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Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn  
Ward's *Salvage the Bones***

Crystal F. Giles

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FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH SURVIVAL: THE IMPACT OF THE  
HURRICANES IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING*  
*GOD* AND JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES*

by

Crystal F. Giles

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Humanities  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Katherine Cochran, Committee Chair  
Dr. Sherita Johnson  
Dr. Monika Gehlawat

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to convey the importance of the hurricane symbol in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. In both novels, the authors use the imagery of setting combined with the characterization of poor women of color in order to emphasize both the effects of environmental disaster on vulnerable communities and also the inherent power of their protagonists to overcome systemic racism combined with natural disaster. The climax of Zora Neale Hurston's novel revolves around the deadly 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane in Florida, and the rising action of Jesmyn Ward's novel peaks when Hurricane Katrina hits the fictional town of Bois Sauvage on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Hurston and Ward demonstrate with historical accuracy how powerful these two similar hurricanes were on the low-lying communities that were ravaged in their path. The backdrop *Their Eyes Were Watching God* paints a clear picture of racist practices common in America in the 1920s and sadly, *Salvage the Bones* shows that similar racist practices are common even in 2005. The two motherless protagonists of these novels evolve both despite and because of very similar deadly hurricanes and very similar acts of oppression. Moreover, this paper argues that the hurricanes birth in these two women new and stronger identities defying the prejudices they face as minority women from the South.

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## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my students. I began this process to hopefully become a better teacher for them, but they have inspired me to see this project through because of their profound persistence. Just like Janie and Esch, so many of them emerge into adulthood stronger than the world expects them to.

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## CHAPTER I - A SIMILAR STORY OF A SIMILAR TIME

Devastation foregrounds the character evolution of Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Esch from *Salvage the Bones*. Both motherless heroines struggle to develop independence until crippling hurricanes help them recognize their inner strengths. The 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane and 2005's Hurricane Katrina reveal the social inequalities Janie and Esch face when these two storms wreak devastation on the already-struggling communities in which these characters live, reflecting Jesmyn Ward's comment that hurricanes "reduce us to an improbable metaphor" ("National Book Award Winner"). Janie and Esch are representative of one of the most vulnerable populations in America: African American women born in poverty. However, Zora Neale Hurston once said "I have walked in storms with a crown of clouds about my head and the zigzag lightning playing through my fingers...I have found out that my real home is in the water, that the earth is only my stepmother" (as qtd. in Davies, *The Goddess in the Landscape* 141), showing how storms can empower as well as destroy. This essay explores how the novels' hurricanes paradoxically give Janie and Esch the strength to claim their equality among men as they fight white power structures who cause a hurricane-like devastation among minority populations. In the face of the similar precarious settings fraught with natural and racist attacks, Janie and Esch should have been crushed like so many other victims; instead they are birthed as stronger protagonists who have survived overwhelming odds, representing the inherent power that lies within our most vulnerable populations.

In Hurston's and Ward's novels, the hurricane is the climax of the plot during which both protagonists are centered on the goal of surviving. Walker Percy posited that



hurricanes bring a sense of focus: ““Why is the same man apt to feel good in a very bad environment, say an old hotel on Key Largo during a hurricane?’ Part of the answer is that when a hurricane is about to hit, we no longer feel uncertain about our role in the world. Everyone is focused, connected, engaged. We know what we’re supposed to do, and we do it” (Issacson). Just as the characters focus on their own survival, the historical contexts of their stories focus the reader’s attention on the socioeconomic inequalities revealed through the storms. Hurston and Ward’s communities of the muck and the Pit contribute to the evolutions of the protagonists. The perfect storm of historical fact, accurate settings, and protagonists that would defy the odds highlight the good that comes from this very bad situation. Janie and Esch’s stories show that vulnerable women can not only survive against interminable odds every day, but also become stronger and more independent on the other side of the storm.

Hurricane narratives often recount the trauma endured by the victims of such devastating events, and by doing so, provide an informative lens through which we can examine the trauma response of different types of people. These are not simply storm stories: a hurricane has the power to impact large areas politically and single persons traumatically. In his article, “Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*,” Christopher Lloyd references two categories into which post-Katrina narratives fall: “texts that focus on testimony and deal with processing the storm and its traumatic and cultural effects and texts that center on the identity politics activated and complicated by Katrina” (247). I suggest first that these categories are as true for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as for *Salvage the Bones* and, second, that Ward’s and Hurston’s hurricane narratives reflect aspects of both of Lloyd’s

categories. Janie and Esch process the storm in similar ways—allowing the tempest to create in them new identities that fight against their personal traumas as well as the cultural effects of racist politics in the southern societies that oppress them. The many parallels between the two hurricanes provide context for the conflict in these novels and expose a shared background of white power structures seeking to destroy vulnerable populations.

## CHAPTER II - THE HISTORY AND RACIST POLITICS OF THE HURRICANES

The Okeechobee Hurricane and Hurricane Katrina unleashed strikingly similar and seemingly insurmountable effects upon poor, minority communities. The devastation from both storms were primarily the result of floodwaters from weakened levees and dikes, yet there were many insidious secondary factors at work. The aftermaths of the hurricanes revealed profound institutional racism and the inadequacies of governmental assistance for the poor and most vulnerable, mainly African American communities. Critical scholarship of both hurricanes mentions the wide gap in help provided across social classes as well as the acknowledgement of what Henry A. Giroux calls “disposable” communities—communities made up of mostly black citizens sequestered through “red-lining practices,” methods of intentionally segregating othered groups that result in an atmosphere of systemic institutionalized racism (*Stormy Weather* 11).

Before the Okeechobee Hurricane made landfall, there was “no adequate hurricane warning,” and the storm attacked an area in Florida that had already been weakened from a 1926 hurricane (Emanuel 119). According to the various primary accounts published in Lawrence Will’s *Okeechobee Hurricane and Hoover Dike*, “nobody seemed worried about it,” and many did not heed the slight warnings (53). As Janie and Tea Cake try to outrun the Okeechobee Hurricane, Janie’s response to the idea of escaping with no car and no public transportation is to scream, “Us can’t fly” (Hurston 162). Both Ward and Hurston criticize judgments against people who “chose” not to evacuate by emphasizing the number of citizens who had nowhere to go and no means to escape. Jesmyn Ward comments on her intentions with the book saying, “I was also angry at the people who blamed survivors for staying and for choosing to return to the

Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm” (as qtd. in Hoover). Esch sees her father’s broken-down car floating by and imagines it is someone coming to rescue them and, in this daydream, her father’s car becomes a symbol of the futility of escape. Indeed, during Hurricane Katrina the government issued a mandatory evacuation, but failed to provide adequate services to evacuate persons who could not leave on their own (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 43).

The makeup of the communities devastated by each hurricane are also similar. On both Okeechobee Lake and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, poor, primarily black communities were hit the hardest. Okeechobee Lake was surrounded by agriculture communities of wealthy white landholders, and their “many negro sharecroppers in isolated shanties were those most affected” (Will 71). In *Divine Wind: The History and Science of Hurricanes*, Kerry Emanuel describes a new land in South Central Florida being cultivated around Okeechobee Lake, one in which farmers “brought in thousands of migrant workers, many from the Bahamas,” but, despite the influx in population, there were only “209 registered voters” (117). This statistic indicates that the majority of the population were black workers who would not have had the power to vote in the Jim Crow South. There are many specific communities that have qualities reminiscent of those in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, from Belle Glade, which had a “muck road” that “led toward the colored section,” to Pelican Lake, which was referred to as “Muck City” (Will 79, 125). In these muck communities, “probably three-fourths or more of the casualties were negroes, many of whom had come from the Bahama islands” (Will 127). An overwhelming majority of blacks lost their lives in this storm due to the dikes breaking and flooding the area. In fact, “virtually everyone who had elected to ride out

the storms on the lake islands perished” (Emanuel 120). Many of those who would have elected to stay would have most likely been those who could not afford to leave the muck. The term “muck” literally refers to a naturally waterlogged land, and the landscape represents a swamp-like place of fertile soil that is worked by migrant and poverty-stricken farmworkers. Zora Neale Hurston describes what the muck might have been like before the devastating hurricane:

Tea Cake and Janie decided to stay since they wanted to make another season on the muck. There was nothing to do, after they had gathered several bushels of dried beans to save over and sell to the planters in the fall. So Janie began to look around and see people and things she hadn’t noticed during the season. For instance during the summer when she heard the subtle but compelling rhythms of the Bahaman drummers, she’d walk over and watch the dances. (139)

Hurston appreciates the eclectic fervor of the muck, and she paints the atmosphere of the landscape in a beautiful, natural light while still invoking a transient feel of hardworking, underappreciated workers.

Following the aftermath of both hurricanes, the government’s response to the crisis angered affected citizens and outraged many across the country. In 1928, “settlers blamed engineers,” and there was a severe “lack of resources” (Will 177). In his *Okeechobee Hurricane and the Hoover Dike*, Will acknowledges, but does not criticize, the structural racism that excluded the black workers from safety precautions and equal rights while simultaneously capitalizing on their labor and enforcing policies such as white and black survivors being separated, the “Negro doctor” seeing only black survivors, and the segregation of burial grounds for black and white bodies. Will records

that white officials “led crews of negroes who searched flooded glade waters,” and that the dead bodies were “sprinkled with lime” (147). It seems that “colored laborers were [actually] imported” to help with this horrific work (153). The black survivors who were forced to recover the bodies had, in many cases, lost their entire family due to the storm. The work of recovering bodies took place in contaminated waters, and the protection workers received came in the form of typhoid shots (Sharp).

The same inadequate and inequitable government response occurred after the disaster of 2005. Not long before Hurricane Katrina, the government chose to downsize programs that focused on disaster planning and preparation in favor of placing more resources into the fight on terrorism and other programs. Many of these other projects benefitted only a small portion of the richest Americans (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 47). With a shift in focus on programs that serve the underprivileged like FEMA, the welfare state, affirmative action, and rural public schools, and with directors possessing little to no experience being appointed to already reduced social programs (42), hurricane relief efforts were doomed from the beginning. When hurricane victims were finally evacuated, many days after the storm, these people were not told where they were being sent. Hundreds of evacuees were displaced at the same time as brand-new FEMA trailers were rotting in fields from disuse (42). The media published stories laced with racist language, calling victims “parasites” and “thugs,” while reports on major news sources cited black citizens’ involvement in “many cases of rapes, murders, and looting even though such stories were unsubstantiated” (50). America was sending the message to the victims of Katrina that “the poor, especially people of color, not only had to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies, but were also supposed to do it without being seen by

dominant society” (48). Considered alongside the narrative of *Salvage the Bones*, Ward’s characters face the same unknown, homeless future at the end of the book that many Katrina victims faced, and there will be no government help to provide a way out. White power structures may have seen Esch and her family as disposable, given the labels that the media placed on people of color, instead of victims in need of relief.

The lack of governmental concern is perhaps most vivid in the accounts of the disposal of black bodies during both hurricanes. As Lawrence Will recounts, “Yesterday 55 white bodies were buried and 212 colored buried or burned, 87 in one pile. White flags mark spots where bodies are located but not recovered. From 75 to 80 flags were fluttering in Belle Glade yesterday” (155-56). Black bodies were not even given the respect of a burial. The white, upper-class storytellers in *Okeechobee Hurricane and the Hoover Dike* observe two ways in which bodies were disposed. In one instance, the source discusses coffins being roughly manufactured for bodies found. Though Will does not clarify the race of the bodies that were placed in the coffins, in an earlier chapter, he specifies that “negro bodies” were thrown into a large ditch that would serve as a burial ground (112). Caskets, because they were hard to come by, were reserved for white bodies (Sharp). The short documentary “Storm of 1928-City of Pahokee-Lake Okeechobee” confirms that the majority of white bodies were identified and buried at Wood Lawn Cemetery, but the bodies of African Americans were buried in a mass grave in West Palm Beach, Florida. This gravesite received a historical marker in 2003 (Sharp), which means it took 75 years before Florida acknowledged the lives and personhood of thousands of its black citizens. Only two years later, vivid images like this one flooded television screens after Hurricane Katrina:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, grotesque images of bloated corpses floating in the rotting waters that flooded the streets of New Orleans circulated throughout the mainstream media...the world watched in disbelief as bloated decomposing bodies left on the street—or, in some cases, on the porches of once-flooded homes—were broadcast on CNN. A body in the downtown district of New Orleans remained on the street for four days locked in rigor mortis and flanked by traffic cones. (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 8)

Both the Okeechobee Hurricane and Hurricane Katrina thus contained very literal symbols of what Patricia Yaeger called “throwaway bodies that mire the earth,” and “disposable bodies denied by white culture” (15). In 2005, images, like the one described above, enraged the nation because of the slow response to action. Identification of badly decomposed bodies is a difficult yet necessary task, to provide dignity and closure for the victims of a storm that leaves thousands dead in its wake.

For both hurricanes, the inadequate governmental response to the survivors of the hurricanes was colored with racist attitudes of white power structures. In addition to disrespecting dead black bodies, the government was unable and perhaps unwilling to keep track of which residents died in the storms. Kerry Emanuel quotes Florida’s attorney general during the 1928 hurricane, Fred Davis, who remarked “it is mighty hard to get people in other parts of the State interested in whether they [the workers of South Central Florida] perish or not.” Emanuel goes on to explain, “this callousness toward the welfare of the migrant workers, most of whom were black, contributed to the lack of an accurate death toll” (120). And hauntingly, many Katrina stories of thousands dead and even more bodies unaccounted for mirror Emanuel’s statement that, “for many years afterwards,



farmers cultivating land south of the lake would come across human skeletons, the last vestiges of that terrible storm” (121). Surely these were the black bodies of Will’s account that had been crudely thrown in the large ditch during the aftermath of the Okeechobee hurricane. Similarly, Christopher Lloyd reveals that during Katrina “bodies were left for dead, simply abandoned in the storm’s wake” (246). Of the Okeechobee Hurricane, Will writes, “In the years following the storm it was no uncommon occurrence to hear a farmer remark, ‘Well, I plowed up somebody’s bones today!’” (156). The racial implications of such statements directly relate to the overwhelmingly impoverished, black communities of Mississippi and Florida. During both hurricanes thousands were drowned; after both hurricanes thousands were forgotten and ignored, proving that after both hurricanes, the establishment’s response was at best unconcerned and at worst maniacal.

In the wake of the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston describes how Tea Cake is forced into service burying the dead, and while he is burying the dead, he is told that the white dead will get coffins, but the black dead will not. As mentioned before, during the 1928 hurricane common Jim Crow practices of segregating whites from blacks ironically extended even after death. This harsh realization of the racist South prompts him to tell Janie “us got tuh git outa dis house and outa dis man’s town. Ah don’t mean tuh work lak dat no mo” (Hurston 171). “Dis man” implies the white “Bossman” who has kept them in the muck, afforded Tea Cake and Janie no safety, exploited their labor, and crowded their only escape from a vicious storm. The bodies Tea Cake was forced to clean up left over from the “Mother of Malice” were a lesson for Janie and Tea Cake (Hurston 160); Esch Batiste also admits that “bodies tell stories”

(Ward, *Salvage* 83). The floating bodies and the environments of the muck and the Pit tell the story of southern racism and segregation.

Zora Neale Hurston and Jesmyn Ward humanize the inhumane treatment of the dead: in their novels, the bodies are not just bodies. They are Janie's friends; one could have easily been Esch herself. Janie and Esch are living in a world where they do not matter to white power structures; they must overcome their humanity being ignored. As Janie and Esch's stories are told, the personhood of the bodies found during these hurricanes is realized. The "muck" and the "Pit" symbolize the harshness of the environments these women are up against in societies that refuse to grant them full personhood. Setting their protagonists in such historically accurate natural disasters is crucial to the development of Hurston's and Ward's characters. Jesmyn Ward explained what she learned from her experiences in Hurricane Katrina and about storms of this magnitude, "I understood then how that hurricane, like Camille, had unmade the world, tree by water by house by person" ("National Book Award Winner"). Janie and Esch are the daughters of these storms and, as their pseudo-mothers, the hurricanes unmake what they were and rebirth their new identity.

### CHAPTER III - THE “MUCK” AND THE “PIT”

The parallels between the 1928 Hurricane and Hurricane Katrina extend to the specific settings that allow these hurricanes to transform Janie and Esch so effectively: the muck and the Pit are both places that Janie and Esch have to survive even before the destruction of a hurricane. It is in the midst of the muck and the Pit, though, that we clearly see one of Lloyd’s hurricane narrative categories: “texts that center on the identity politics activated and complicated by Katrina” (247). The identity politics of the muck and the Pit have created systems that are not in favor of minority communities. For instance, Robert Jackson, in his article, “The Southern Disaster Complex” asks, “What could be more Southern than disaster?” (555), since the disaster of disempowered and oppressed minority groups is the haunted past that makes up the Southern context. Jackson goes on to explain, “one way to one way to tell the story of what is now the US South is as a series of disasters—natural, man-made, and otherwise” (555). As poor female African American characters from the South, Janie and Esch’s lives are fraught with disaster, man-made and natural. Janie, like her mother before her, is a product of rape. Esch’s mother lost her life hemorrhaging after childbirth. This specific characterization sees both women struggle to find love and equality with their sexual partners, and both women have little control over the power structures that oppress them. Janie and Esch are what Abigail Manzella refers to in her book *Migrating Fictions: Gender, Race, and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements* as “outside the expected image” and, as members of a poorer minority, are “kept on the move as precarious, bare life to provide the labor for this nation or are imprisoned, out of sight, with their individual identities and their larger communities obscured” (188). The deeper

implication in Manzella's claim suggests that the world is purposely continuing to remove agency from women like Janie and Esch and from the communities in which they live by ensuring their homes are built to be temporary and therefore unsound. Their communities also are literally low-lying communities vulnerable to flooding. In the muck, Janie is afforded neither sufficient ownership or safety, as she and Tea Cake reside in a rickety shack in a flood plain, working the fields for a land owner. The muck and the Pit are both a direct result of white men creating an incredibly vulnerable land—in the Pit's case by digging it into a flood zone and in the muck's case by intentionally creating a flood zone.

Esch lives in the Pit, the lowest part of the land in the junk-infested, barely held together shack. This is land that her family owns, but only because the space is undesired. Esch explains that her Papa Joseph owned all the land at first, nicknaming it "the Pit." Papa Joseph let white men excavate clay from the Pit until it was no longer a valuable piece of property. Ward personifies the land when Esch describes Papa Joseph's reaction to the effects of a land stripped of its clay until it begins to flood, "Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 14). Papa Joseph's fears are realized when this waste of land becomes a prime place for flooding during the hurricane.

In her novel, Hurston describes the rich soil of the muck saying that it was "rich black earth" that "[clung] to bodies and [bit] the skin like ants" (131). Here the "ground was so rich that everything went wild" (129). The rich earth of the Everglades was incredibly fertile once the water had been held back, and agriculture was a very profitable

business here. Janie and Tea Cake and other transient workers pour in at the beginning of the agricultural season to find a boss-man, who then shows them “the quarters,” and rents them a shack to live in while they pick beans for him. Janie and Tea Cake arrive at Lake Okeechobee early in the season and are able to find a shack in “quarters that squatted so close that only the dyke separated them from great, sprawling Okeechobee” (130). It is these quarters that were impacted so much by the flooding; it is these poor workers who made up most of the death toll when the floodwaters from the lake easily wiped away “the crude walls” of “their shanties” (160). According to Hurston, Tea Cake and Janie spend two seasons on the muck, and they witness the “hordes of workers [pour] in,” people who Hurston’s narrator describes as “ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor” (131). Once the shacks were full, the rest of the workers slept on the ground and paid the bossman for that rent as well (132). Hurston uses imagery here to describe the reality of segregation and sharecropping in the South during the 1920s.

Both the muck and the Pit resulted from missions to capitalize off of the riches of the land while exploiting the poor who live and work there. Whether it be the white men Papa Joseph worked for or Tea Cake and Janie’s “bossman,” one similarity is that both had the ability to move to a safer place when the storms approached. During the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie and Tea Cake are forced to take refuge in what equates to slave quarters down in the muck, while the white landowners live high on the hill. Tea Cake does not leave because the bossman has not left, yet the bossman is in a much safer, more fortified space. The white men who did not escape crowd the highest point of elevation on “six-mile bridge,” the only “high and safe” point around the lake (Hurston 164). In *Salvage the Bones*, the slave quarters imagery is striking in the first few

pages as Esch describes the Gulf land where hurricanes “knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines” (4). The hurricanes come for everyone in these swamp-like settings, yet the underlying message is that the hurricane will only knock against the bossman while it will ravage the poor worker.

The settings of low-lying lands that flood easily have given the characters no choice but to hold on, fight against the current, and literally and figuratively refuse to drown. The Pit and the muck are variations of the swamp symbol. Both the noun and verb definition of the word swamp describe Janie and Esch’s homes: a swamp is “a wetland often partially covered with water and dominated by woody vegetation” (Merriam-Webster); to be “swamped” is to be inundated by water or other peril. Due to the rape of its clay resources, the small creek that runs through Esch’s family’s land turned into a pond, and Esch states that the “pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 14). Lake Okeechobee is in the Florida Everglades, a natural region of tropical wetlands in Florida that the government partially drained in 1910, “to recover potentially valuable farmland” (Emanuel 117). Dikes and canals were built to divert water from where it was needed in order to create new land that migrant workers were then brought in to farm. However, in pursuit of the riches of the land, these actions made the low-lying lakeside towns in which the migrant workers lived very susceptible to “being swamped” by floods (Emanuel 117). In *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*, Anthony Wilson states that swamp areas, since they are outside civilization, are often demonized, representing physical visions of the underworld (xiv). However, Wilson writes that “the swamp carried both a promise of

freedom for escaped slaves, and a threat to social order”—an order that relied on oppression of African Americans (xv). He goes on to say that the swamp is “significant as independent of the white patriarchal master narrative” (xvi), and the idea of being independent is paramount to the paradox that Janie and Esch’s settings suggest. Wilson describes these bayous as a “home for the desperate and disenfranchised” and a “haven for civilization’s exiles” (xvii), who usually are also the poorest and most defenseless among us. Therefore, while the swamp is a result of the patriarchal master narrative, it is also the only sanctuary vulnerable minority groups know and own. Wilson cites Zora Neale Hurston’s depiction of the swamp in her novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, as a place of “pure, natural communion” in which “Hurston captures her protagonist...in a moment of cultural transformation” (xxiii), just like Janie. Wilson realizes that there is an “inherent spirituality embodied in the swamp” as well as a “traditional status as a place of fear, danger, and exile” (xxiii). Wilson’s descriptions capture a parallel paradox present in the communities these hurricanes ravage; that is, these are places that are both poor and rich, both loving and damaging. Hurricanes striking these already fragile settings create a perfect storm of tragedy for Janie, Esch, and women like them. In the end of both novels, Janie and Esch must emerge from these swamps onto a higher ground in order to survive and move forward.

A major conflict in both novels involves the evolution of Janie and Esch as they must learn how to survive in a society that is conspiring against them. Although Eatonville and Bois Sauvage are highly segregated communities, it is interesting that Ward and Hurston’s stories are virtually devoid of named white characters who hold any kind of agency. Eatonville is an all-black, self-governing town that Zora Neale Hurston

was born in, and any references to white characters in the muck are reduced to brief mentions of the landlords and bossmen of the land around Lake Okeechobee. In *Bois Sauvage*, Esch, Skeetah, and Big Henry stumble upon a car accident involving a white couple who are not from the area and briefly try to help them in an incredibly tense exchange. They also steal parvo medication for China from a white couple who live near the Pit, but we are never introduced to any more than the fear that these people might come home and catch Skeetah and Esch. It is as if by refusing a white person a character role, the authors have made Janie and Esch's fight even more subversive because it is a fight against an entire system in which no single white character can help or hurt. This entire system is, however, causing severe obstacles for both women.

Esch is much younger than Janie, and as such, she either has not fully grasped the ways in which her environment conspires against her, or else she refuses to move this type of racism to the forefront of her story. Yet examples can still be inferred from context and must be considered as part of the obstacles Esch must overcome. In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch's pregnancy and her mother's death are a direct result of the inadequacies of the health care system for the poor. Esch sees birth control as something that is not for her; she describes condoms with "gold wrappers" reminding her of fancy chocolates—not for her poverty level (30). Her mother gives birth to all of her children at home because of an inability to pay medical bills, and when she is dying, Esch's father "drags her to the car" to go to the hospital, suggesting a wariness even then of the health-care system (2). In his article "Bodies Tell Stories: Between the Human and Animal in *Salvage the Bones*," Keith Mitchell claims that in choosing Mississippi as her setting, a state that "has the most restrictive abortion laws in the country," Ward is "pointing out



that a lack of adequate family planning services, coupled with structural racism and discrimination...leaves Esch with few choices” (73). Esch needs a guiding mother; Janie is guided by Nanny to marry Logan Killicks when she begins her sexual awakening under the pear tree. We can’t blame Nanny, since she has endured sexual trauma. Hurston’s narrator describes Nanny as a woman whose “head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm” (12). Nanny teaches Janie, through the experience that provided her deep roots, that “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). In Nanny’s case, the storm she has survived includes being raped by her slave owner and a horrible beating by his wife. Suffering from her wounds, Nanny fled on foot with her small child to freedom in a harrowing journey through the swamps to find a place to hide until she was granted her freedom and could try to create a life for her and her child. Once Nanny is set on the path to help her child become a school teacher, Leafy is raped by her own teacher “in de woods all night long” (19). Patricia Yaeger alludes directly to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when she writes that “Black Women must struggle to transcend their debasement as mules of the world” (272): Nanny’s decision to marry Janie to Logan Killicks is the way she tries to protect Janie from this fate. Janie, however, begins to refuse being debased as she uses her voice to be her own lawyer while on trial for Tea Cake’s murder after the storm and to tell her story to Phoeby.

Even beyond sexual vulnerability, Hurston and Ward’s characters are seen as prey to the predator. The rabid dog attack on Tea Cake is symbolic of this relationship: “He aimed to kill me stone dead” Janie reflects after the rabid dog attacked her and bit Tea Cake, ultimately leading to his own death. In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch admits that “the

small don't run" (215). She likens herself to a small animal without much resource who has been trained to "sit safe in the hand of the earth" (216). According to Abigail Manzella, "Esch describes herself and her family as the small animals, the prey to the predatory world around them" (198). And in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tea Cake literally becomes prey to the predatory environment around him while Janie narrowly survives.

The storms don't cause social inequity but reveal how vulnerable Esch and Janie are. Henry Giroux explains what exactly comes to the surface as a result of Katrina's harsh lesson in these oppressive societies: "something more systematic and deep-rooted was revealed in the wake of Katrina—namely, that the state no longer provided a safety net for the poor, sick, elderly, and homeless" ("Reading Hurricane Katrina" 175). Rising above the injuries of systemic racism is what it means for Esch to survive. Both Janie and Esch are essentially alone in their quests to navigate their surroundings. They are surrounded by men throughout their journeys and from very early in their stories, Janie and Esch lose their only mother figures and must rely on the lessons that the natural world teaches them to adapt. Present in both novels is the idea that in the absence of their own mothers, both the natural world and their communities can fill this void, and thus grant Janie and Esch a new identity that they would not have had without the struggle and revelations of the similar storms in similar settings.

The swamp is both light and dark for Janie and Esch. In both environments, language and storytelling become coping mechanisms that Janie and Esch use to survive the environments around them. Throughout the novel, Esch uses the characters of the texts she reads, specifically Medea, to relate to and learn from. She cultivates her voice

throughout the novel so that she can finally tell the truth in the end. Janie longs to conversate with the people around her, but is rarely able to because her husbands and society restrict her voice. When Janie does use her voice to tell her story in the end, she chooses very carefully a friend she can trust. Janie refuses to “[put] it in de street” because it is her story to tell, and she is careful that its integrity survives (Hurston 114). In this way, the novels reflect Lloyd’s second category of hurricane narratives: “texts that focus on testimony and deal with processing the storm and its traumatic and cultural effects” (247). Janie and Esch’s personal testimonies begin and end with tremendous and traumatic loss. Both Ward and Hurston have written characters who not only are of a vulnerable ethnicity, who not only face poverty, but who are also motherless from the outset. The effects of the storms on motherless children creates an even more complicated situations as the storms’ impact on the most vulnerable of victims, orphaned women of color, creates in these women a new identity. Both storms become a very unconventional mother of sorts shaping and molding Janie and Esch as their children and birthing an unbelievable strength from both women.

## CHAPTER IV – THE VOID OF MOTHERLESSNESS

Just as the muck and the Pit were compromised spaces before the storms, the protagonists' backgrounds prior to the "traumatic and cultural effects" of the hurricanes influence their "testimony" (Lloyd 247). The mother figure in both novels is an incredibly unconventional symbol. Janie's mother Leafy becomes an alcoholic after she is raped and abandons Janie before she has the chance to know her. Esch is different than Janie as far as motherly influence goes. Esch does know her mother before she dies when Esch is eight years old after giving birth to her son Junior. In fact, she remains heavily influenced by the memories and elements of her mother, which she continues to see in the landscape of the Pit. The visions of her own mother and the mother character of Medea carry Esch through difficult times in the Pit. We see Esch mourn the loss of her mother much more heavily than Janie, perhaps because she is a teenage girl searching for direction and failing at accepting her womanhood appropriately, feeling shame at herself and her pregnancy. Janie, on the other hand, is taught by Nanny that sexual maturation is something to be ashamed of as she slaps Janie's face for being interested in a boy. Being in love is a luxury Nanny does not think Janie can afford, and so she marries Janie to the elderly Logan Killicks for Janie's own protection. From the beginning of their stories, the characterization of Janie and Esch evolves without a guiding mother to show them who they are as women.

Both women feel the void left by the absence of their mothers. Hurston has created in Janie's journey a sort of quest in which Janie is searching for herself, though perhaps this search would not have been necessary if there had been a mother in the picture to tether her to home. Instead, when Janie asks questions to the air about the life

that eludes her, “nothing on the place nor in her grandma’s house answered her” (Hurston 11). For Esch, her mother’s memory is fresh and she sees her mother in her physical features as she looks in the mirror and remarks that she has “Mama’s slim, short frame” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 7). She remembers that she “clung like a monkey to Mama, [her] legs and arms wrapped around her softness,” and in her heartbreaking way, Esch simply states “and then Mama died, and there was no one left for me to hang on to” (59). At Esch’s age, she is extremely vulnerable because she does not have a mother to hang onto, but Janie has Nanny when she is Esch’s age. Nanny tries to fill the mother role for a short time, but sending Janie away to be married seems to make her an orphan twice over, and can be read as the first example of a mother figure being an actual antagonist forcing Janie’s evolution and driving Janie’s journey.

Both characters attempt to fill the void of motherlessness with hurtful relationships with men. While Janie is forcibly married to Logan Killicks, a much older man whom she does not love, she mistakenly thinks that love will just come, and of course, it does not. Janie does not have a mother to teach her this lesson, and because “her first dream was dead, she became a woman” (Hurston 25). This pattern of Janie “[finding] out about livin’”(192) for herself, through her relationships with men, continues throughout the text until after the storm—at which time the lessons are complete. Janie escapes Logan Killicks by running away with Jody Starks, an opportunist who abuses her physically and mentally. Finally, Janie does fall in love with Tea Cake, but even this relationship brings with it instances of toxic masculinity and hurtful control. At one point during their relationship, Tea Cake becomes jealous of Mrs. Turner’s brother and whips Janie. His justification for the abuse is that “it relieved an awful fear

inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession” (146). After this episode, the men around him hold Tea Cake in much higher esteem, as if it had been expected that Tea Cake establish his dominance in the relationship. Of the three men, Tea Cake is the one Janie truly loves, and they do move past the fights they have, yet the message is clear. Just because there is love, does not mean the pear tree will always be beautiful and full of “kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world” (11). A strong mother might have been able to guide Janie; Hurston’s choice to leave this conventional mother figure out highlights the complexity and complications of Janie’s path.

Likewise, Ward sets up her character to figure out life on her own. Esch becomes sexually active at a shockingly young age, and endures many sexual encounters with boys, noting “it was easier to let him keep on touching me than ask him to stop, easier to let him inside than to push him away, easier than hearing him ask me, ‘Why not?’ It was easier to keep quiet and take it than to give him an answer” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 23). This response reveals the dominance the boys have over her, an abusive relationship where Esch does not feel like she can say no. Esch’s warped sense of self-confidence is also wrapped up in sex. She equates sex with swimming, claiming that “the only thing that’s ever been easy for me to do, like swimming through water, was sex when I started having it” (22). However, Esch is good at a lot of other things: she analyzes the difficult literature that she reads, like Greek myths and Faulkner novels, in impressive ways. Skeetah often calls on Esch to help him instead of any of the many boys around them; she is fast, clever, and strong. Esch is a caretaker for her brothers and for her father, and at her young age, she is compassionate, helping her neighbors when she can. Perhaps because she has no mother to point them out to her, she is unaware of the many positive

traits that make up her identity. While there is love in her household, and definitely fierce loyalty, Esch's brothers and father cannot nurture her the way she needs when they refuse to even acknowledge her womanhood. Esch feels needed by the boys, but Esch has no one to turn to with her own needs. Throughout the book, the memories of how her mother's used to nurture the children haunt Esch. She consistently remembers her mother's care. She remembers instances of patience as she "she cleaned us like kittens," "clinging to her mother," and her mother teaching her to find eggs (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 22, 59, 69). After her mother's death, there is no one to take care of Esch's "girl's heart" or even recognize it as such, except for Manny. Since Esch believes that Manny does recognize her womanhood, albeit in a dangerous way, it is he who Esch dangerously clings to before the storm, and she accepts his use and abuse because it is all she has to acknowledge her as a woman. No one is truly paying attention to Esch. It is her father's lack of attention her brothers' insistence that Esch is one of the guys coupled with no available mother to correct these assumptions that lead Esch to the damaging belief that sex and swimming are the only two things that come easy for her. Ward begins the novel with a protagonist who possesses little sense of self and does not acknowledge her own value as a strong woman and soon-to-be mother.

As much as Janie and Esch try to fill the void of motherlessness with harmful relationships, they have no choice in the symbolic, and even more unconventional, mother that seeks them out and imposes her most important lessons upon them. In the absence of their biological mothers, the ultimate mother—Mother Nature—teaches them the comforting but harsh lessons of survival and self-realization after they are "birthed" by the storms. Birth is a complicated and violent symbol in both novels: *Salvage the*

*Bones* opens with a comparison of the pit bull China's violent, visceral birth to Esch's last image of her own mother hemorrhaging while delivering Junior. Esch reflects on what she witnesses by determining that "what China is doing is fighting, like she was born to do...fighting these puppies that are reaching for the outside, blind and wet" (2). This moment is eerily similar to how Esch fights to survive in the storm being "pushed up and out of the water" as the family squints and blinks, unable to see clearly due to the water (232-36). Esch has a right to be afraid of birth; Ward's imagery is horrifying, as are the images of motherhood that surround Ward's characters: China eats one of her puppies in a scene that terrifies the children of the Pit, and Medea is the mythological character from her books who kills her children in a jealous rage. Esch says of her own pregnancy, "this is what it means to be pregnant so far: throwing up" (37). While Esch's purging is a physical response to her pregnancy, Christopher Clark claims that "while [Esch's vomiting is] involuntary, [it] is indicative of an unconscious desire to free herself from the individuality that ironically threatens her" (352). I would suggest that before the storm the individuality that threatens her is wrapped up in fear for survival and shame in her position as a pregnant teenager.

Likewise in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston suggests that birth is something to survive, not something to commemorate. Janie herself never becomes a mother, but motherhood and birth are a violent motif in the beginning of the novel. Nanny was raped by her slave owner and beaten by the slave owner's wife when she gives birth to Janie's mother. Janie is also a product of rape, and as such, her own birth is shadowed in oppression and shame. However, the resolution of the novel is that Janie finds out about living for herself, not for a child. In an awakening sense, Janie is the child



that must establish identity; there is no room for another child in this story. Esch, however, is a child who will be having a child. She has no mother to raise her and help her maneuver through this experience, which likely contributes to her hesitation at even admitting she is pregnant. What Esch has seen of birth and the contexts of Janie's own existence are precursors for their rebirth. Birth being established in such a violent context paves the way for the idea that the violent hurricanes coming for the women will birth new identities in them, and this symbolic birth will also be a fight to survive.

Although the image of a devastating hurricane as a symbol of violent birth is the reverse of the more comforting Mother Nature trope, destruction and renewal are two sides of the same coin. As much as nature destroys in these novels, it also comforts Janie and Esch along their journey and brings about life in the end. In the established societal ideal, a mother is simultaneously a teacher and a safe place. This sentiment is clear in both novels, as when Motor Boat tells Tea Cake, "Mah mama's house is yours" (Hurston 164), and Big Henry offers, "It's just me and my mama...plenty of room. Come on" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 243). Big Henry and Motor Boat do not have much, but they both have a mother, and they offer their mother and home as a way to care for a friend with neither. Similarly, natural beauty comforts Esch and Janie. Zora Neale Hurston's references to the pear tree in the beginning of the novel show Janie the beauty of marriage, a lesson she would never get from her own absent mother, but one that is nonetheless important in shaping who Janie is and what her driving dream will be. Davies describes Nature as "both an 'audible,' flowery voice which speaks of 'honey' and an 'inaudible' voice which articulates rage for men's betrayal of women" (141). In the beginning of Hurston's novel, Janie receives lessons from Mother Nature that paint a

very clear and beautiful picture of sexuality. As she lies below a pear tree and watches the literal “birds and the bees,” Janie is able to form her dream as a result of the “natural law of mother” (Davies, *Goddess* 160). Janie likes this message; in fact, it comforts her so much that it becomes a crucial part of her dream. Davies also makes the point that the “word Janie comes to speak” as a result of her lesson with “Dame Nature” has “origins firmly rooted in Nature and in womanhood” (159). In this moment, Janie learns the beauty of what life and love can be, a beauty that she will not know fully until much later in her journey after nature also teaches her some very difficult lessons.

Likewise, Ward connects motherhood with nature in a calming way for Esch before her real mother dies. James Coby, author of *High Water Everywhere: Affect, Ecological Disasters, and Southern Literature*, explains nature’s place in Esch’s life early on: “In Esch’s assessment of her mother’s death, she reveals the ambivalent but ultimately comforting presence of rural landscape” (149). Esch remembers the final moments of her mother’s life with natural imagery teaching her lessons of life and death: “Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mom’s last flower” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 2). It is in her own mother’s death that she sees life happening, and the same flower imagery is present as a comfort, like it is for Janie. Esch’s own pregnancy helps her realize that there can be life among the death surrounding her later in the novel as well. Life in the midst of death is a familiar motif that both authors emphasize throughout the protagonists’ journeys, and nature teaches this lesson to Janie and Esch as perhaps their mothers would have. However, besides being a teacher, a mother can also be a disciplinarian who punishes as a consequence of her children’s poor behavior.

Nature in these novels can be a harsh disciplinarian; unconventional mothers are oftentimes not protective and nurturing. The hurricanes, which “are traditionally described as women” (Davies 185) are symbolic of this cruel protector. Esch’s father, in fact, comments on the femininity of the storm by referencing it “like the worst—she’s a woman” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 124) and, while we must not equate motherhood with womanhood, a strong mother figure is first a feminine figure. Humorous yet frightening in its implication about mothers, Esch’s description of the storm is that, “It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt” (230). Ward’s sensory details personify the storm as one which disciplines through violence. Esch’s description of Katrina furthers Ward’s extended metaphor of the mother: “[Katrina was] the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered...she left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes” (255). The image of the storm as a mother here heightens the impact of its violence and adds the tone of violent abuse. In Hurston’s novel, Tea Cake says of the storm that “the Mother of Malice has trifled with men” (169). This storm was intent upon ill will, and the images in all of these examples paint a picture of not just a cruel parent, but of a woman scorned. The term “men” can be read as all of humankind, and as such, would mean that humankind is up against this force of destruction, yet it is interesting that Janie survives when the man in her life does not. Kathleen Davies speaks of this Mother of Malice saying that “Hurston’s other personal power symbol, the storm, will “speak” women’s rage” (155). Both authors personify the hurricane’s feminine strength, while showing this mother is an abusive one who unleashes her vicious discipline towards the children in her path.

Independence is a harsh lesson, but a necessary one for the evolution of these characters. The men in Janie and Esch's life have had power over them for far too long. Even Tea Cake who mostly embodies Janie's dream has abusive moments and, in the end, Janie will have to put him out of his misery and rage. In Esch's case, Manny, the father of her child, refuses to see Esch as a woman, as a person, and will not even look her in the eye during sex. He objectifies her womanhood and, until the end when Esch forces him to look at her, Esch falls into the same trap of viewing herself as unworthy and unequal. However, these storms teach both women how to be independent from the oppression of men. Esch's violent attack of Manny before the storm and her denial of him as the father of her child establish her independence. Through the storm, Janie realizes her own power, in stark contrast to the Janie who wore a head wrap, and even the Janie who mostly listens on the porch. She has power to destroy as well, to be a storm of her own, and she uses that power to do what she has to do when Tea Cake contracts rabies. Janie is not only able to sacrificially kill Tea Cake, she is also able to proclaim her innocence in front of a court, and she physically walks the path to Eatonville to tell her story under her own conditions. Janie tells her story from beginning to end, emphasizing both the ways in which men have controlled her and also that she will tell this story only once and only to someone who will honor it—her bosom friend Phoeby. In the end, Janie realizes her power, and this new self-actualization causes her to understand, "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes!" (Hurstons 193). The comfort of nature as a blanket shows the soft side of nature, but more importantly, after the harsh lessons of the storm, she is able to find peace within herself. In *The*

*Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston*, Karla Holloway writes that Janie is a character “who has been linked with natural imagery throughout the story and who needs to learn the potential strength in her own independence” (65). She has known love and loss, life and death, and she has proven she is a strong force to accept and surmount it all. In Janie’s case, she sees her life as “a great tree in leaf with things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and left undone. Dawn and doom [are in] the branches” (Hurston 8). The storm teaches her this lesson. In the end of both novels, the protagonists have evolved—not an easy feat in a world that does little to recognize their personhood.

Before the storm, both women could be described as subservient, yet after the storms, they are capable of holding their heads higher. In “Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*,” Mary Ruth Marotte writes, “[Jesmyn Ward’s] characters do not simply survive but move on seamlessly to shift into their new roles, roles they did not seem capable of inhabiting before the storm” (217). This is true as Esch comes out of the storm ready to finally accept her motherhood and venture out of the Pit focusing on the help she will have to overcome her isolation. Marotte’s description is exactly what Hurston portrays in Janie as well. The resolution to Janie’s conflict happens when, after the storm, Janie has transcended and rejected Nanny’s original “mule” vision for her, and she has become a strong, independent woman instead. The last image of Janie as she finishes telling her story vividly describes this transformation. Janie ascends the stairs with a light, and notices that “the place tasted fresh again” (Hurston 92). Her shift into a new role is complete as she combs “the road-dust out of her hair” (192). Janie’s actions are symbolic of her shifting into a new role.

This role casts off the shadows of her past and leaves behind the times when she felt the “nothingness” of her role. In this same scene, the light becomes symbolic because she keeps it with her as she ascends, describing it as a “spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire” (192). At this moment, Janie has taken on the light herself and gotten rid of the dirt that described her before. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Women’s Writings, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger claims, “...black women use dirt as a means of transcendence, a way of changing the meaning of blackness altogether” (275). As Janie combs the dirt out of her hair, as she ascends the stairs, as she carries the symbolic light in her hand, the “nothingness” of what her Nanny claims African American women are has disappeared. It seems in this scene that Hurston is conveying the victory of Janie through the survival of her struggles as black woman, the struggle of being ignored or abused. As she combs her long hair and frees it from the dirt, she is also freeing herself from the shame of the head rag and all she has endured.

Similarly, when Esch is soaked with the water from the storm, the shame of her pregnancy is revealed to her father, and in the moment his eyes are “open and hurt” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 234). After the storm is over, Esch describes her family, similar to the dirt symbol, as “human debris” (237). In this moment, though, Esch’s father begins assume the shame instead by admitting that he is the one who failed the children’s mother, not Esch. At this moment, the father and daughter embrace, and Esch admits it will be all right and that she “had never been so strong” ( 238). Yaeger states that “Literary characters who submerge themselves in water or earth provide a litany of romantic transcendence or transfiguration” (15). Janie and Esch both transform as a result of their immersion in water and the natural landscape. They survive their violent births

from the storm and are more visible than they were before the storms; they force other characters to see them and the imagery surrounding them is that of light and vision. The hurricanes that create tumultuous change in both earth and sea cause Janie and Esch to transcend the subjugation of the masculine and white culture of power.

Through their transformations, they become strong and refuse to disappear. This strength stems from both the trauma they have experienced from losing their mothers and their own identities, as well as the environments of the muck and the Pit that both nurture and challenge them as agents of struggle in highly inequitable societies. Esch, at her young age, is only beginning a complicated journey. We know, fifteen years after Katrina, that women like Esch still deal with structural racism as they face tornadoes and pandemics. Nevertheless, 100 years prior to *Salvage the Bones*, Janie and women like her were dealing with eerily similar issues. On the one hand, it is appalling that social milieus have not changed much. On the other hand, it is inspiring that Hurston and Ward create for us women who refuse to disappear. Perhaps Janie is Esch's hope for the future, too strong to continue to be the "mule of the world" who lowers her eyes to men. In the end, Esch begins looking to the future herself, "I [*will*] tie the glass and stone with string, hand the shards above my bed, so they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 255). Janie and Esch and the strong women they represent are up against a world that fights so hard against them. The magic in these characters lies in having the ability to stand and speak given the magnitude of the obstacles they have faced within their vulnerable spaces. The power they possess is exemplified by the fact that they remain moving forward when the waters recede.

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