

What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies and Community in Jesmyn Ward's

Salvage the Bones

As the narrator of Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) Esch Batiste tells the reader, "[b]odies tell stories" (83). This article will examine how embodiment figures in the novel, and how human and non-human bodies manifest particular regional stories, playing an important role alongside particular racialized histories of the South. In examining how these interact and often hybridize one another, it will be possible to examine how Ward's novel highlights tensions and contradictions that surround Hurricane Katrina and how the storm literally and figuratively uncovers such dimensions. By investigating the landscape, femininity, as well as the natural and man-made, this article will chart the ways in which Ward represents the South through a typically regional mode of address, whilst challenging pre-conceived notions of who is affected by the storm, and how. Examining the social and cultural effects of Katrina alongside Esch's narrative will uncover how certain relationships function, and are imagined, and the potential violent repercussions of those conceptualizations. These Southern myths work alongside Katrina discourse to erase individuals' identities and histories. Considered in conjunction with premises of naturalization and how certain ideologies arbitrarily become natural, the novel demonstrates an increased violence and persecution of particular subjugated bodies.

Foregrounding Katrina

Hurricane Katrina has often been cast as an inevitable event, intrinsically bound up within regional and national geographies, and their social implications. In the storm's aftermath, the disaster was cast as "the inevitable results of the actions

(and inactions) of [New Orleans, and as such] the South as a whole,” which has been shaped by “a centuries-long American perception that New Orleans is destined for a tragic ending” (Bibler 7, 8). The consequences of Katrina were exacerbated by the pre-existing discriminations that affected large swathes of the South, based particularly on race and class. As Henry Giroux tells us, “[s]omething more systematic and deep-rooted was revealed in the wake of Katrina—namely, that the state no longer provided as safety net for the poor, sick, elderly, and homeless” (175). Therefore, the location of the South and the oppression of large amounts of its citizens, meant that the potential effects of the storm were greatly increased and that they were inevitable.

Ward’s novel engages with this inexorable nature of Katrina, framing the narrative across twelve days leading up to the storm. With each passing day, the pre-existing knowledge of the approaching hurricane becomes more apparent, haunting the novel’s text and characters in advance: snatches of television chatter and hearsay filter through the locals. It is during the fifth day that the storm becomes fully recognized, and therefore acknowledged, as Katrina: “The storm, it has a name now. Like the worst, she’s a woman. Katrina” (124). Esch’s father thus converts the specter of the incoming storm into a fully realized character with a name, making it more tangible to both the characters and the book’s reader. The switch is compounded by the sharp inflection of the father’s statement, comparing the severity of Katrina to the “worst” kind of person, a woman. The novel’s treatment of gender will be discussed below, but it is worth noting that the use of the female-gendered pronoun is a way of marking the storm’s dangerous and destructive power.

I have already mentioned how Katrina is formulated as an inevitable disaster, and this is bound up in the pre-existing sociopolitical state of Mississippi and the

wider South. As Clyde Woods posits, the “tortured past of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi is reasserting itself” (428) through the circumstances surrounding the storm, and Christopher Lloyd suggests “as the floodwaters [of Katrina] receded, the old racial demarcations of the city were brought into stark relief” (54). It is worth noting the large amount of theory discussing Katrina that is centered on New Orleans: among others, Giroux’s *Stormy Weather* (2006), Karen O’Neill’s “Broken Levees, Broken Lives” (2008), and Ruth Salvaggio’s “Forgetting New Orleans” (2008). In discussing the disaster through the lens of this one city, it often becomes a stand-in for the South as a region and the U.S. as a whole. In setting her novel in Mississippi, rather than New Orleans, Ward is providing an alternative perspective on Katrina, indicating that the effects of the storm are more wide-ranging than usually considered. Further, the novel’s geography invokes a deeply embedded history of racism. The rising waters that engulf the landscape figuratively drown it in the past, and the throwaway bodies left behind recall other victims of racial violence.

Despite academic theory’s strong focus on New Orleans in discussing Katrina, it is interesting to consider that Mississippi is actually “the poorest state in the nation” (Dyson 5). Ward avoids what is historically considered the hardest hit area of New Orleans, and instead chooses to focus on the poorest area in the United States. Further, by resisting the over-arching framing of Katrina as a New Orleans disaster, and as such a Southern/American tragedy, Ward seeks to disrupt the way in which New Orleans then becomes an automatic stand-in between the regional and national scale of the disaster. Ward’s novel is seemingly arguing for a more considered treatment of the regional aspects of the storm, reframing a Katrina narrative as regional, yet outside of New Orleans.

Scholars do attempt to critique a nationalist framing of Katrina, arguing to retain a stronger focus on the storm's regional effects alongside its national implications. However, as Lloyd's book demonstrates, often this only seems to side-step the argument rather than fully confront it. Briefly discussing Ward's novel, he suggests that "while not set in New Orleans [*Salvage the Bones*] offers a brief glimpse of how the state of African-American precariousness ... is not only contained in New Orleans, and thus may be considered in some ways regional" (69). By only momentarily considering this perspective, Lloyd, along with many others, fails to fully consider the centralizing aspect of repeatedly considering Katrina from only a New Orleans-as-Southern perspective, and switching between apparent regionalized contexts to a more national lens. This inadvertently embeds the regional and national elements of Katrina in a one-dimensional framework, rather than exploring the way diverse areas and populations were devastated by the disaster.

Race and Class in the South

Anna Hartnell writes: "Hurricane Katrina laid bare a legacy of systemic racism that still traps disproportionate numbers of African Americans" (1). Despite frequent reports in the media that sought to set the narrative of Katrina otherwise, those that remained in the South "weren't shiftless, stupid, or stubborn [but] simply couldn't muster the resources to escape destruction," (Dyson 6) as Ward's novel sets out to demonstrate. The characters in the novel are particularly framed in the conventionally American tropes of home and family. The book charts the trajectory of the family's preparation for the storm, whilst also chronicling their daily experiences. The novel's slow setting is vividly told with a dream-like quality common to Southern literature, whilst still enacting common strategies of the grotesque: "the explosion of

monstrosity or violence, the flickery image of injustice ... discomfoting emblems of neglect, disregard, elision, the throwaway” (Yaeger 8). Despite occupying a space traditionally conceived in a more heteronormative context—that is, the white middle class family—Esch and her kin are constantly surrounded by a harsh environment that will ultimately wreak havoc in their lives. The land, whilst beautifully described by Ward, is often figured in terms of the body, particularly injured bodies and waste:

I dumped the glass into the ditch, where it sparkled on top of the black remains like stars. The shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there. When there’s good rain in the summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it. The water, which was normally pink, had turned a thick, brownish red. The color of a scab. (15)

They live in a forest clearing called the Pit, which is both man-made and natural, adapted by Esch’s family as a site of social engagement, yet it is also a place where waste is dumped. Ward’s descriptive language evokes a natural yet romanticized, and almost mythologized landscape that is also simultaneously deprived, injured, and hurting. The South of *Salvage the Bones* is both a site of sustenance and harm and the image of a bleeding landscape mirrors the social injury experienced by the residents of Bois Sauvage, where Esch and her family live. They become the tired, hungry children who appear more like a scab rather than the flowing waters of a flourishing landscape. Bois Sauvage, or “savage woods,” also reflects the doubleness of natural realms and their subsequent qualities. The flipside of a nurturing Mother Nature is a darker, more dangerous proposition, whereby the natural is capable of taking away as well as providing. Coupled with the sociological

conditions deeply entrenched in the Southern Mississippi landscape, Bois Sauvage becomes a marker for both the natural and cultural hardships that the residents face. Early on in the novel, Esch shatters a glass bottle that cuts her hand “the size of a quarter, bleeding steadily” (11). Her brother Randall attends to her in the way “Mama told us to do” (12). She goes on to explain that their mother “would push and blow at the wound after putting alcohol on it, and when she’d stopped blowing, it wouldn’t hurt anymore. *There. See? Like it never happened*” (12). Esch’s description of an injured body is layered with the memory of her mother, suggestive of the generational nature of memory in the region. Further, injury is often hidden from view as soon as it becomes visible, much like the injury that is caused to black bodies that is only momentarily viewed. Whilst this scene in itself is relatively small, the impact it registers is quite significant, and when viewed amongst the plethora of bloody images of bodies and land in Ward’s novel, it is particularly useful in considering how specific bodies in certain landscapes are viewed culturally. Using Yaeger’s framing, the landscape is violent whilst being a discomfiting emblem of neglect, disregard, elision and the throwaway. By presenting the reader with the story of those left behind by Katrina, Ward is providing “the unseen everyday” (Yaeger xii) using the South’s preoccupation, and in a wider sense the American obsession, with the trope of family.

The Social Katrina

Whilst I am making a comparison between Ward’s novel and a common conceptualization of “the American family,” the Batistes serve as an atypical model that actually subverts conventional ideas of how the American family is considered. They reflect large populations of the South who are often considered working-class, living in poverty, often unemployed, and uneducated. Whilst occupying these liminal

spaces, characters in *Salvage the Bones* demonstrate traits that are thought to be incompatible with viewpoints of those living outside of (what might be termed) the “general population.” Esch, who is an A-grade English student in high school, often refers to Greek mythology in the course of the narrative:

I wondered if Medea felt this way before she walked out to meet Jason for the first time, like a hard wind come through her and set her shaking. The insects singing as they ring the red dirt yard, the bouncing ball, Daddy’s blues coming from his truck radio, they all called me out the door. (7)

This type of identification not only challenges pre-conceived notions of Bois Sauvage’s residents, but also actively blurs the boundaries between spheres conceived as disparate, bound up in notions of race and class. Ward’s book challenges what Yaeger suggests is the “replac[ing of] the effects of a white bourgeois reality with bodily dislocation, sharing ... a desire to reveal the ‘natural body’ as a painful assemblage of someone else’s codes and symbols” (223). By identifying with Greek mythology, Esch is highlighting the permeability between these apparently distinct borders, and destabilizes social constructs that are placed on a black, Southern, female body. The use of present tense and first person narrative further challenges readers to step deeper into self-identification with Esch, increasing the proximity between the two. Also, merging the apparently far-apart lands of the contemporary South and ancient Greece effectively highlights how disparate identities and their constructions are easily collapsible into one another. By highlighting these kinds of slippages, Ward is demonstrating the construction of these fictions, and the societal power they hold over how we identify others. As Michael Eric Dyson tell us “the religious myths we

circulate bring shame on the poor ... the alleged pathology of poor blacks ... gives us license to dismiss or demonize them” (3). The characters of *Salvage the Bones* challenge these pre-conceived notions, but also suggest that the methods of identification used by society should also be subject to interrogation.

This type of cognitive dissonance is reminiscent of the “Du Boisian double consciousness of black America” and can be understood further through what Hartnell describes as the “‘unhomely’ quality of the American experience for large sections of the nation’s black population,” (Hartnell 216, 215); or as Dyson puts it more simply “the poor had been abandoned by society and its institutions ... long before the storm” (2). Esch’s family home is located in woodland clearing; the nearest white family are outside of the woods at the top of a hill. The difference between the two locations is stark: the black family are literally lost in the woods, trapped in the lowlands that are susceptible, and will succumb to, flood damage, whilst the white family embody the American fantasy of the “city upon a hill.” The Batiste family home is in a state of disrepair, their mother is long dead, creating a notable absence in the family, and the land surrounding is full of broken-down machinery that has been left to rust. As Esch describes, “[e]ven when she was alive, it was full of empty cars with their hoods open, the engines stripped, and the bodies sitting there like picked-over animal bones” (22). Skeetah, Esch’s brother, describes the other (white) house: “you ever heard of Hansel and Gretel? Well, that’s who own that house, and they want to fatten you up like a little pig and eat you” (75). Not only does Skeetah’s description evoke another type of myth in the form of a fairy tale, but it also one that describes a perfect house used to seduce the characters of Hansel and Gretel to their potential deaths. As Skeetah goes on to say, “[t]hat’s if the white people don’t eat you first” (75). The stark difference between the two is represented as the white people who have become a monstrous

danger that threatens the black protagonists. Conversely, to the white people on the hill, the Batiste family are hidden away from view amongst the woods in an uncanny mirroring. As Hartnell tell us, “the word ‘unhomely’ comes from Freud’s definition of the ‘uncanny’ ... something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (217). The Batistes have been repressed into the wilderness where their family and home, whilst familiar, are left to become alienated and unrecognizable, repressed by society and left to squander.

Kinship and Community

Whilst representing what remains left behind in the South, Esch and her family are seen to both inhabit and resist social positions that are assigned to them. As Thadious Davis suggests, Southern writers and their characters “use their spatial location to imagine, create, and define new and unproscribed subjectivities” (4). In doing so, the characters in *Salvage the Bones* assume hybrid characteristics that are typically associated with African Americans living in the South, as well as those individuals living outside of such geographical and socio-political spaces. The theme of kinship is prevalent throughout Ward’s narrative, and actively clashes with stereotypes that haunt African Americans. Rather than appearing as unintelligent, engaging in anti-social and often criminal behavior, or fulfilling archetypes such as the “welfare queen,” characters like Esch are clever, educated and have developed a strong sense of family and community connection. As Esch suggests “where my brothers go, I follow” (53). After burying a sick puppy, which is birthed by China, Skeeter’s pit bull, one by one the group consisting of Esch and her brothers, joined by cousin Marquise and friends Big Henry and Manny, each “walks toward the black

water of the pit” (52). There they immerse themselves, in a baptism-like scene, stripped of clothing, in order to cleanse themselves of the deadly “parvo” virus; as Skeetah tells them, “it’s all contaminated” (52). Shedding the contaminants of the outside world to join one another in a scene of uncanny Edenic qualities evokes a number of things. Firstly, the obvious Christian iconography is reconfigured into an African American context, whereby the innocent babes of Eden are actually poor, black children from the South. Secondly, the group has to shed their clothes, akin to their social skin, which is contaminated, suggestive of the cultural impact that is harmful towards their bodies. Finally, the water is described by Esch as a black pit, which eerily recollects old B-movie features, like that of the black lagoon, suggesting that something monstrous also lurks in the scene of their “perverse” baptism, or that they themselves are the creatures emerging from the black lagoon. Thus, community can be viewed as something that is both sustaining and perverse.

Another pivotal scene illuminating the tensions of community occurs around Esch’s brother Randall’s basketball at St. Catherine’s elementary. As Esch describes, “the elementary school used to actually be the black school for the district before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane” (140) which partly suggests the (literally) uprooting power of natural disasters in the region, in addition to the importance of geographical areas that act as sites of social bonding. Rick Crownshaw has suggested that desegregation is “the byproduct of a disastrous distraction” and that “this history of disaster has revealed that social progress may be nominal” (164). This idea can be further read through the memory of the school embroiled with Esch’s own familial history, as she tells the reader, “Mama told the story of how [her parents] met, that Daddy would not stop pulling her hair in the hallway, making fun of her little-girl pigtails since the rest of her was so grown ...

that was their beginning” (141). However, this site of layered social and historical importance is also the place where a multitude of circumstances violently affect the characters. Firstly, this is where Esch encounters Manny (her love interest) sexually in a bathroom stall. Whereas in the past she passively engaged with these acts, here Esch makes a symbolic stand and forces Manny to look her in the eye while they have sex, something he has previously refused: “I grab his dick enough to hurt. I want it to hurt” before proclaiming repeatedly, “[h]e will look at me” (145). Manny’s violently abrupt rejection of Esch leads her to the ultimate (violent) refusal she will take against him later in the novel: “I am crying again for what I have been, for what I am, and for what I will be again” (147). Secondly, the escalating tension between Skeetah and Manny’s cousin Rico (owner of China’s mate) breaks out into physical confrontation: “Skeetah punches Rico. He does it with his whole body, raining down on Rico’s wide, sweaty face with the steady fury and quick power of the small: fierce as China” (150). This culminates with the group, including Randall, being forced out: “the other referee is blowing his whistle at Skeetah and Rico and Manny and Big Henry and Marquise, who are fighting their way along the side of the court now, the crowd carrying them out of the door in the kind of frothing waves we only get before hurricanes” (150). In Ward’s description, the boys are dually compared with animals, particularly the dogs they are fighting over, but also the volatile aspects of the natural world, like the frothing waves before a storm. Evidently, the social aspects of the South are complexly tied up with the natural, and animalistic, landscape. The characters’ identities are merged with those of animals, much like derogatory cultural stereotypes that paint African Americans as non-human, or animalistic in character. The violent storm analogies also reflect the apparent savage and uncontrollable aspects and are reminiscent of savage jungles, that wider—predominately white—

culture, approximates with black society. Ward shows the characters of *Salvage the Bones* as more complex than a simple set of stereotypical perceptions though, overturning and investigating these figurations of animalism and savagery.

The Southern Imagination

As Davis discusses in her book *Southsapes*, African American characters in the South “assert geographical claims and transgress regulatory boundaries that counter racial exclusion as a practice of power and privilege” (4). Rather than adhering to one-dimensional prejudices, Ward duly acknowledges them, as she widens out the complexities of her characters. The multi-dimensional facets of them allow the characters to be more easily identifiable to readers whose backgrounds do not necessarily fit politically, culturally, or socio-economically. As we have already seen, Esch views herself through the lens of Greek mythology, but often she conflates her own identity with that of others, including her own siblings. For instance, the close proximity of her brothers often becomes complicated in the narrative by the narrative description, conflating them with her own body, or as had already been described, the memory of her mother. Later in the novel, Esch occupies the blurred standpoint between consciousness and sleep as she wakes to the sound of vomiting: “In my half sleep, I see myself in the bathroom, hunched over the toilet, one hand on the back of the bowl, vomiting. But then the retching becomes louder, sounds like my tongue is curling up and out of my throat, and I realize I am not throwing up” (177). Upon realizing that it is not her being sick, Esch is again transported, this time away from the immediate scene of the action: “I have never been so loud; have never made that sound. The bathroom disappears and I wake to the half-light of dawn, the ceiling, Junior asleep ... It’s Daddy on the floor of the bathroom” (177). Esch is

simultaneously present and dislocated from the scene confusing her own body with that of her father. When she realizes her mistake, Esch is relocated and becomes attached to the room in which she sleeps and identifies the differences between herself and her Daddy. The dreamlike environment of Ward's South becomes a haze through which one's own body can be confused with another, in the first instance invoking the racial prejudices that are aimed at black bodies. This mis- and re-identification marks sites through which culture aims and attempts to create forms of identification, however problematic, often in a continuance of oppressive behavior. By becoming aware of her mistake, Esch dis-identifies with her father's body but does not become completely separate from the physical landscape that she inhabits. Esch is unable to suddenly escape the confines of her house and home, only slightly more aware of the boundaries that situate her, and the limitations contained within.

The identification of bodies with subjects that are "other" is not just contained to human bodies. In the narrative, Esch merges images of bodily identification with the surrounding landscape and wildlife, which Crownshaw posits as the "interminable process of evisceration revealing the animal within" and that the characters "are increasingly indistinguishable from the surrounding detritus of poverty and ... the environment more generally" (161). This sense of uncanny doubling, as previously mentioned, pervades the novel and is most interesting when viewed through the framework of motherhood.

Doubling and Motherhood

As Thadious Davis posits, the South is a "stark geographic metaphor," one that is "alive in memory and in blood, but dead too in the literal skin of animals and in the material body of the mother" (1). The particular symbolic authority of the mother-

figure in *Salvage the Bones* drives through the pages and finds itself being doubled between characters. As Mary Ruth Marotte suggests “nearly all of Esch’s recollections of her mother involve fortifying and guiding them” (209). The book begins with China giving birth and the discovery by Esch that she is pregnant as she attempts to navigate the implications of that knowledge. Alongside her identification with mythological characters, the boundaries between China, Esch, and her mother are repeatedly blurred: “What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest Brother, Junior”; “Her breasts are swollen, and the puppies pull at them. She is a weary goddess. She is a mother many times over” (1, 40). When Esch later confronts Manny she imagines herself as China: “For some reason I see Skeetah when I blink, Skeetah kneeling next to China, always kneeling, always stroking and loving and knowing her. Skeetah’s face when he stood across from Rico, when he told China, *Make them know*. I am on him like China” (203). For the majority of the novel, Esch’s status as mother is kept hidden from the other characters, and it is this (im)perceptibility that is integral to how Esch is viewed, and more importantly how she feels she is viewed, by those around her. Esch often feels that she is not fully understood by the other (male) characters, and that she must fight to be really seen by them. In the confrontation with Manny, this desire becomes literal as she embodies the characteristics of the fighting dog China in the hope that both Manny, and her brother Skeetah, are able to see her as an individual who is a woman and a mother. By “making them know,” Esch desires to assume the role that she sees other females occupying: the mythological characters, her mother, and China. Her violent outburst becomes a stark declaration of who and what she wishes to be seen as, and by whom.

The issue of visibility, and how Esch's body reconfigures in relation to the space around her, is continuously explored by Ward's novel. Standing as witness to the treatment and idolization of other women troubles Esch, as she views it as a benchmark that she also must meet. The disjunction between Esch and the collective gendered identity that she thinks she must inhabit leads to a crisis of selfhood that she has to work through in order to be seen by the other characters. Throughout, this is bound up with both her social interactions and those with the landscape around her. Thus, the link between Esch's body and the body of the South is intrinsic. In marking out her identity amongst these pressures, Esch notes that once Katrina hits "*everything will be washed clean*. What I carry in my stomach is relentless; like each unbearable day, it will dawn" (205). Not only will the external landscape be washed clean, but the internal will be altered irrevocably also. As Esch tells the reader "the wind grabs my voice up and snatches it out and over the pipes, and drops it there to die" (205). The body, and thus the identity, of the South is subject to an impending change, as simultaneously Esch is exposed to such changes as well. The winds of Katrina are the same winds that she declares "show[] my body for what it is" (196).

Esch's knowledge of being pregnant, and the way this is described, highlights the hybrid relationship between Esch and her social and physical landscape. When she watches Skeetah disembowel a squirrel, Esch cannot sustain her witnessing of the internal becoming external:

I run off behind a small gathering of trees, as far as I can make it away from that smell and that slime, and I fall and throw up the eggs, the rice, the water, everything I have inside of me until there is no food left, until my throat feels

empty ... but still I am not able to throw it all up. Inside, at the bottom, something remains. (48)

This example from early on in the novel demonstrates how Esch cannot yet handle the fact that she is now pregnant, and is at this point comparable to the mother-figures that present themselves around her: in the literal figure of China, and the spectral hauntings of the past through her mother and mythology. Esch attempts to rid herself of any sense of identity through her purging, which while involuntary, is indicative of an unconscious desire to rid herself of the individuality that ironically threatens her, but which is also bound up with the pressures of conforming to a collective identity of femininity that surrounds her. Esch also tries to expel the internal when she is forced to pee suddenly when the group is attempting to steal supplies from a neighboring farm. Hiding in the long grass, awaiting Skeetah's escape from the farm, Esch momentarily thinks of Manny: anxiety overwhelms her physically: "the pain is sudden, sharp. It shoots through my hips ... I have to pee. Again" (77). Esch's body succumbs to the lack of control she feels, particularly through her interactions with Manny, and manifests this physically. Realizing what is happening, Esch attempts to find cover, stating "I cannot face the road and pee" (77) as the others, Randall, Big Henry, and Junior will be able to see. She is able to "deal with them seeing a flash of shoulder, of leg, even a nipple, but I cannot bare myself in this field, my butt facing them, and pee" (77-8). Esch is comfortable with the others seeing her body in fragmented parts, but she cannot bare herself fully, being exposed to them through their witnessing of her urinating. This act of expelling the internal is too shameful, and as such, is at the limits of Esch's level of exposure. Esch is given no choice, however, and squats "facing Junior and Randall and Big Henry in the woods" (78). As

she does so, “[the pee] beats the grass low. The baby and the pee, there when I forget they are there, when I forget so well I think they might be gone” (78). Esch is forced to remember what is happening to her body, despite her attempts to repress it. Often these moments come suddenly to Esch, and provide a startling reminder to her. As such, when her body takes over and exposes the internal to her external surroundings, and specifically the landscape of the South, Esch is forced to admit the true condition of her body. In Ward’s novel, then, the uncontrollable moments of bodily identity are embroiled with a violent eruption of bodily fluid on to the land—whether it be urine, vomit, or in some cases, blood.

Bodies and Community

These violent bodily effects are not limited to just Esch as the blood of characters is often spilt in the novel. In a particularly striking scene, the violence of bodies is paralleled between China and her puppies and Daddy as he prepares for Katrina’s arrival. Trying to fix one of the broken-down tractors that idly sits in the yard, chicken wire becomes stuck in the grille. Meanwhile, Skeetah attempts to get the recovering China to eat:

I don’t know what Randall hears, but he lets up on the brake and slips it in gear, and the tractor eases forward ... The red puppy creeps forward, rounds China’s bowl, noses her tit. China is rolling, rising. The rumble of the tractor is her growl ... China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy’s neck ... Randall puts the tractor in gear, switches it to park, but the small hillock the coop is on pulls the tractor back as the engine idles. “No!” Daddy calls. Daddy flings his hand free ... The oil on his T-shirt turns red. The sound coming out

his open mouth is like growling. “No!” Skeetah calls. The blood on Daddy’s shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China’s mouth. China flings it away from her. It thuds on the tin and slides ... “Why did you?” Skeetah wails. “Why?” Daddy breathes. (129-30)

In this shocking, yet vivid scene, the non-human doubling between the farm machinery and China is suggestive of the inherent danger contained within social fringes. The threat of the natural, through that which it produces, and the machinery attempting to tame it, suddenly ruptures into the Batistes’ frame of reference. Skeetah tries to assert control over China, while Daddy is preparing to curtail the effects of the approaching storm with dramatic repercussions for both of them. China’s brutal defiance of Skeetah means that she tears apart a puppy in front of him, whilst Daddy’s hand becomes chewed up in the grille of the tractor. As such, in attempting to prepare for Katrina, Daddy has suffered a violent repercussion. Both tractor and dog growl at Skeetah and Daddy; the snap and pull leads to spilt blood over the land, with soft and harsh cries of “why?” Indeed, this is the question here: why does the relationship with the southern landscape have such detrimental effects on the bodies that reside there? Seemingly fulfilling its namesake, the wooded landscape that the Batistes’ reside in has indeed become savage, leaving indelible marks. Taking on the characteristics of an animal, machines become something else, both biting back and consuming. The violent reprisal leads Esch to question “*Is this what motherhood is?*” (130) referring to the idea of Mother Nature: that the feminine is not as naturalized a concept as it is purported to be. The idea of femininity is questioned, as the men who try to control it end up discovering.

Perhaps one of the most violent acts of femininity in *Salvage the Bones* is the dog-fight involving China and her mating partner, Kilo. During their fight, “China grabs Kilo at the back of the neck,” similar to how she grabs the puppy, “burrow[ing] into him with her head like a worm tunnelling into red earth” (171). Again, Esch describes the image of the red and bloodied earth. The imagery continues: “[China] is bounding toward Skeetah, her smile red like smudged lipstick. The blood on her leg is a crimson garter” (172). The perverse detail of smudged lipstick and crimson garter is specifically sexualized in a violent manner. The concept of sexual violence can further be seen as “Kilo has just seen her breasts, white and full and heavy and warm, and he bows his head like a puppy to drink. But he doesn’t drink. He bites. He swallows her breast” (173). Kilo, the masculine dog, literally devours the source of China’s maternal nutrition and feminine signifier, the breast, “the nipple, missing” (174). China comes at Kilo as Skeetah tells her to “*make them know*” in violent retaliation:

I don’t have milk for you. China blazes. Kilo snaps at her breast again, but she shoulders him away. *But I do have this.* Her jaw is a mousetrap snapped shut around the mouse of Kilo’s neck ... China spins, takes away part of Kilo’s throat ... There are pink mimosa flowers drifting and falling in the breeze. Marquise’s brother has left Junior; he has scampered out of the tree to hide his face in Jerome’s leg while his pink-dusted shoulders shudder. Junior squats in the mimosa still, his hands white on the branches, jerking as if he would break the wood. His eyes are wide, glued to the screaming Kilo. Junior shakes a beat to Kilo’s keening, and it is a song. (175-6)

As China brutally retaliates against the oppressive masculinity that has seen her breast torn, the horror of the scene becomes too much for the boys. Described in a romanticized and natural register, pink flowers blow through a calm wind as the men are effectively traumatized by the transgression of a violent femininity. This distinction is never stable however, as earlier in the scene the divisions are somewhat different. As tensions escalate, Esch notices that “in the middle of the dead circle, the boys snap like the air before a storm” (163). The landscape is preparing to turn as the air picks up a distinct tension. Interestingly, however, in Esch’s description, the quality of the natural becomes attached to the boys who have gathered to fight their dogs: “They are all coming, all meeting in the middle. Like the dogs” (169). In this way, the boys are dogs, also embodying the natural. This is further complicated however when China’s transgressive behavior obscures boundaries such as natural/un-natural and feminine/masculine.

Expecting Katrina

This kind of hybridity is what Yaeger describes as strategic in southern literature, particularly those written by female authors: hybrid bodies “move the reader toward unregistered precincts of knowledge” (8). This kind of “grotesque” hybridity is what Jay Watson links back to the historicity of “bodily damage of spectacle lynching” and “the human ashes that drift earthward” (2). It is no coincidence then that Ward’s novel makes frequent reference to the scorched red earth that surrounds the Batistes. The “uneasy inside-outside relation[s]” of *Salvage the Bones* exemplifies how the South is the basis for understanding “idiosyncratic modes of American identity” (Watson 9) in wider critical theory. This involuntary hybridity leads to what Yaeger describes as trauma, where the body “amalgamat[es] with its

environment (248). The cleansing effects of Katrina come to wipe clean the land (in Esch's words) in what might be considered as a form of naturalistic baptism. In wiping out the kind of bodily excesses that can be seen in characters like Esch, Katrina is a destabilizing force, unravelling the structural implications of the South. Much like her pee and vomit, Esch describes how Katrina "swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine, and vomited it out in pieces" (252). In doing so, the storm uncovers both the essence and consequence of those racialized structures, seeking to establish a transformative representation that is located outside of those spaces. Complexly, Katrina can represent both white oppression and its effects on the South's black population, but also a destabilizing force that seeks to wipe away forms of white cruelty. In Ward's novel, even the seemingly clearest forms of imagery become blurred through their Southern coordinates.

By the book's close, the floodwaters have destroyed the Batistes' home and China is missing along with her puppies. As a symbol of whiteness, China is literally swept away by Katrina, leaving behind the remaining black bodies. This recalls the ground movement of whites away from areas affected by the storm, but also offers the removal of an oppressive white culture, symbolized in the violence of a fighting pit-bull. Rather than the commonly expected outcome of black death, Ward recasts this idea through the removal of whiteness from the novel. The newly-destroyed landscape through which Esch walks, in which Skeetah determinedly continues searching for his dog, now represents an open and "aesthetically visible" (Yaeger 337) South, its population "naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies" (255). The markedly open-ended conclusion to *Salvage the Bones* registers this newly open space that is clearly marked by its origins, yet remains open to new possibilities. This is evident in the fostering of community amongst the storm's wreckage: "there is nothing here but

broken bottles, smashed signs, splintered wood, so much garbage” (254). Surrounded by garbage and left behind as remains, the Batistes “exemplif[y] the conception of African-Americana as throwaway and far from human” (Lloyd 78). However, as Esch seeks to tell “the story of Katrina and what she did to the coast,” as she describes the remnants that she “will tie ... above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story” (255). Esch uses what remains to create something new in the form of a story, like the history of female Southern writers before her. Meanwhile, Esch tells Big Henry her baby is fatherless:

“You wrong,” Big Henry says. He looks away when he says it, out to the grey Gulf. There is a car out there in the shallows of the water. The top gleams red.” This baby got a daddy, Esch.” He reaches out his big soft hand, soft as the bottom of his feet probably, and helps me stand. “This baby got plenty daddies.” (255)

Big Henry becomes the last of the boys to finally see Esch as she really is and in doing so begins the process of change that Katrina literally and figuratively triggers. In the face of abandonment and left to waste, the characters of *Salvage the Bones* band together in solidarity, challenging the expectant outcome of black bodies left to perish in the South. As Big Henry declares out to the coast and the aftermath of Katrina, “You wrong.” Giroux tells us, “Katrina ... serve[s] as an desperate reminder of what it means when justice, as the lifeblood of democracy, becomes cold and indifferent in the face of death,” [sic] (192) but *Salvage the Bones* reminds us that black Southerners will continue join together and survive. Amongst the wreckage, Esch notices a car that “gleams red,” a symbol of hope that shines through the storm’s

effects and reminds the reader that amongst the bleeding landscape of the South, the community that Esch and her kin embody will carry on.

Works Cited

- Bibler, Michael P. "Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourse of a Doomed Southern City." *Southern Cultures* 14.2 (2008): 6-27. Print.
- Crownshaw, Rick. "A Natural History of Testimony?" *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing*. Ed. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland. London: Routledge, 2014. 160-176. Print.
- Davis, Thadious M. *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region and Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006. Print.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability." *College Literature* 33.3 (2006): 171-196. Print.
- . *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006. Print.
- Hartnell, Anna. *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama*. London: Pluto Press, 2011. Print.
- Lloyd, Christopher. *Rooting Memory, Rooting Place: Regionalism in the Twenty-First-Century American South*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.
- Marotte, Mary Ruth. "Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss." *Ten Years after Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Ed. Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. 207-219. Print.
- O'Neill, Karen M. "Broken Levees, Broken Lives, and a Broken Nation After

- Hurricane Katrina.” *Southern Cultures* 14.2 (2008): 89-108. Print.
- Salvaggio, Ruth. “Forgetting New Orleans.” *The Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (2008): 305-316. Print.
- Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print.
- Watson, Jay. *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. Print.
- Woods, Clyde. “Katrina’s World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source.” *American Quarterly* 61.3 (2009): 427-453. Print.
- Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Print.