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Coming Back Home to Oppressive Mississippi: A Figurative Study of Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to discuss the figurative aspects of Jesmyn Ward's *The Men We Reaped* (2013). In her memoir, Ward demonstrates the connections between the systemic racism in the US South and the tragic stories of five African-American men who were close to her, and who died between 2000-2004. The tragic loss of these lives is presented through a number of figurative images which present the region through the metaphors of predatory animals, physical burdens and uncanny doubling. Also, the article reflects on how Ward coped with the trauma of loss through her writings, and how, in numerous interviews, she justified her decision to return home to Mississippi and to settle there, in spite of the systemic racism and the trauma of loss.

Keywords: Jesmyn Ward, Southern literature, Mississippi, figurative analysis, *Men We Reaped*

Bodies tell stories.
Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*

In a 2016 interview with Danille K. Taylor, Jesmyn Ward explained her key preoccupations as a writer: “How does the past bear fruit? And why are we often so blind to it? I find myself writing around that question again and again with different sets of characters” (267). In Ward's novels, her portrayal of the South and its inhabitants invariably features a region afflicted by a dense nexus of social, economic, historical and natural factors. Her debut *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), set on the rural Mississippi Gulf Coast, explores the fears that twin African-American brothers have over their uncertain future in adulthood. Next, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) which won the National Book Award for Fiction, dramatizes the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi black community. And her latest work *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017), demonstrates the haunting legacy of slavery in the South in the form of a road novel. Similarly, Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) follows this pattern. It is an account of a personal loss—a story of five African-American men who passed away in different, tragic circumstances over the span of 2000-2004, and who were her friends and family members. In each case, the tragic deaths are inevitably connected with systemic racism of the South and social adversities that the members of the African-American community in Mississippi are forced to struggle with. Yet, in spite of the painful memories evoked by Mississippi in connection with this loss, Ward decided to return to the South, not only in her novels, but also physically, and to settle down back in her hometown. This paper seeks to explore the narrative ways in which Ward presents her ambivalent approach to the region through figurative images of predatory animals, physical burdens and doubling.

Southern Homecomings

The theme of a departure from home and a subsequent return played an important role in the literature of the American South in the 20th century. Arguably, Thomas Wolfe's eponymous sentiment that one "can't go home again" can be viewed as one of the central tropes of Southern writing. In Wolfe's novel, George Webber, a budding author currently living in New York, writes a book *Home to Our Mountain* in which he exposes inner conflicts and pruderies of the Southern community of Libya Hill. This publication causes an uproar among his former neighbors and Webber becomes a pariah—he almost literally "cannot go home" due to the scandal associated with what the community views as a treacherous exposition of Southern ways to the outside world. The conflicts of Wolfe's novel becomes emblematic of the ambivalent attitude among Southerner expats towards their former home, towards the idealization of the region and its mythologies, and towards the role of memory and self-reflection in the perception of the past.

Jerry M. Burger's research into the psychological aspects of homecoming sheds vital light on all these processes. In *Returning Home*, Burger stresses the epistemic importance of returning home, as well as the tremendous popularity of sentimental journeys in contemporary America. Visiting home, even for a brief period, triggers strong emotional reactions among vast groups of Americans, often combining contrastive feelings of joy and pain. Burger's series of interviews with people who came back home demonstrates that apart from being a confrontation with childhood memories and traumas, the act of homecoming is oftentimes an emotional process of healing and personal growth. It is also sensual journey, as moving back home means the evocation of smells, tastes and sounds known from childhood. As estimated by Burger (8), nearly 20% of those who returned home cried during the experience, as they confronted their past with their present moment, struggling to grasp how the uprooting from home, and then a journey back reflected on their sense of identity.

In the South, these processes are of particular significance, given the scale of migrations from the region. Robert Coles, Pulitzer-winning psychiatrist and journalist, in one volume of his study *Children of Crisis* tellingly entitled *The South Goes North*, explored the motivations and troubles of Southerners who migrated massively from the impoverished southern states in the late 1960s, hoping to begin a new life in the ghettos of cities in the North, such as Chicago, New York, or Boston. Coles based his study on numerous interviews and this qualitative sociological approach allowed him to paint a portrayal of motivations driving Southerners to leave their homes, of which economic struggles, sense of hopelessness and oppressive racism were among the prevalent ones. The extent to which these factors were present in the South, and the ways in which they determined the life in the region could often only be assessed from the outsider's perspective, after one has already left the region and settled down somewhere else.

For a host of Southern authors like Richard Wright, Robert Penn Warren, Dorothy Allison, or Alice Walker it was exactly the act of leaving the region that allowed them to reflect back on the South from a fresh position, and to understand the burden associated with their Southernness. The full scale of regional paradoxes

became apparent only upon the painful process of cutting the umbilical cord with their home state. In *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, observes that a plethora of memoirs that emerged from the poor South, gave rise to an entire “social history of remembering in the South” (3). These memories, among which one may include Harry Crews’s *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), or Rick Bragg’s *All Over but the Shoutin’* (1997), tell the tales of Southern racial, social and economic struggles. In these autobiographies, the South is no myth, it is no abstract, complex, or rural idealization, rather it is an actual space of trauma and confusion, whose racial restrictions and economic struggles force Southerners to question the principles of their upbringing, their family network, or, very often, to change the place of residence.

In *Writing the South*, Richard Gray points out that it is not so much that that these generations of expat writers have written *about* the South, but that they have effectively written the South. On the one hand, their texts have shaped the image of the region in the general public, but, on the other hand, the processes of artistic examination and appropriation interred in these works allowed their authors for a deeper, auto-reflexive insight into the region’s paradoxical culture, effectively constructing it. According to Gray, the “vital importance of the Southern image springs from the fact that it represents what the poet Wallace Stevens would call an idea of order, a structuring principle [or] a set of structural possibilities” (xii)—these principles become best visible from the vantage point of someone who is no longer part of the southern society, and who can study its paradoxes from a safe distance, as happened often in the works of African-American writers, like Richard Wright who in his memoir *Black Boy* (1945), paints the image of childhood on a farm in Mississippi afflicted by hunger and abuse, the level of which and the full impact of which he became aware only when he moved to Chicago. So, Jesmyn Ward’s memoir follows a long tradition of Southern writing in which the act of homecoming becomes a vital element of the fundamental critique of the region.

Narrative Ruthlessness

At a literary event “Writing for the Broken World,” hosted November 15th 2015 by Brown University, Ward stressed that the writing of *Men We Reaped* was for her not only a personal “healing process,” but also an attempt to understand the source of deaths occurring around her in such a short span of time. Ward’s artistic and personal goal was to name and pronounce the Southern “plague,” which has been irreversibly bound to the life of the African-American community in the South, afflicting it and abducting its members one by one. In the memoir, her personal trauma merges with the trauma of the collective, as Ward paints a picture of a Mississippi community bereft of job prospects and hope, perpetually in danger from threats which are inalienable from the region, “self-medicating” with abusive substances to numb emotional pain and abjection. The South is a place of pain, loss and menace.

And yet, in spite of all this, Ward consistently calls the South “home” and talks about it with allegiant affection. To her, notwithstanding all its threats and repidations, it is a place worth returning to. In fact, in *Men We Reaped*, there is a dual

act of homecoming. On the meta-literary level, as stressed by Ward, each act of writing about Mississippi was effectively a revisiting of home, her friends and family and past experiences, which are perennial for her thoughts, ambitions and identity. As she described the South in an 2012 interview for Sydney's Writer Center, "that's home and I feel the responsibility to write not only about that place but also about people who inhabit that place." Ward's writing is a mental return to the place and to the community which resides in Mississippi in spite of what the region befalls on them. The second homecoming is her actual, physical return, first from Stanford, where she studied media and communication, and then from New England, where she found better professional career prospects than in Mississippi. Her return to DeLisle was symbolic, an outcome of a decision regarding what she identifies herself with and where she intends to put down roots and live with her family—even in spite of how "the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread [all through Mississippi]" (8). Through both acts of homecoming, the meta-narrative one and the physical one, Ward manages to counter the oppressive narratives of exclusion and helplessness.

Apart from being an answer to a longing to be with her family, Ward's homecoming becomes an epistemic act. To understand her own imperative to return to the South, as well as her desire to explore her deep personal ambivalence towards the region, in *Men We Reaped*, Ward seeks to name and to describe the ephemeral oppressiveness of her hometown—the "plague" of death and despondency which afflicts the black community in DeLisle. Thus, the figurative images of menacing, predatory animals and of oppressive heaviness, as well as the narrative strategies of doubling and chronological reversal she employs allow her to identify the Southern threat and to confront it. In this sense, they constitute the ultimate therapeutic "self-medication"—by exploring the Southern oppressiveness, and by proclaiming it to the world through her writing, Ward can understand the hold hot and oppressive Mississippi air has over her, and claim her return home, as her own, independent act of will.

In an interview for *The Paris Review* from 2011, Ward discussed social engagement of her writings. As she explained, when she finished the manuscript of *Salvage the Bones*, she felt that it was not "political enough" and that it required a genuinely non-compromising account of the South's oppressive reality: "I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us." While working on her second novel, she realized that as an author, as much as she wanted to, she was in no position to save her characters, simply because the very lives of people around her were rarely salvageable from the brutal circumstances of their lives as African-Americans in Mississippi. Because of that, the South of *Salvage the Bones* is a site of both sustenance and harm, and the image of bleeding landscape mirrors the social injury experienced by the residents of Bois Sauvage, where Esch Batise and her family live. As noted by Esch Batiste, narrator of *Salvage the Bones*, it is "Bodies [that] tell stories" (83).

This policy of "narrative ruthlessness" is likewise palpable in *Men We Reaped*, in how Ward describes the lives of those close to her whom she lost. And she aimed to be as realistic as possible in her account, purposefully writing against the communal

compulsion to sanctify those who passed, and to downplay how embattled they were, often pushed to become engaged in illegal actions. As she recalled at a meeting at Politics and Bookstore in 2014, often having written one paragraph she would look at the wall and think “I can’t believe I have written this.” This dedication to be ruthlessly realistic in the depiction, however hard it could be for personal reasons, come from Ward’s reading of Kiese Laymon’s *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. Laymon’s notoriously non-compromising text, as she claims, helped her to “stop fighting the process” of writing, and express her hyperbolic, conflicted relationship with the South, a place that was both homely and brutally threatening.

In general, the decision to write *Men We Reaped*, stemmed from Ward’s realization that she was “writing around” her personal trauma. Prior to her working of the memoir, the characters in her novels were often young African-American males, confronted with the oppressive circumstances of everyday existence, literally losing the fight for their lives. The compulsion to create such characters haunted Ward, until she apprehended that it was a direct outcome of her personal trauma and of a sense of constant threat she was experiencing—as she recalls in a 2013 interview for NPR: “Every day, I woke up with that feeling of dread and that just overwhelming sensation of loss, and then of course that fear—who’s going to die next?” This anxiety and powerlessness against the ephemeral threat, the “plague” of the South, made her feel perpetually “under siege,” and compelled her to confront it openly through her writing. These processes left a lot of marks on the figurative fabric of *Men We Reaped*, and the study of these marks may better understand her ambivalent position towards the South, and the imperative to return to it.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward constructs a reversed chronological narrative about five black men close to her, who perished during the time span of 2000-2004: Roger, who died from a heart attack caused by a combination of cocaine and pills, Desmond who was murdered when he decided to testify in court against a drug dealer from New Orleans, C. J. who died in a car accident, Ronald who struggled with depression and committed suicide, and Joshua, Ward’s brother, who passed away in a car accident caused by a white driver let off with a token sentence. This series of personal tragedies is presented in reverse by Ward, leading up to the demise of her brother, which in real life was chronologically the first in the sequence of tragedies. As explained openly by Ward in a 2020 podcast for the National Endowment of Arts, the reason why the memoir turns the actual chronology around is that she wanted the book to “end in the heart,” in other words, to make her readers experience the irreversible building up of expectation of disaster she herself experienced her entire life. She wanted the reader to sample the premonition that tragedies, like death, are pending, and that one cannot stop them.

At the same time, Ward stresses that what the personal tragedies she describes are part of a larger tragic story of her community in the South, and of the entire, historical African-American experience in the region. What the presence of the plaguing oppressiveness visibly and palpably leads to are heart-breaking tragedies and the loss of lives, but where these tragedies originate from is much harder to grasp and explain. And the meta-narrative homecoming Ward undertakes in the memoir is partly an attempt to determine the indeterminable—a journey back to her hometown,

to confront not only her haunting pain, but also the Southern threat itself, in various metaphorical shapes of which the figurative wolf is the most prominent.

Yet Ward's exploration starts with a title, one which she adopts from a passage where Harriet Tubman described a desperate assault made on July 18th 1863, by the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry of the Union Army on Fort Wagner, a Confederate stronghold located on Morris Island, in the vicinity of Charleston harbor. Almost half of the unit, which consisted entirely of African Americans, perished in the attack, and the assault ultimately failed. In her account, Tubman describes how everyone present during the battle was overwhelmed by the tumult of artillery and horrified by the slaughter: "We heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped" (Humez 135). Ward endows Tubman's words with a new meaning. Her overwriting builds on the original sense of tragic loss included in the description which dates back over a century and a half, yet in her text Ward builds a trope, a palimpsest of continuity, stressing the permanence of the African American experience. She constructs the metaphor of the African American experience which is historically permeated with pain and loss, and one which is perpetuated in the new millennium. The historic undercurrent is particularly visible in how the pronoun "we" functions both in Tubman's account and in the title of Ward's memoir. In the text by Tubman, the pronoun on the one hand designates all those survivors of the battle, left to collect the bodies of the dead, on the other hand, the pronoun is bound with the collective African-American experience of slavery and affliction. This figurative image of the harvest of the dead during the Civil War is adopted by Ward to talk about her private experience, which essentially becomes the experience of the community of DeLisle, and then, further, of the black community in the South in general. Yet, while in Tubman's text, the South becomes the carrier of black bodies which are left to be picked up by the few survivors, in Ward's text, the South itself comes alive and transforms into a predatory specter which snatches people away, leaving the families destitute and grieving.

"Somebody Died Here"

William Faulkner once talked about a "pollen of ideas" present in the South, one which fertilizes minds of those who breathe the Mississippi air with a specific set of logic (30). In that image, the South's figurative presence is ephemeral and pervasive, but not as nearly as threatening as in Ward's animalistic images of Mississippi, which when juxtaposed with Faulkner's images from the 1930s, demonstrate the Mississippi idiom which in spite of the eighty years of progress and integration separating these two works, has only grown more ominous and oppressive for an African-American writer. As Wards writes, "I knew that I lived in a place where hope and a sense of possibility were as ephemeral as morning fog, but I did not see the despair at the heart of our drug use" (34). This elusive, and omnipresent constrain of Wards' home state is visible in how, in the memoir, she struggles with the pronouns which stand for the agents of the Southern oppressiveness, the spreaders of the endemic Mississippian "plague," whose identity often remains hidden or undetermined. Right after Rog's death, his

sister called Jesmyn and told her: "They killed my brother" (37) and later a friend of his added: "They're picking us off, one by one" (38). The narrator of the memoir struggles to identify the people behind the pronoun "they," and is disquieted by its ominous indeterminacy. The metaphor of "picking off" used by Rog's sister evokes the image of a pack of predators following their prey and attacking it unawares, gnawing it and jumping away, those indeterminate "they" work systematically and under cover of state institutions and the social decorum.

The ephemeral, yet oppressive manifestation of the past likewise marks its presence right at the beginning of *Men We Reaped*. Ward's memoir opens with a ghost story. The narrator recalls how her brother Joshua and her two sisters, Nerissa and Charine told scary stories as pastime: "Joshua insisted that there was a ghost in the house, and at night we'd lie on our backs in the TV-less living room... and wait for something to change, for something that wasn't supposed to be there, to move. 'Somebody died here'" (1). The proclamation "Somebody died here" echoes in the narrator's mind, and symbolically marks the inception of a haunting sense of anxiety and threat. While making up a ghost story, Joshua was unwittingly tapping into something more than just scaring people for fun, suggesting the presence they did yet not know was inherent in their home, and that would pervade their lives. Retrospectively, Ward looks at these words as fatidic, for they indeed highlighted the proximity and the inescapability of the threat which followed and afflicted them for the rest of their lives.

In her *Southscapes*, analyzing black Southern authors, Thadious Davis posits that the South functions as "stark geographic metaphor," one that remains "alive in memory and in blood, but dead too in the literal skin of animals and in the material body of the mother" (1). In Ward's account of her personal loss and of her homecoming, the geography of the South has a dual nature, merging the untamed life force of the landscape and the death brought by its pervasive hauntedness. This dual paradox of Ward's spatial trope is not only visible in the descriptions of the landscape, but also in the very names of the places she sets her novels in. Such names as "Bois Sauvage," savage, untamed woods, tap on the ambivalent nature of the region, in which the visceral "skins" and "material bodies" are barely covered by the painfully slowly progressing veil of social change. The circumstances of Ward's novels peek under this veil and expose the dark, predatory nature of the Southern space.

For Ward, this untamed nature of the Mississippi landscape is organically connected with the racial "plague" which afflicts its inhabitants, and which compels them to live lives of struggle. As she explains, there is certain "rawness to the art" that comes out of the notion of Dirty South. "To express what it means to be born and grow up into the cycle of poverty that has bequeathed to so many of us. And finally to reckon with what growing up in this place has affected us, and how we fight against it, sometimes foolishly, sometimes foolhardily, but always with a kind of courage born of desperation" (267-68). In a 2013 interview for *The Toast*, Ward commented on how these topics remain to be problematic in the public debate: "I'm fairly pessimistic about the possibility of people in the current South having complicated conversations about race because we're so conditioned to respond quickly and emotionally, with all the vitriol that's been bred into us, when race arises. I don't think this is a conversation that we can avoid for long, however, because our past is our present and our future,

in some respects”—yet, in spite of all that she proclaims: “I moved back. I still live here.” In this way, Ward becomes the opponent to the selective embrace of history and culture in the South, and the pervasive denialism that the southern “plague” is so notoriously endemic. Her writings and her decision to move back to Mississippi, both aim to name the threat and to counter these narratives.

Ward’s growing up, as she describes in her memoir, was a constant education into the cultural semiotics of race. Her mother worked as a housekeeper for a wealthy white family, and when her grades began to slip, her mother’s white employer offered to cover the fee for her education in a private school—a kind gesture, which, as Ward sees in retrospect, also bound her mother to her employer. As Ward recalls, that was the moment when she became most directly aware of the racial paradoxes of the South, not only through bullying she was exposed to as the only African-American girl in that private school, but also through what she saw as the parallel existence of two Southern worlds—the threatening and oppressive reality of the black community and the reality of the White community, which was much better endowed with opportunities. In particular, Ward recalls (202), how later, when she was already in college, she encountered W.E.B. Du Bois’s works and the term “double consciousness.” She identifies that moment as formative for her perception of the region’s fundamental duality. This notion became best illustrated when Ward recalls how she was sitting in her mother’s employer’s room, as her mother was finishing the cleaning of the house: “I was very conscious in that moment of my dark skin, my overbite, my irascible hair, the way my hands itched to help my mother”—and while her mother was cleaning, the white owner of the house asked her about her college plans, engaging her as an “intellectual equal” (203).

The schizophrenic duality of that experience gave Ward an insight into the gap between these two Southern macrocosms, into the endemic, Southern “reconciliation of opposites” (1), as described by Hugh C. Holman. This binarism had very tangible demarcation lines of school and home, and Ward recalls how mother caught her once in the mental transition moment when she moved between the two worlds which both had their own languages and their own codes of behavior. When Ward’s mother picked her up from school and listened to her daughter’s description of a school project, she scolded her: “stop talking like that.” In hindsight, Ward interprets her mother’s reprimand as a series of implicit questions: “Why are you speaking so properly? As in: Why do you sound like those White kinds you go to school with, that I clean up after? As in: Who are you?” (208). She recalls how she had to “switch” back to another language when coming back from school, becoming painfully aware of the linguistic division lines in the South. This constant moving in between the realities of the private school she had access to purely by a stroke of luck and of the quotidian reality of her mother’s chores was a fundamentally confusing and triggered a crisis of identity in Ward.

Ward also recalls how this sense of oppressive duality, of a hyperbolic paradox inherent in the South, affected the way she viewed herself and initiated a habit of self-loathing, due to her racial background. As she says, her brown skin was an “actual physical indicator of otherness” (186). The abuse Ward experienced at the nearly all-white school was a painful reminder of this “otherness.” Once, another student began

taunting her, sitting provocatively on her desk, by telling a deeply racist and offensive joke: “A nigger, an oriental, and a Polish man walk into a bar” (192). Ward was livid and she imagined herself assaulting that student in response—she wished to “lunge at him, to grab his throat... to see him turning blue” (192). That bully from school was much more tangible than the ephemeral Southern “plague” she would be confronted with later in life. The elusive, predatory “wolf” that snatched people she loved from her was much more ominous exactly because he could not be in any way confronted. This does not change, however, that her imaginary act of retaliation for the offensive and provocative behaviour was desperate, for all the time she was painfully aware of how futile all her emotions and actions were against social issues so strongly enrooted in her Southern macrocosm.

“I Think of DeLisle as the Wolf”

In the entire book, it is very clear that Ward's South is haunted by the “plague,” which regulates the life of the black communities in the region, shaping it and impacting most of its aspects. The story behind the name of Ward's hometown is emblematic of the figurative representation of that regional force. Early settlers dubbed DeLisle, Wolf Town. As Ward explains, “When people ask me about my hometown, I tell them it was called after a wolf before it was partially tamed and settled. I want to impart something of its wild roots, its early savagery. Calling it Wolf Town hints at the wildness at its heart” (9). That early moniker, before it was rebranded, hints on a nebulous, dangerous element concealed deep in the town and its natural surroundings. It evokes the figurative image of a predator in the dark, a figurative representation of the region inequalities and adversities as a hungry beast. The implications of the name are ominous, as it points to the existence of danger that may be temporarily dormant, but that never goes away, one that is endemic in the landscape of Mississippi, interred in the Southern landscape.

This feeling of anxiety was an inalienable element of Ward's life in DeLisle. In the wake of the threat, the sense of safety was ephemeral and could at best be achieved temporarily. Ward recalls an encounter with an unidentified animal near DeLisle, in the middle of the night: “The creature looped out of the woods before us, and we startled and shouted, and it looked at us and looped back into the darkness... this wild thing that looked at us like the intruders that we were before we drove away from it to more well-travelled roads, away from the place that was everything but dead end, that place that seemed all beginning, a birthplace” Wolf Town” (10). That episode became symbolic to her, giving her sense that the dark, vast space of southern landscape abounds in anonymous predators, who reveal themselves only for a moment, to grab the prey. And this ominous presence of a fatal threat, ready to snatch away the members of the community, to control and to pursue them, makes it impossible to experience any sense of permanence of safety. The figurative representation Ward paints of a life of an African-American in DeLisle is that of a perpetual anticipation of danger, of existence marked by fear and the lack of perspectives. This predatory, primordial menace that is hidden behind the masque of a new town name may be covered-up, but it remains invariably ravenous and permanent. And in her imagery of her Southern hometown,

Ward demonstrated how her dear ones were consumed by this ephemeral threat that is in the very town and its surroundings.

Ward proclaims ominously that “men’s bodies litter [her] family history” (14). And to her, it is the sense of loss and personal grief that is the hardest: “The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from the beyond, makes them appear as ghosts. In death, they transcend the circumstances of this place that I love and hate all at once and become supernatural. Sometimes, when I think of all the men who’ve died early in my family over the generations, I think of DeLisle as the wolf” (14). These words remind one of Patricia Yeager’s discussions of the somatic hybridity in the South, of how in the region the bodily “amalgamat[es] with its environment” (248). In Ward’s book, it is the body of the predator who is landscape, and the landscape who is the predator. In this sense, a perpetual sense of a threat becomes organically embedded in the landscape, inseparable from it, just like historical implications are inseparable from the palimpsestic use of Tubman’s text in the title of Ward’s memoir. Thus, members of Ward’s family, effectively are “children of history and place” (15), whose lives are from inception marked by the threatening, animalistic oppressiveness of the region.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward stresses the “endurance demanded of women in the rural South” (19) due to the wounds inflicted to the society by the phantom wolf. Her mother was one of those women who showed a great deal of resilience in confronting life circumstances which were the direct outcome of the endemic Southern “plague,” which snatches away young men from the black community, or which compels them to leave their families and to terminate their relationships. Ward recalls how she was affected by her father’s departure, and how his leaving contributed to her identity crisis: “His leaving felt like a repudiation of the child I was and the young woman I was growing into. I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor, Black woman.... This seed buried itself in my stomach and bore fruit. I hated myself.... I was something to be left” (135). The sense of objectification and of abandonment provoked the sense of self-loathing she was programmed to have by the dual system of oppressiveness. In a lot of ways, Ward’s father is the sixth black man in the memoir, who may not be a fatal victim of the predatory “wolf,” but whose disappearance from Ward’s life visibly exacerbated the narrative of loss and abandonment. Ward’s father fate, his life choices, aspirations and struggles were all tied to Mississippi and in this sense he is yet another victim of the “plague” that Ward seeks to name and confront.

In her recollection of her father, Ward observes how his treatment of her brother Joshua was different from his treatment of his daughters. She recalls how her father was generally patient, calm and understanding, but also how with “Joshua his patience was thin.” One of the ways in which this behavior could be explained was that her father believed that there was no space for error or weakness in Joshua’s behavior precisely because he was a boy: “My brother would have to grow up and be a black man in the South. My brother would have to fight in ways that I would not. Perhaps my father dreamed about the men in his family who died young in all the wrong ways, and this forced his hand when he woke to my brother standing next to my parents’ bed: pink-mouthed and grinning, green to the world, innocent” (52). This awareness of the dual standards for African-American and white macrocosms of the

South, of continuous separation in spite of surface equality, and of the extent to which the Southern oppressiveness predetermined a number of aspects of his life.

Chronic pessimism and anhedonic hopelessness were direct consequences of the Southern wolf's enduring presence. Ward recalls when C.J. told her "I got a feeling I ain't going to be here long" (120). The Southern oppressiveness, a network of forces beyond his control, shaping his life in ways he cannot influence in anyway is overwhelming and prophetic of tragedies. C. J. is painfully tossed by the circumstances of life, as he sells dope between jobs, caught in a vicious "cycle of futility." Within the shadow of the wolf, life is so full of threats and uncertainties that it sucks the joy out of those afflicted by the Southern "plague." Ward's describes the mental state of such individuals as life contaminated by death: C. J. "looked at those who still lived and those who'd died, and didn't see much difference between the two; pinioned beneath poverty and history and racism, we were all dying inside" (121). The life threatened by the figurative wolf, and controlled by the Southern karma, has "no American dream, no fairy-tale ending, no hope"—it is a life deprived.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward consistently constructs the metaphor of the wolf as a figure to internalize the sense of threat accompanying her life as an African-American in Mississippi. The ephemeral nature of the wolf, and its physical air-like elusiveness translate into its ever-presence, which haunts generations, families and social circles. Ward's mother "felt the confines of gender and the rural South and the seventies stalking her, felt that specter of DeLisle out in the darkness, the wolf cornering her in her mother's house, which had no heat in the winter, no air in the summer" (19). The elusiveness of the figurative predator also makes it impossible to pin it down, and to put a face on it. It is as evanescent as the subtle rules of Southern etiquette which maintain racism, and equally formative for the life of the community. The elusiveness of the figurative wolf merges with the anonymity of its avatars, the people who are physically responsible for the deaths Ward describes in the memoir. It is the faceless murderers, like the one who killed Desmond right in front of his house, whose anonymity is particularly painful for the narrator: "We did not know the murdered would remain faceless, like the great wolf trackless in the swamp, and the police's search would be fruitless" (79). But their anonymity is symbolic in the sense that these actors are part of something greater, of an overpowering presence, not only organically merged with the landscape, but at the same time, a being with a presence of its own, menacing and rapacious. This predatory emanation of the Southern oppressiveness was also present in the form of dark fog, when C. J. perished in a car accident, when his damaged vehicle caught on fire. Ward's cousins "stood by helpless, hollering for help into the cold white night, their cries swallowed by the Mississippi fog" (125). This accident leads her to conclude bitterly, that in the world controlled by the oppressiveness, and haunted by the wolf, "our lives are our deaths" (128).

The Burden of Homecoming

In an interview from 2018 for New York Times Events, Ward recalls how she was often asked why she decided to return to Mississippi in spite of everything that had happened in the South to her and to her community. As she admits, her mother told her

bitterly: “I wish you would have stayed away.” In response to all these reservations, Ward observed that a lot of black Southerners were in the same situation as she was—they felt longing for home and returned, especially having left after the region after it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Later still, some sort of magnetism pulled them back. As explained by Ward, in spite of how the South afflicts them, “[t]hey’re coming back to the same struggle.” And that is exactly what she did in 2002.

Ward’s justification for the decision to return to the South stems from her need to counter the narrative of pessimism and helplessness. As she stresses in that interview, “one of the reasons why I decided to come back to Mississippi is because I wanted to serve as an example in some way. So [other members of the community would] see that being successful and gaining access does not mean you have to leave.” But Ward’s motivation is driven also by other factors. One simply concerns her appreciation for the scenic landscape of the South. In a number of interviews, she stresses the direct magnetism of natural beauty of Mississippi—of the familiar scenery which included swamps, rivers and forests. These made Ward “feel at home.” Yet, another factor element of southern pull stemmed from the sense of community. Ward stresses that her network of friends and family spread all over DeLisle allows her to feel safer and connected and she always missed her community when she was away.

As far Ward’s relationship with the region is concerned, she stresses that—always—“it’s complicated.” This ambivalence is figuratively expressed by the metaphors of weight and burden. As she explains in the podcast for National Endowment of Arts, “There’s much about the South that I hate, that I find problematic, when I leave the South, Mississippi, there is a palpable weight that I can shrug off when I leave.” When she drives out of the South, and when she drives back in, the sense of a burden appears and disappears like a psychosomatic compass, signaling her that she has indeed moved between the safe zone of America outside the South, and the South, the space of angst, haunted by the ephemeral wolf. As she explains, “When I am in the South, I feel the physical sensation of heaviness. And sometimes I’m not aware of it... I forget. I become very aware of the fact that I feel like that when I leave the South. When I get off at the airport, in San Francisco or in New York I feel lighter. And the reason I feel that is because it’s because of the fear you live with, which is informed by the history of the place. And that’s how the history is manifesting itself in the present.” The past weighing on the present in such a palpable way is Ward’s experiencing that in the South, the past is never dead, and it’s not even past,

In the summer of 2004, Ward was driving from Michigan to Mississippi with her cousin Aldon. She recalls being down with flu at that time and having minor respiratory problems. Yet, the illness was not the sole reason why she was not able to breathe freely. The sensation of heaviness on her chest was a glaring symptom of her returning to the place of trauma, where she knew she could not let her guard down for fear of yet another tragedy. In *Men We Reaped*, Ward recalls that trip: “[m]y homesickness always meant that the thought of going home was exhilarating and comforting, but over the past for years, that sense of promise had turned to dread. When my brother died in October 2000, it was as if all the tragedy that had haunted my family’s life took shape in that great wolf of DeLisle, a wolf of darkness and grief, and that great thing was bent on beating us” (21). The figurative wolf choking her and

the whole community, and the sense of both communal and personal traumas, and the memory of the history of her family all generated the palpable weight on Ward's chest, affecting her whole body, which becomes besieged the moment she enters the South, but also which refuses to let her go.

In the memoir, Ward describes how the idea of leaving Mississippi gradually sprouted in her mind. She wanted to "escape the narrative [she] encountered in [her] family, [her] community, and [her] school that [she] was worthless." When hearing about her plans and ambitions, her mother told her she has to stay and help with the upbringing of the children. With these words, Ward "felt all the weight of the South pressing down on [her]" and—as she explains—"it was then that I resolved to leave the region for college, but to do it in a way that respected the sacrifices my mother made for me. I studied harder. I read more. How could I know then that this would be my life: yearning to leave the South and doing so again, and again, but perpetually called back to home by a love so thick it choked me?" (195). The inner weight notoriously pressing on her chest was a direct source of the anxiety Ward comes to associate with the region. Her despondent thought is that she hopes "nobody dies this summer" (21) is the awareness that she cannot relax, cannot forget about the elusive menace, that she cannot fail to keep her guard up.

This anticipation of tragedy was an inalienable element of every act of homecoming. While she studied at Stanford University, between 1995 and 2000, during every winter and spring break, she always returned to Mississippi. Ward longed to see the South again, and she was homesick—during long conversations over the phone with her friends back home, she listened in to "the sounds in the background" (22), wishing she was there. She even "dreamed of the woods surrounding [her] mother's house" and she knew "there was much to hate about home, the racism and inequality and poverty," which is why she left"—yet "I loved it." During those short visits, she stayed in her mother's house. She recalls how she tiptoed to Charine's room, her sister was nine years younger than she was and laid with her, letting herself be weak and cried. Each of those homecomings was essentially ambivalent.

A Double in the Cellar

In the challenging processes of homecoming, and in the subsequent writing about her return to Mississippi, Ward attached significance to one particular memory. In the landscape surrounding Pass Christian, when Ward was twelve, her brother had once discovered a man-made hole in the ground, which turned out to be an abandoned, hidden cellar in the midst of woods. Her brother's discovery attained a fundamental significance for Ward, as an emblem of an atavistic drive to escape from the pressure of the region's dark oppressions. The memory of that cellar, a "place where wind does not reach," kept returning to Ward when she was working on the draft of her memoir. As she recalls in *Men We Reaped*, "we found the plywood that had covered the top of the cellar gone, so what remained was a large, open ditch lined with pine straw, perfectly square and dark. Somehow, it was even more awful to see the dim recesses of that man-made hole, and my response was visceral. I felt as if I were down in it, as if my world had shrunk to its confines: the pine straw pricking my legs and arms,

the walls a cavern around me, tall as a line of trees, the sky itself obscured” (161). For reasons Ward could not initially explain, the image haunted her, and turned out to be an objective correlative in the process of confronting her trauma—of putting a name on it, and of writing *Men We Reaped*.

The fact that at the onset of her writing process Ward could not properly account for the haunting memory of the cellar, of why it became a “specter” in her life, demonstrates the extent to which her work on the memoir was an epistemic and therapeutic enterprise. Ward later reflects that the image of the hole in the ground, a hidden retreat, was particularly instrumental in the context of the racist bullying she had experienced in school and the constant threat of sexual assault. The obscure nature of the cellar, a grotesque *grotto* which attracts the mind with its interior separated from the outside world of trauma, and which lures with its hiddenness, reminds one of the escapist and healing role the cave played in another southern narrative of homecoming, in Dorothy Allison’s *Cavedweller*—there, it serves as a symbolic space of female transfiguration, and of an internal discovery under the ground of Georgia. For Ward, in *Men We Reaped*, the cellar plays a different role. It is an element of the menacing encounter with the regional oppressiveness, a gateway to the primordial, natural settings of the South, which in the narrative figuratively metamorphose into the wolf-predator—and the murky interior becomes a “physical representation of all the hatred and loathing and sorrow I carried inside, the dark embodiment of all the times in Gulfport when I had been terrorized or sexually threatened” (161). In figurative terms, the dark hole in the ground can be identified as the very lair of the wolf of DeLisle.

Since the ominous hole in the ground is organically connected with the trauma of the South, it also becomes emblematic of the region’s dualistic paradoxes. Ward associates the personal struggles of her friends and family, as well as her own sense of dissevered personality with the ambivalent nature of the cellar, as a gateway to the dark, primordial underbelly of Mississippi. Just as Ronald’s “daemons” constituted the “debilitating darkness, that Nothing that pursued him,” for Ward the cellar in the wood remains a “wide, deep living grave,” which reflects back at the minds of all African-Americans: “I know that when [Ronald] looked down at his cooper hands and in the mirror, his dark eyes and his freckles and his even mouth, that he thought it would be better if he were dead, because then all of it, every bit of it, would stop.” (174-75). For Ward, likewise, the cellar becomes the space filled with the voice of the dark passenger, an ominous double—the very same one who entices Ronald about the helplessness of his existence, corrupting his thoughts and removing the sense of purpose and hope from it.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward herself employs these strategies of doubling to demonstrate how the region instilled in her the enduring sense of inadequacy and ineptitude, of how it brought her to the ground. She explains that the effect of being brought up in the shadow of the southern oppressiveness, and in gravitational pull of the black hole in the woods, one grows to accept racism and abuse as part of the surrounding reality, and one develops an extensive complex, verging on the sense of worthlessness. And it is this debilitating voice that effectively becomes her double. Just like in the case of Ronald mentioned above, his doppelgänger-like “daemons” kept inciting in him to take his own life. As Ward recalls, the very same year she

and her brother discovered the ominous cellar, once she “looked in the mirror and... saw what [she] perceived to be my faults and my mother’s faults. They coalesced into a dark mark that I would carry through my life, a loathing of what I saw, which came from other’s hatred of me, and all this fostered a hatred of myself.” The region’s fundamental divisiveness incites a split in Ward’s mind, a rift around which her traumas revolved, she began to see herself through the region’s eyes, as her own Other. This split accompanied her through all stages of her life—when she moved between the world of the private school and her struggling household, when she experienced the sense of Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” watching her mother cleaning the apartments of white people both when she left the South, and then came back home.

As stressed by Ward, that depressive double from the mirror, soon to be haunted by the wolf, afflicted by the darkness from under the ground, was the outcome of historical processes that had taken place in the South. Split in two by the self-hate incited into her by the oppressive culture, Ward was afflicted by the living past in both a direct way and indirect way. But, also, she translated this personal sense of affliction and abandonment into the collective experience of her community—as she explains, “I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of the poor southern Black woman” (x). And, just like with her return to the South, which she decided to undertake in spite of all odds, to work for the community and to combat the lingering hopelessness, also here, Ward succeeds in elevating her mother’s suffering and hard work, demonstrating her feminine strength—as she explains, “I see my mother’s legacy anew. I see how all the burdens she bore, the burdens of her history and identity and of our country’s history and identity, enabled her to manifest her greatest gifts. My mother had the courage to look at four hungry children and find a way to fill them. My mother had the strength to work her body to its breaking point to provide for herself and her children” (x). The resilience and heroic endurance of Ward’s mother against the affliction is her legacy, one which Ward wishes to cultivate by returning home.

“Hello. We are here. Listen.”

During a meeting with her readers in Shakespeare & Co. in Paris, in 2018, Ward portrayed a vision of the South unaffected by the regional oppressiveness. She explained that “[i]t would be nice not to feel in danger every time you encounter the police, it would be nice not to feel policed all the time,” and she stressed that she “want[s] to live in a world where [she] does not have to worry that [her] eighteen year old nephew will be dead before he turns twenty one.” This hypothetical future is very remote from the present reality, which, as she proves in *Men We Reaped*, is so fundamentally racked by death. As stressed by Ward, “[d]eath spreads, eating away at the root of our community like a fungus.” The region, eclipsed by the “great darkness” (250) which bears on the community, pursued by the ephemeral wolf cannot give any semblance of safety and stability—in fact it is presently the very antithesis of this hypothetical future: “[the presence of racism] is why I choose the option of a life insurance plan at every job I work. This is why I hate answering the phone. This is why fear roots through me when I think of my nephew, who is funny and even-shouldered and quite, when I think of what awaits him in the world” (240).

In this context, Ward's decision to move back to Mississippi and confront both her personal trauma and the regional oppressiveness becomes a powerful symbolic statement of resilience. As she explains, "Yet, I've returned home to this place that birthed me and kills me at once. I've turned down more-lucrative jobs, with more potential for advancement, to move back to Mississippi. I wake up every morning hoping to have dreamed my brother. I carry the weight of grief even as I struggle to live" (240). This gesture of homecoming takes on a historical context—in which the pronoun "we" from the final words of the memoir, "*Hello. We are here. Listen.*" conflates with the "we" from the palimpsestic title of the book. It is Ward's attempt to confront the history of the region and to influence it, finally warding off the figurative wolf which has taken so much from her.

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