadly linked phenomena. First, a cycle of early 9/11 novels that functioned in a similar but not nearly as effective way, and second an emerging friction between trauma as an interpretive framework and the more recent turn toward systemic or "slow violence." Though Ward's oeuvre is ultimately very different, her allegorical strategies can be usefully compared to a trend identified by David Holloway in some early 9/11 novels. Holloway noted a conspicuous preoccupation with parents struggling to care for children in novels including Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Art Spiegelman's graphic text *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006). This pattern was also noted by Kristiaan Versluys who argued in

his study of 9/11 fiction that "in caring for their children parents affirm their humanity against the inhuman thrust of homicidal ideologues" (28). For Holloway, though, the repeated instances of "children and youths, or adult sons and daughters involved in distressing relationships with parents or guardian figures" in early 9/11 novels has allegorical meaning (110). He argues that these narratives of parental struggle represent a crisis in the American state's ability to care for its citizens: "children/citizens divested of parental/state protection" (110). The enduring prevalence of this dynamic in later 9/11 novels published after Holloway's book, *9/11 and the War on Terror* appeared in 2008, is striking and these texts include Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) and Porochista Khakpour's novels *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007) and *The Last Illusion* (2014). Each of these novels in some way replicates the parent/children dynamic identified by Holloway. However, while Holloway's allegorical reading is convincing in that it identifies a broad way in which a group of novels respond to certain fears and anxieties of the time, it doesn't unlock any sophisticated layers of meaning in those texts or reveal a political core in novels that were frequently criticized for "domesticating" the 9/11 crisis.[3] Neither does this reading offer new ways of considering the insularity of those texts or their depolicitization of the 9/11 crisis and what this might reveal about American society in this period. The allegorical meanings that are evident across Ward's work, on the other hand, are politically potent and offer some lines of sight in relation to how trauma works in the context of slow violence. Though Ward certainly depicts the struggles of parents, her fiction and

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[3] That the early 9/11 novels "domesticated" the attacks is an argument that was made by Pankaj Mishra in a long article in *The Guardian* in which he asked – referring to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2005) and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children (*2006): "Are we really meant to think of marital discord as a metaphor for 9/11?" (4). Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg made similar claims in essays that featured in a special issue of *American Literary History* (2009) and Martin Randall reinforced these in his book, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (2011).

nonfiction is much more invested in the ongoing struggles of siblings in the absence of parents.[4]

Many of the 9/11 novels I mentioned briefly, have reinforced the exceptionalization of that event; partly through the inwardness of their traumatic narratives which tend to sever the event from its causes, effects and wider historical contexts. This is important given the emerging friction or impasse between notions of traumatic rupture and systemic phenomena as interpretive tools. Indeed, trauma and trauma theory, as interpretive frameworks in literary and cultural studies, have been the subject of a series of substantial critiques over the last decade. One notable and influential example is Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), which argues for "moving away from the discourse of trauma – from Caruth to Agamben – when describing what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts" (9-10). For Berlant and others, what needs urgent attention is "a notion of systemic crisis," and what Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence," and the focus on trauma diverts attention away from these less visceral and immediate but equally pernicious phenomena (2). In particular, the discourse of trauma doesn't adequately describe the slower, less visible violence of neoliberal capitalism and climate degradation. One consequence of the prevalence of trauma, Berlant argues, is that the contemporary moment is experienced as a perennial state of exception where people are waiting to resume "some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life," in which people feel "solid and confident," but which doesn't actually exist (10). There is no doubt that climate change-related disasters are increasing, and adjacently, there is a common feeling in Western democracies that the world is seeing unprecedented levels of

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[4] One example of this foregrounding of sibling relationships is in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* where the sibling relationship between Jojo and toddler Kayla who he cares for is central; as Anna Hartnell has noted, thirteen-year-old Jojo is the "moral heart of the novel" ("Civil Rights to #BLM," p.298). Though the novel also explores their mother Leonie's troubles as a parent, in the chapters that she narrates (the novel alternates between chapters focussed on the perspectives of Jojo, Leonie and the ghost, Richie), it privileges the ongoing effects of the traumatic loss of her brother rather than her struggles as a parent.

terrorism, increasing financial precarity (or "volatile markets") and insecure housing and employment, resulting in what Hua Hsu calls a "new age of anxiety" (61). Ward's work depicts this acutely and specifically emphasizes the systemic violence of institutional racism. In these contexts it is certainly legitimate to question the extent to which trauma should remain a central interpretative framework. But equally, there can be no doubt that moments of extreme violence or experience which exceed individual and collective psychological limits and haunt us via traumatic memories or PTSD, still occur. What is truly pressing, perhaps, is an understanding of how such limit events play out in the context of "crisis ordinariness," or this "new age of anxiety." Even before the seminal works by Berlant and Nixon, however, theoreticians of trauma expressed concerns about the tendency of trauma studies to exceptionalize, depoliticize or de-contextualize violent events. For instance, Michael Rothberg, writing about 9/11, in the midst of its fraught aftermath, pointed out that "a focus on trauma solely as a structure of reception might [...] actually end up unwittingly reinforcing the repressive liberal–conservative consensus in the United States that attempting to explain the events amounts to explaining them away or excusing them" (151). Rothberg's concerns proved to be warranted and even before the essay I cite here was published (in 2003), the few critics and commentators who had dared to consider America's roles in precipitating the 9/11 attacks, such as Susan Sontag, were castigated. It is undoubtedly the case that the exceptionalization of 9/11 has played a part in escalating the scrutiny and criticism of trauma studies and in the shift in focus toward systemic and slow violence.

In this context, it is worth looking back to Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). Lauded for both its scholarly rigor and accessibility, Klein's book traces a history of neoliberal capitalism from Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics in the 1940s to Hurricane Katrina and the War in Iraq, arguing that it has been propelled by moments of shock or trauma, where society is "psychologically unmoored and physically

uprooted," allowing the ideologues "clean canvases" (21). Klein's narrative is trenchantly

political, global and historical in scope and yet its focus on moments of "shock" has been

critiqued in relation to the emergent interest in the systemic. For instance, in *After Katrina:*

Race, Neoliberalism and the End of the American Century (2017), Anna Hartnell argues that

Klein's emphasis on shock or trauma "neglects the role of consent" and "fails to track the

progression of neoliberal policies as forms of 'slow violence' that had been in train for

decades before the storm" (132). So while Klein and Hartnell are both fundamentally

interested in critiquing neoliberal practices and ideology, for Hartnell, the emphasis on shock

and trauma has the effect of exceptionalizing these practices and thus disavowing the fact that

they are politically, culturally and socially entrenched. This is a telling example of a wider

emergent tension across the humanities between trauma studies, which remains prevalent

despite these recent challenges, and the emergent focus on the systemic. This is an important

context for my analysis of Ward's depictions of sibling relationships because her writing –

partly through intradiegetic allegory – meaningfully addresses such intersections between

psychological trauma and ongoing slow violence in the way it depicts the unfolding

experience of trauma and PTSD in the context of systemic or slow violence.

In addition to the tension I have described these apparently antithetical phenomena

both pose well-known representational problems. As Anne Whitehead has noted in her

monograph *Trauma Fiction* (2004): "[t]he term 'trauma fiction' represents a paradox or

contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual

and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?" (4). But

while traumatic ruptures or moments of extreme violence may be impossible to fully

apprehend and therefore a challenge to represent, they often at least have some kind of

dramatic potential. The lack of such potential has, as Nixon has noted, proven to be the

critical representational challenge for slow violence: it is "neither spectacular nor

instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). Nixon is discussing the slow violence of climate change here, but the same logic applies to the kinds of slow violence Ward portrays. By depicting the intersections of moments of traumatic rupture with ongoing systemic violence, Ward's fiction and nonfiction make visible the slow violence of neoliberalism and structural inequality while also drawing attention to the ways trauma and PTSD is experienced in these contexts.

"Domesticity," disaster and allegory in *Salvage the Bones*

As stated, *Salvage the Bones* is a "domestic" novel, but I use this term cautiously as limited and crudely gendered definitions of domesticity and domestic literature are stubbornly persistent. Kristin J. Jacobson's recuperation of the term in *Neodomestic American Fictions* (2010) is a useful point of reference here. Jacobson points out that "domestic literature features a self-consciousness about the home's physical space and the project of homemaking, highlighting domestic instability in positive and negative ways" (3). *Salvage the Bones* certainly emphasizes its narrator Esch's obsessions with the precarity of both the physical spaces of the home and her family's wellbeing. Furthermore, the domesticity of *Salvage the Bones* is also exemplary of some aspects of what Susan Fraiman identifies in *Extreme Domesticity: Voices from the Margins* (2017), which sees the representation of sites of precarious domesticity as potential acts of resistance. Fraiman points to visions of home and homemaking that are characterized by "economic insecurity," and "physical vulnerability," perhaps the defining features of the Batiste's family home in *Salvage the Bones*, which they refer to as "The Pit" (9). The domestic sphere in this novel is also a site of past traumas as Esch's mother died shortly after giving birth, in the house, to her younger

brother. The Batistes home, therefore, is a site of trauma long before Hurricane Katrina, and this is important to the narrative in two ways. First it is redolent of the way the novel resists any temptation to exceptionalize Katrina as a moment of rupture, instead drawing attention to the ongoing, daily disaster of precarity; and second, it invites consideration of the aggregation of Esch's individual trauma and the collective trauma of the Katrina crisis. As all the Batiste siblings were born at home, likely because the family does not have access to adequate healthcare options, it is also probable that Esch's mother's death was preventable. Her death, therefore, is both a traumatic memory for Esch, and something that draws attention to the family's disconnection from state protection, and ongoing experience of poverty. As such it is one example of the novel's depictions of traumatic rupture occurring within and being exacerbated by the slow violence of neoliberalism.

Salvage the Bones follows the experiences of Esch, her younger brother Junior, and two older brothers Skeetah and Randall as they prepare for the imminent hurricane. Esch, who is fifteen, discovers that she is pregnant early in the novel and Skeetah, with whom Esch has a powerful sibling bond, is preoccupied with the task of caring for his prize pitbull, China, and her new born puppies. Esch's domestic routines and the rhythms of the Batiste home evoke both traumatic repetition and the extent of her family's abandonment by the American state and experience of precarity. The novel cycles from Esch's bedroom where she reads and dreams and where the walls are "thin and uninsulated, peeling from each other at the seams"; through daily scenes of her morning sickness in the bathroom; the preparing of Top Ramen noodles, canned Vienna sausages or foraged wild eggs in the kitchen; visits to her father's bedroom where for much of the book he is infirm (and where photos of her late mother seem to gaze at her); to the makeshift shed outside where Skeetah tends to China and her puppies; and to the yard where the siblings and friends gather. Every part of this domestic space is characterized by poverty and vulnerability. The house is surrounded by scrapped cars

and satellite structures including the "patchy remains" of Esch's grandmother's "rotting house" next door. This means that the domestic space of the novel is an extended indoor and outdoor space of decay and debris. When nobody is around Esch describes the yard as "full of empty cars with their hoods open, engines stripped, and the bodies sitting there like picked-over animal bones" (22). It is a space that embodies Fraiman's notion of "extreme domesticity" as both "extreme as a reference to dire circumstances due to such things as economic insecurity, physical vulnerability," and "extreme as in the sense of balancing on a knife-edge" (5). As such, it is in stark contrast to the privileged domestic spheres of the early 9/11 novels, which were threatened only by what Pankaj Mishra called "marital discord" ("End of Innocence," p.4). Esch gathers wild eggs in the woods around the house; the siblings and their friends swim in the nearby swimming hole and camp in the adjacent woods, and this is all part of the Batiste family's extended domestic world. As Esch states: "the boys always found places to sleep when they were too drunk or high or lazy to go home. The backseats of junk cars; the old RV Daddy bought… the front porch that Mama had made Daddy screen in when we were little" (10). It is a place of routine and familiarity that does structure their lives and provide some sense of safety but such repetitions evoke both precarity and unresolved traumatic memories. As Whitehead has noted, repetition is integral to "trauma fiction" as it "mimics the effects of trauma" by suggesting "the insistent return to the event" (86). It is certainly the case that Esch's routines are largely structured around her memories of what her mother used to do to look after the family.

Despite this, Esch is attuned to the stark contrasts to her family's domestic reality. In the novel's first chapter she mentions "the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guest houses" that sit along the short coastal stretch of Mississippi between Louisiana and Alabama (4). This is a subtle but powerful allusion to the legacies of slavery and aspects of Michelle Alexander's arguments in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of*

Colorblindness (2012). Alexander's study of America's racist penal policies and culture shows how a vast swath of American society has radically curtailed opportunities and rights, and remain subject to a particularly brutal form of systemic violence: "legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were" (2). As stated, the systemic violence of institutional racism, as described by Alexander, is a perennial threat for Ward's characters. However, while these legacies of slavery are evoked in Esch's comments about the coastal "summer mansions," – which could, of course, be properties owned by many of the protagonists of the early 9/11 novels – they are also evident in her depictions of the homes in her own neighbouring community that she calls "Black Bois." Indeed, Esch fixates in a much more sustained way on the houses of the poor, mostly black citizens of Bois Sauvage. She describes focussing on them from the windows of her school bus: "I would study the other houses in other lonely fields; the trailers, the long low brick homes, small wood shacks that looked slapped together, that couldn't be bigger than two rooms" (71). In addition to these vivid descriptions of poverty, sometimes her accounts of the local houses are imbued with something like symbolism. For instance, she describes the house through the woods from The Pit, owned by white farmers, with particularly suggestive language: "its white is faded to tan by the sun, and all the windows are shut with white curtains drawn over them. It's a blind house with closed eyes" (71). Most frequently, though, Esch meditates on the outward appearance of her own house and those of her and the siblings' friends. Such descriptions are similar to the park scene, discussed previously, in that they show the houses to be merged or merging with the natural environment of Bois Sauvage. Describing The Pit, she notes that "our house is the color of rust, nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided. The cement bricks it sits on are the color of sand" (116). Similarly, "Marquise's small pink house, which has only three windows and sits in a yard so clustered

with azalea, seems like one more faded flower" (116). As such accounts accumulate over the course of Esch's narration, it is clear that these houses are all ill-maintained and redolent of the community's poverty and abandonment. Additionally, and like the park scene, such descriptions build a wider image of state neglect that contextualizes and speaks to the allegorical mode of the novel, which is "embedded" within its surface realism ("The Presence of Allegory," p.237).

Esch obsesses over the physical appearance of houses and domestic spaces throughout the novel but it is The Pit and its rhythms that are most vivid. This setting, and these domestic routines, where the traumatic memories and histories are intertwined with the pernicious effects of slow violence, form the backdrop in which the siblings draw strength from each other and from close family friends in the absence of nurturing or protective parents. I want to note two scenes that exemplify these allegorical moves, and include some of the most poignant moments in the text. First, is an instance of intense connection between Skeetah and Esch that occurs as Katrina looms perilously. As the Batistes brace themselves for the worst part of the hurricane, the siblings recall their mother's last words as she was driven away, dying. Skeetah reminds Esch that as she was hurriedly taken away following the birth of Junior, the last time they saw her alive, she told them "to be good, and "to look after each other" (222). Here the idea of the siblings looking after each other is reinforced literally and the obviously powerful but never mutually affirmed bond between Esch and Skeetah is consolidated. With no mother, and with an increasingly ineffectual and unhealthy father, they will look after each other, just as the wider community they belong to must look after itself in the absence of state protection or care – something that was acutely felt during the Katrina crisis. In the context of this specific national disaster, a moment in American history where citizens were egregiously let down by the absent federal government, this literal affirmation

between Esch and Skeetah that they must "look after each other" takes on an obvious and powerful allegorical meaning.

Shortly after this moment between Esch and Skeetah, their house is swept off its foundation by the storm surge, and the family escapes by hacking through the attic roof and swimming to safety. Eventually, the family takes refuge in the home of one of the siblings' friends, Big Henry, who is a regular presence at The Pit and who is depicted as like family to the Batiste siblings.In the aftermath of the immediate crisis, in another moving exchange, Esch reveals to Big Henry that she is afraid for her baby and anxious that it will have no father and thus will not have the parental care and protection she would like for it. As the two survivors look out at the "gray Gulf," where a car is floating "out there in the shallows," Big Henry reassures her that the child will be looked after by the siblings and their friends who will collectively and collaboratively assume responsibility (255). Reaching out "his big soft hand," he says to Esch: "your baby will have plenty of daddies."(255). This is another explicit iteration of the allegorical logic of the siblings and family friends "looking after each other" in the absence of their parents. Moreover, as Big Henry and Esch are gazing out at the decimated and flood-ravaged neighborhood, it is a statement and gesture that is very explicitly made in the context of collective trauma and thus extends this gesture of kinship and solidarity. It is also a moment where the novel's intradiegetic allegory is particularly effective as the allegorical rhetoric of citizens supporting other citizens is acute in the vivid context of the absence of disaster relief or any kind of state intervention.

Men We Reaped: memoir as allegory

Just as *Salvage the Bones* has two narrative modes, Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped*, has two primary narrative strands, and what Ward describes as "two stories" (213). One is the

story of her family history and her upbringing in DeLisle, and the other is the story of five young, black men who died between 2000 and 2004, beginning with her brother Joshua who was killed age 20. Her family history is chronological but the stories of the five men work in reverse chronology from the most recent to the first (again, Ward's brother, Joshua Dedeaux). Chapters of the book alternate with a long section devoted to each of the men following instalments of the chronological story of growing up. This means the two strands work in reverse, with a looming moment of collision that is perceptible from the opening pages. The former chapters are named after the men, and the latter all have suggestive titles beginning with "We,": "We Are Born," "We Are Wounded," "We Are Watching," "We Are Learning," and "We Are Here." The repetition of the "We" signifies Ward and her siblings and particularly her brother, Joshua, but it also has obvious figurative resonances too and might also mean her community, or more widely black citizens of the American South. This is redolent of the way Ward's depictions of siblings operate throughout her work. 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. In one sense, we might place *Men We Reaped* alongside recent memoirs like Porochista Khakpour's *Sick* (2017) or Rebecca Stott's *In the Days of Rain* (2017). These texts are allegorical in the very broadest sense that their personal stories are also using affective strategies to tell stories about wider social issues. *Men We Reaped* is different, though, because it tells a story of personal trauma that is also the story of systemic and structural racism and inequality, transcending the impasse I've discussed in its very premise. Moreover, *Men We Reaped* also replicates the allegorical logic of *Salvage the Bones* in important ways. For instance, the two modes of the narrative, mean that while its series of individual stories allegorize a range of specific instances of state neglect or systemic violence, its chronological story shows the wider

permutations and consequences of this in its carefully constructed depiction of DeLisle, Mississippi, which builds the contexts of systemic violence that thread together the stories of the five tragic – and traumatic – deaths. Additionally, and as in *Salvage the Bones*, the traumatic ruptures of *Men We Reaped* are compounded by the ongoing slow violence of neoliberalism: the lack of job opportunities, health care, support, and a pervasive poverty. This means that, just as in *Salvage the Bones*, two narrative modes are in dialogue with each other illuminating complex and intertwined experiences of trauma and slow and systemic violence.

Ward's introduction emphasizes the dual impulses I have described in both subtle and explicit ways. For instance, describing the deaths she intends to chronicle she states: "From 2000 to 2004, five Black young men I grew up with died, all violently, in seemingly unrelated deaths" (7). The conspicuous part of this short, succinct sentence is the "seemingly," which tells us that there are in fact connections in the deaths but that it might not be immediately obvious. The connections are systemic inequality, structural racism, and the absence of the state, and through the narrative's unique structure, it is able to make these connections visible. Nevertheless, in the same passage the emphasis on the numbing and 'silencing' effects of psychological trauma are also conspicuous. After naming the men, Ward states: "That's a brutal list, in its immediacy and its relentlessness, and it's a list that silences people. It silenced me for a long time. To say this is difficult is understatement: telling this story is the hardest thing I've ever done" (7). *Men We Reaped* is subtly metafictional in that it brings this struggle for expression to life in reversing the chronology of the deaths, so that Ward's brother's story and death, which was first, is last. This evokes what Judith Herman calls the "central dialectic of psychological trauma," the "will to deny horrific events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (2). Even near the end of the work, after Ward has dropped her silence, and after substantial time is spent meticulously exposing and

critiquing systemic inequality, there is a sense of unresolved trauma. Introducing the final of the five sections devoted to the men, and specifically the section on her brother's death, she states: "This is where the past and the future meet… This is the summer of 2000. This is the last summer that I will spend with my brother. This is the heart. This is. Every day, this is" (213). The emphasis Ward places here on this event as a singular moment of rupture in the statement that it is always with her, that "Every day, this is," is a powerful and archetypal example of psychological trauma as theorized by Cathy Caruth and many others: the experience of being "possessed by an image or event" (5). .

There are many ways we might map Ward's unresolved trauma – the experience she describes of of feeling her late brother's presence daily – onto her fiction. Indeed, she has indicated as much on numerous occasions, and stated in an interview at the Norwich Literary Festival in 2018 that she is always "writing toward her brother." Intense sibling relationships are at the heart of all of her work as are obvious traces of her own life: from Leonie being haunted by her dead brother's ghost in *Sing, Unburied Sing*, to the intensity of Esch and Skeetah's relationship in *Salvage the Bones*, and to the story of the twins, Christophe and Joshua, in *Where the Line Bleeds* (one of whom has Ward's brother's name). It is perhaps most useful, though, to consider what *Men We Reaped* says about how trauma is experienced in the context of systemic malaise and how that might invite us to reflect back upon the fiction. It is certainly the case that this is where the "two stories" of *Men We Reaped* become particularly powerful.

Ward's account of systemic racial discrimination and the violence of neoliberal capital in *Men We Reaped* is historic in scope. Discussing this in relation to her father's departure from the family home when she was a child, 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). Though this "tradition" and this structural inequality is vividly portrayed in Ward's
depictions of her father, it is most powerfully seen in relation to her brother, whose
opportunities are so limited as a young man that he resorts to dealing crack. Ward writes
about her response to this revelation: "[p]erhaps 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 systematically undervalue him as a worker, a citizen, a human
being" (211). 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. These "endemic," "systemic" and "generational" issues that Ward outlines in
Men We Reaped, also clearly underpin Esch's worries about her baby being fatherless in
Salvage the Bones.

Nevertheless, the power of this depiction of systemic malaise is generated through
repetition, a repetition that, as in *Salvage the Bones*, is also traumatic. It is what binds the
stories of the five young men Ward discusses in her memoir – the men whose violent deaths
are "seemingly unrelated" (7). Rog died of a heart attack that was likely drug-related, but
which was also linked to an untreated hereditary issue; Demond was shot outside his house,
possibly because he was preparing to testify against a local criminal and was not protected;
C.J., Ward's cousin, was hit by a train at a crossing with no reflective gate arm and faulty
warning lights; Ronald, depressed and untreated, shot himself; and Joshua, Ward's brother
was killed by a drunk driver – a white man who served less than three years for the crime.
These are different and are shown in the text to have been traumatic in different ways to
different people. But the connections Ward's short depictions of each of them draws are

clear. These men are crippled by self-doubt, by lack of opportunity, lack of state support and they had all been caught up in illegal drugs in order to either make money to survive or to self-medicate; numbing themselves to the violence of abandonment. Discussing Ronald, 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). This argument about systemic oppression is repeated throughout the text, contextualizing each moment of traumatic rupture, and broadly characterized as: "the degradations that come from a life of poverty exacerbated by maleness and Blackness and fatherlessness in the South" (175).

Conclusion:

Salvage the Bones, *Men We Reaped* and Ward's work more generally, does two things in relation to these two overlapping forms of violence. First, it shows us how psychological traumas can work in the context of what I have described as the systemic violence of institutional racism and slow violence of neoliberal capitalism, mapping out the various barriers to healing and recovery while offering glimmers of hope through these allegorical depictions of siblings supporting and loving each other. In *Salvage the Bones*, the effects of systemic and slow violence – poverty and precarity – are imbricated in the traumatic repetitions and cycles of the Batiste home, "The Pit." Esch deals with the unresolved trauma of losing her mother, and with the experience of Hurricane Katrina, in the context of the everyday disaster of her domestic reality - what Berlant refers to as "crisis ordinariness" (*Cruel Optimism*, p. 9). In *Men We Reaped*, a meticulous history of institutional racism and "endemic fatherlessness" which is "generational" is the broader context in which five young men die – all in pursuit of some kind of escape or transcendence. In both cases,

recovery and healing from trauma is stifled by poverty, lack of opportunity and various forms of institutional racism. Secondly, her depictions of traumatic moments, are painfully attentive – both thematically and formally – to such extreme occurrences or traumatic ruptures, while consistently drawing attention to systemic issues. In doing so they give representation to pernicious forms of violence that are, as Nixon notes, "not spectacular" or immediate and sometimes "invisible." This is to no small extent, achieved through the function of intradiegetic allegory, in which powerful human stories allegorize such "invisible" phenomena. Indeed, in both texts allegorical meaning is nested within and interacts with, another narrative mode. As I have argued, the repeated instances of children supporting each other in the absence of parental protection and nurture, allegorizes a pattern of state abandonment and neglect that is also evident in the realistic depictions of Bois Sauvage or descriptions of impoverished DeLisle; one narrative mode reinforcing the other. Ward's work subtly – but consistently – suggests there is hope in such relationships though they are also relationships that are at least partly driven by necessity. Siblings have to look after themselves because parents are absent just as citizens are forced to help each other in the absence of state support. This qualified sense of hope has a very real corresponding allegorical logic which sheds some light on how critical responses to her writing have been quick to identify their simultaneously trenchant social and political critiques, and ultimately hopeful registers. As Ward's writing shows, it is affirming when citizens support each other in the absence of the state, but it also draws attention to the violence of that absence.

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