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Unnatural Disasters: Environmental Trauma and Ecofeminist/ Ecowomanist Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

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Unnatural Disasters:
Environmental Trauma and Ecofeminist/Ecowomanist Resistance in
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

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Chapter One: Introduction

“We want to know if it is possible to live on the earth peacefully. Is it possible to sustain life? Can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about the appropriate care of the world’s resources, but is also about the creation of meaning—the making of lives that we feel are worth living?”

– bell hooks

In her 2008 book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, feminist theorist bell hooks envisions an America in which the separate realms of non-human nature and human culture are both upheld as valuable, autonomous subjects (1). hooks’ philosophy, in other words, rejects hierarchical ideologies, promoting instead an ethos of reciprocal care and sustainability. According to this model, no human, animal, or natural environment should suffer involuntary subordination. Instead, all living things are connected in a web of mutuality: just as humanity sustains the earth’s resources, so too does the earth sustain humanity. Ultimately, hooks advances a discourse that recognizes the healthy continuities between people, their natural environments, and the worldviews of those historically deemed inferior.

Sadly, however, hooks’ vision of “appropriate care” has not come to fruition; among African American women specifically, the natural world more often functions as a source of trauma rather than peace. Indeed, as Delores Williams contends, “slave owner consciousness” has historically “imaged black [women] as belonging to a lower order of nature than white people”; consequently, “black people [are] to be controlled and tamed like the rest of the natural environment” (24). By enforcing strict dualisms between civilization and nature, white and black, man and woman, human and animal, dominant masculine ideologies exclude black women from the realm of human achievement and place them in the “inferior” realm of nature.

This divisive strategy of social control “makes human subjects into natural objects,” rendering them “abject, commodified, and subaltern” (Outka 25). Unsurprisingly, these gestures of superiority profoundly damage human and environmental dignity, destroying the possibility of healthy, productive life.

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I began searching for a thesis topic with a general interest in environmental literature—a broad genre that explores the ethical relationships between humans and nature.¹ However, as I cast about for authors I might focus on, I quickly discovered a field fraught with privilege. That is, though prominent environmental authors² (typically white males) image the natural world as a source of personal enlightenment, sublime experience, and awe, they too often neglect the reality that “not everyone can access [nature], nor can they always afford to romanticise it” (Gilbert). In particular, I noticed that African American women were blatantly missing (or intentionally excluded) from the mainstream environmental canon. Literary theorist Paul Outka confirms and clarifies this reality: though black and white populations are *both* “deeply engaged in environmental struggles, the nature each group is concerned with remains markedly different. One environment is ... toxic; the other is ... pure, untouched except by the gaze of the privileged visitor” (1). This first, “toxic” nature has not been adequately explored, particularly as it relates to black women’s ecological worldviews. Among black women, nature rarely functions *solely* as “cure, ... balm, [or] wise mentor” (Gilbert); instead, it becomes harmfully complicit in hegemonic systems of human domination. This project endeavors to bring these unacknowledged experiences to light.

¹ Nature, here, is defined as “the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations” (“Nature”).

² Examples of these authors include Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, or, more contemporarily, Wendell Berry.

Accordingly, this thesis examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, two novels narrated by black women and steeped in environmental concerns. More specifically, these works feature catastrophic hurricanes—the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane (1928) and Hurricane Katrina (2005) respectively. In both novels, “toxic” nature figures prominently, because “dualistic notions of women’s subordination and male power” render black women especially at risk of suffering environmental damage (Enarson and Morrow 6). Accordingly, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* demonstrate that environmental devastation is premised first and foremost on *human* domination—a “failure . . . to remember and act in an accordance with a deep connection to all life” (Pinn 104). However, hurricanes *also* reveal the possibility of black female agency: though Hurston and Ward’s fictionalized hurricanes certainly *magnify* black women’s traumatic alignments with nature, they *also* reveal black women’s unique ability to sustain life amidst the basest social and environmental oppression. Natural disasters thus clear space for black women to articulate their stories, pose more productive models of ecological stewardship, and exemplify kinship and care. Because black women are “most adversely affected” by environmental disasters, they are (perhaps paradoxically) “better qualified” to imagine trauma-free relationships with the natural world, create new ecological paradigms, and practice active resistance (Lorentzen and Eaton).

I chose to focus on Zora Neale Hurston and Jesmyn Ward 1) because their statuses as black women place them in an alleged position of Western³ inferiority and 2) because their fiction calls for a radical rethinking of hegemonic social structures. Both authors demonstrate that constructed power systems destroy the earth’s nonhierarchical natural order. They also

³ Here, “Western” refers to ideologies that originate in the West, particularly Europe and the United States.

demonstrate, against the grain of mainstream belief, that an ethos of sustainability, interdependency, and community are integral to restoring human dignity and erasing the binaries associated with power. Through their fiction, Hurston and Ward “[make lives] that [they] feel are worth living” by affirming the inherent worth of those labelled “other” and envisioning a more egalitarian, care-conscious society (hooks 1).

Theoretical lenses

My reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* will rely on two theoretical lenses in particular: ecofeminism and ecowomanism. I outline both approaches below.

Ecofeminism

According to environmental philosopher Chaone Mallory, ecofeminism (in its simplest sense) is “the merger of environmental and feminist concerns” (1). On one side of this equation is environmentalism, “a movement opposed to the harm and degradation of ... ‘the more-than-human world’” (Mallory 1). On the other side of this equation is feminism, a movement that “investigates the underlying conceptual systems, beliefs, and values that undergird sexism and related injustices and exclusions, focusing especially on the ways that unequal distributions and deployments of power among social groups is central to processes of oppression” (Mallory 1). By extension, *ecofeminism* “analyzes the ways that gendered and environmental oppressions stem from similar conceptual roots” and suggests that the “categories and characteristics that are commonly regarded as inferior in the Western tradition are often ascribed to non-humans as well as women, people of color, and other subordinated groups” (Mallory 2). However, the ecofeminist movement does not simply *identify* unjust systems of oppression; it also posits “more life-sustaining values of nurturance, care, and reciprocity” (Mallory 2). Ultimately, then,

ecofeminism “contains a constructive, prefigurative (forward-looking) vision that seeks to transform existing relations—both intra- and trans-human—in ecologically sound and socially just ways” (Mallory 3).

Though several pioneering scholars have made significant contributions to the ecofeminist movement,⁴ I will draw most notably from the seminal work of Val Plumwood, an Australian ecofeminist renowned for her repudiation of anthropocentrism. In simple terms, Plumwood argues that the “hyperseparation” of humans from the rest of the natural world is morally wrong. Because (some) humans view themselves as rational beings at the center of the universe, they justify their subjugation and manipulation of the allegedly separate and inferior “natural” world—which implicitly includes women, people of color, indigenous populations, and non-human life. Ultimately, Plumwood argues that the gulf between humans and “others” must yield to a new worldview that recognizes the healthy continuities between oppressor and oppressed. In other words, an ethical response to the inferiorised natural world demands that nature be reconceived “as capable of agency and intentionality” and that humans be “reconceived in less polarized and disembodied ways” (Plumwood 5).

In her pioneering text *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood contends that all living things are intimately connected in a web of mutuality. However, this obvious “message of continuity” has become increasingly alien to the Western world (Plumwood 6). Indeed, rather than acknowledge their need for natural resources and processes, humans instead scorn environmental dependency, forging an identity that is “only minimally and accidentally connected to the earth” (Plumwood 6). In doing so, humans rationalize their authority by viewing

⁴ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and Science* (HarperCollins, 1980); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Zed Books, 1989); and Greta Gaard, *Women, Nature, Animals* (Temple UP, 1993), for more examples.

themselves as separate from and superior to the natural world. Plumwood terms this dangerous philosophy “dualism”—“the process by which contrasting concepts... are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (31). These dualistic structures manifest themselves as “contrasting pairs,” organized as follows:

| | | |
|--------------|---|-----------------------|
| culture | / | nature |
| reason | / | nature |
| male | / | female |
| mind | / | body (nature) |
| master | / | slave |
| reason | / | matter (physicality) |
| rationality | / | animality (nature) |
| reason | / | emotion (nature) |
| mind, spirit | / | nature |
| freedom | / | necessity (nature) |
| universal | / | particular |
| human | / | nature (non-human) |
| civilised | / | primitive (nature) |
| production | / | reproduction (nature) |
| public | / | private |
| subject | / | object |
| self | / | other |

(Plumwood 43).

As this chart of hierarchical dualisms suggests, the inferiorised “category of nature” applies not only to non-humans, but also to “various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are *cast as nature*” (Plumwood 4, my emphasis). Indeed, dominant masculinism rationalizes sexism, racism, and classism by aligning human difference with “inferior” natural processes and characteristics, casting females, people of color, and people in poverty as “lesser [forms] of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture” (Plumwood 4). Though this hierarchical split between what is distinctively “human” and what is distinctively “natural” is purely artificial, its destructive implications are nevertheless real. In other words, though the metanarrative of human domination takes place on a theoretical or cultural-symbolic level, it is internalized in tangible ways, producing harsh socioeconomic inequality.

As ecofeminist scholars have made clear, women's close association with the natural world is fundamentally paradoxical. On the one hand, hegemonic rulers garner power by forcing women into postures of *powerlessness*. As a result, the natural world functions as a signifier of oppression and exclusion from culture. On the other hand, women's alignment with "inferior" nature is not wholly negative: because women possess "more knowledge of earth systems than men," they are typically more likely to question the validity of anthropocentric hierarchies (Lorentzen and Eaton). Consequently, women are more qualified to promote "new practical and intellectual ecological paradigms," meaning that they typically relate to the earth and to other humans through the lenses of interdependency and kinship (Lorentzen and Eaton).

That said, ecofeminist theorists must be wary of simply transposing the hierarchical values of nature and culture, a flawed process Plumwood terms "uncritical reversal" (31). Indeed, the argument that women's ecological consciousness can save the world and "redeem fallen political life" is inevitably one-dimensional and steeped in "gynocentric essentialism" (Plumwood 8-9). In other words, by blindly upholding women's capacity for empathy, care, and nurturance as the earth's *sole* source of healing, ecofeminist scholars simply reproduce and reiterate the ecological burden that women already feel. By affirming women's "special qualities" *only*, ecofeminist scholars remain entrapped—consciously or not—in the predominantly male logic of hierarchy, ensuring that women will continue to receive "special treatment" (which, more often than not, implies substandard treatment) (Plumwood 8). Ultimately, this reversal strategy "ignores the way in which these... qualities are formed by powerlessness and will fail to survive translation to a context of power" (Plumwood 8). Female affirmation, though positive *in theory*, must remain constantly attuned to real-life nuances of privilege. "While there is an essentially correct insight in the idea of affirming a difference that

has been denied and inferiorised,” Plumwood argues, “a great deal depends on how the reevaluation is carried out and on *what* is affirmed” (31).

On the other end of the spectrum, scholars must be wary of simply repudiating women’s alignment with nature and insisting upon their complete inclusion into culture (an approach Plumwood terms “uncritical equality”) (34). Proponents of this approach demand equal admittance for both genders into areas of life typically reserved for males. However, this tactic is problematic as well, because it still conceptualizes nature as oppositional and inferior to culture. As women adopt the “traits of objectivity, abstractness, rationality and suppression of emotionality,” qualities associated with masculine identity, they implicitly assimilate themselves into an ideology that sees itself as transcendent of and in control of natural processes (Plumwood 28). Though this model indeed places men and women on a level playing field, the hierarchy between humans and *nature* is nevertheless dangerously reinforced.

Uncritical reversal and uncritical equality do not satisfactorily dignify women; instead, what is needed is an ecological paradigm that extends “beyond that of powerless inclusion in nature, beyond that of reaction against... exclusion from culture, and towards an active, deliberate and reflective positioning of [women] *with nature against* a destructive and dualising form of culture” (Plumwood 39, my emphasis). Accordingly, Plumwood calls for a new ecological model that eliminates hierarchical dualisms, values every species on earth—both human and animal—as an autonomous subject, and thus closes the wide gulf between human “self” and natural “other.” Plumwood terms this new worldview “the intentional stance” (136). Unlike dominant masculinism, the intentional stance sustains the stories of those who have been historically cast as inferior:

We can encounter the earth other as a potential intentional subject, as one who can alter us as well as we it, and thus can begin to conceive a potential for a mutual and sustaining interchange with nature. Earth others can be seen not as objects for manipulation but as ... nations we must meet on their own terms as well as ours. These terms must negate the arrogance of the assumption that earth others are exhausted by our knowledge and our needs, and recognise in their limitless heterogeneity beings who always outrun what we may know and want. Thus the intentional stance makes possible the conception of our relationships to earth others in ethical and in political terms, where ethics is defined as the domain of response to the other's needs, ends, directions, or meaning. 137-138

Contrary to dominant masculine conceptions of the natural world, Plumwood's intentional stance conceives of nature as an entity that exists outside of "the nullity and closure of the world presented by mechanism" (Plumwood 140). That is, nature transforms from an inert resource into an "independent centre of striving which places limits on the self and on the kinds of use which may be made of it" (Plumwood 142). By treating earth others with "respect, benevolence, care, friendship and solidarity" (rather than arrogance, greed, carelessness, and contempt), we free ourselves to imagine more sustainable futures (Plumwood 155).⁵

Because dominant masculinism relegates women to the realm of nature, the intentional stance also applies specifically to female populations. Instead of uncritically affirming women's "special qualities" or uncritically proclaiming women's equal status among men (Plumwood 8), the intentional stance creates a space in which both "continuity and difference" can coexist—"this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor

⁵ See Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Orbis Books, 2011) for similar *indigenous* theories on ecological care (particularly the chapter "Creation: Balancing the World for Seven Generations").

assimilated to or an extension of self” (Plumwood 6). In this conception of ecological feminism, women’s “different social and historical position[s]” are acknowledged and legitimized (Plumwood 35). However, the intentional stance also recognizes the healthy overlaps between male and female—as well as human and nonhuman—identities. In this manner, oppositional relationships become mutually sustaining rather than incompatible. Plumwood leaves her readers with a vision of how this more democratic attitude might be put into practice:

Much inspiration for new, less destructive guiding stories can be drawn from sources other than the master, from subordinated and ignored parts of western culture, such as women’s stories of care. . . . If we are to survive into a liveable future, we must take into our own hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories, with new main characters, better plots, and at least the possibility of some happy endings. 196

Zora Neale Hurston and Jesmyn Ward’s novels are excellent ecofeminist templates because they both critique unjust systems of oppression and put forth forward-looking “guiding stories” (Plumwood 196). On the one hand, both authors force their female protagonists into negative dualistic alignments with the natural world, which inevitably leads to *real* social vulnerability and harm. On the other hand, their characters advance theories of care and prioritize creating a “liveable future” for both humans and non-humans (Plumwood 196).

Ecowomanism

Ecowomanism is a branch of womanist and ecofeminist critical analysis promoted most prominently by Reverend Melanie Harris of Texas Christian University. This theoretical lens emphasizes the nuances of racial suffering in a way that ecofeminism does not, privileging the perspectives of African-American women in the struggle for ecological and social harmony. Ecowomanism thus “centers the perspectives of women of African descent and reflects upon

these women's activist methods... and theories on how to engage earth justice”

(“Ecowomanism” 5). Additionally, it recognizes that “earth justice is and has always been a justice priority for black women... [because] of the deep value of earth as sacred... and the interconnection of black women's bodies to the body of the earth” (“Ecowomanism” 6). Like ecofeminism, ecowomanism is methodologically deconstructive—applying a race-class-gender lens to black women's experiences—and constructive—“[highlighting] strategies of resistance, spiritual resilience, and intellectual genius solutions for survival that emerge from black women's lives and moral integrity” (*Ecowomanism*).

The conceptual roots of ecowomanism can be traced back to author and theorist Alice Walker; in her 1986 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she puts forth a four-part definition of womanism (a self-coined term), worth quoting at length:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist,

as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. xi-xii

Ecowomanism derives from (but is certainly not limited by) this theoretical “roadmap.” Indeed, womanist theorists affirm the lives of *all* people, but they also place specific emphasis on the moral perspectives, survival tactics, and celebrations of black women. *Ecowomanism* takes this approach one step further, highlighting the earth’s well-being, as well. As Melanie Harris suggests,

Ecowomanism builds upon a basic tenet of justice embedded within the womanist tradition and definition Illustrative of what bell hooks calls a connection between black self recovery from historical trauma and contemporary forms of racism and planetary renewal, Walker’s womanist definition provides a base from which thinkers can reflect upon interconnectedness, wholeness, social justice and healthy relationships with the earth. “Ecowomanism” 9

Harris also adds more complexity to this approach, positing seven specific methodological steps: [Ecowomanism] charts a path, one methodological step at a time, by 1) honoring one’s eco-story or experience, 2) critically reflecting on this experience, 3) engaging womanist intersectional analysis, 4) critically engaging our traditions, 5) with an open heart, staying

open to transformation, 6) sharing dialogue, and 7) taking courageous action for environmental justice. “Sacred Blood”

For ecowomanists, constructive analysis takes the form of “earth stories”—narratives that uphold a “prophetic tradition of... truth” and “[cut] through normative practices of white supremacy, hierarchical dualism, and patriarchy” (“Ecowomanism” 7). However, it is important to note that these stories, though centered around an active search for ecological peace, may be traumatic as well as healing. In other words, though black women’s earth stories uphold “the beauty of nature” as their primary end, they may also reflect the ways in which the earth “[becomes] complicit in [systems] of white supremacy” (“Ecowomanism” 8). Ecowomanists emphasize the lynching tree, forced agricultural labor, and natural disasters just as prominently as they emphasize images of ecological stewardship, calling attention to the “androcentric attitudes” that “[devalue] the earth and [privilege] (particular) humans over the earth’s well-being” (“Ecowomanism” 6).

In true ecowomanist fashion, Hurston and Ward model sustainable ecological relationships via nature-honoring, woman-honoring, and community-honoring “earth stories.” Crucially, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* deconstruct “normative practices of white supremacy, hierarchical dualism, and patriarchy,” overturning the assumption that human and environmental subjugation are “natural” or inevitable (“Ecowomanism” 7). Furthermore, through the act of storytelling, Hurston and Ward’s protagonists tell stories and share dialogue as a means of “offering suggestions for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans, humanity, and the rest of creation” (Townes 159).

Supplemental Theoretical Lenses

Ecological Trauma

My reading of Hurston and Ward is also heavily influenced by Paul Outka's theories of environmental trauma outlined in *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*. According to Outka, there are two ways in which African Americans encounter (or merge with) nature: sublimity and trauma. While the former is an affirmation of the mutual connectedness of all living things, the latter is a degrading collapse into nature and a prelude to exploitation. On the one hand, black populations are inescapably bound to the land and to collective histories of slavery. As Outka explains,

this legacy—in which whites viewed black people as part of the natural world, and then proceeded to treat them with the same mixture of contempt, false reverence, and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history—inevitably makes the possibility of an *uncomplicated* union with the natural world less readily available to African Americans than it has been to whites who, by and large, have not suffered from such a history. 3

On the other hand, this historically close connection with the land *also* allows African Americans to discern the beauty, mystery, and wisdom of the natural world in a way that white populations cannot. In her book *Black on Earth*, literary scholar Kimberly Ruffin terms this phenomenon the “ecological burden-and-beauty paradox”: though African Americans possess a rich history of *identification* with natural landscapes, they also “bear the burden of ... environmental alienation” (16).

This alienation is particularly salient for black women. According to Lois Ann Lorentzen and Heather Eaton, “dualist conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality, and flesh”—all subject to the exploitation of men. Paul Outka echoes this observation, pointing out the ways in which “American nature” has historically been aligned

with “a feminized and domesticated pastoral, a landscape ‘tamed’ by men in ways that [mirror] disciplinary gender relations” (3). Ultimately, these scholars recognize that as long as black women consent to oppressive masculine paradigms, their ecological relationships will remain “fraught” (Outka 4).

Natural Disasters

In line with the deconstructive and constructive aims of both ecofeminism and ecowomanism, I have chosen to focus on natural disasters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* because they 1) expose black women’s preexisting vulnerability to environmental trauma and 2) clear space for black women to challenge the validity of hierarchical dualisms and posit more sustainable models of kinship.

According to Elaine Enarson and Betty Morrow, editors of *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women’s Eyes*, “Disasters are complex and quintessentially social events, reflecting not so much uncontrolled brute forces as the interaction of hazards and natural events with social structures and political communities” (1). Though natural disasters profoundly disrupt *all* demographic groups—both male and female, black and white, rich and poor—their effects are particularly brutal for black women. That is, because black women bear injustice and degradation on a *regular basis*—both ideologically and socioeconomically—they are rendered more vulnerable when disaster strikes (Enarson and Morrow 1). Ultimately, black women are especially at risk of suffering environmental damage because of their lower social standings, reduced access to institutional aid, and subsistence lifestyles.

Nevertheless, Black women also fulfill crucial positions in disaster management and recovery: in fact, “women’s paid and unpaid caregiving responsibilities ... position them to emotionally and materially sustain kin and community” (Enarson and Morrow 5). However,

images of women circulated during and after natural disasters do not accurately reflect this reality. According to Enarson and Morrow, “images of tearful and exhausted mothers... reinforce dualistic notions of women’s subordination and male power” (6). These portrayals overshadow “the instrumental and proactive work of women and the disaster-relevant skills and knowledge developed by women’s daily lives” (Enarson and Morrow 6). Indeed, black women are not simply or solely the “hapless victims” of ecological trauma; they are instead “present in every disaster response as mitigators, preparers, rescuers, caregivers, sustainers, and rebuilders” (Enarson and Morrow 6-7). Because black women so often occupy forced positions of powerlessness, they are perhaps better equipped to salvage, build, and sustain community amid heightened tragedy, scarcity, and lack. By extension, black women are uniquely positioned to exemplify care because their very survival hinges on interdependency (Lorentzen and Eaton). If these particular kinship modes were validated rather than discarded, communities could clear space for black women to put their visions for better social and ecological health into practice. As Enarson and Morrow so eloquently argue, “focusing [solely] on women’s status as dependents in the relief process and excluding them from community recovery and mitigation decision-making is myopic and misguided” (6-7).

In his article “Shouting at an Angry Sky,” humanist scholar Anthony Pinn posits a series of questions that I will use as a roadmap when examining *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* in light of race, class, gender, and natural disaster. These questions are especially helpful because they follow the same joint deconstructive/constructive approach discussed in connection with ecofeminism and ecowomanism:

Has this [disaster] resulted from a failure on the part of humans to remember and act in accordance with a deep connection to all life? That is, has an imbalance because of

human manipulation of the earth . . . , premised on a disregard for mutuality, contributed to this devastation of life? And then, what can be done to correct this imbalance, to address the immediate concerns but to do so in ways that allow for a fullness of human life and the integrity of life in more general terms?” 104

Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* function as complex, multilayered answers to these questions. Yes, environmental devastation and human manipulation are intimately intertwined. Yes, natural disasters are especially devastating for those forced into postures of social vulnerability. And yes, these events occur precisely because those in power do not uphold all forms of life as valuable, intentional, or autonomous. Even so, Hurston and Ward recognize what dominant masculinism fails to consider: despite their continued subordination, black women have *already* found “fullness of human life,” and it is premised on new paradigms of mutuality and kinship.

A Note on Context: The American South

Hurston and Ward’s novels take place in rural Florida and rural Mississippi respectively. Thus, the environment specifically addressed in this thesis is the American South, a region of the United States with its own complex customs, values, and prejudices. Though fully analyzing Southern environmental history is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that the South’s environmental character—both past and present—is clouded by the institutions of slavery and settler colonialism. Indeed, this heritage is precisely why the natural world is traumatic for so many black populations in the South (and, alternatively, so intimate). Because both Hurston and Ward ground their narratives in this region, they are both acutely attuned to the “intertwinement of nature and history” (Berger 10).

1.2 Scope and Structure

In the following chapters, I analyze Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. Hurston and Ward are uniquely positioned by ecofeminist and ecowomanist theory to critique oppressive systems of racial, environmental, and gender violence and advocate for a new sense of environmental and social stewardship that recognizes the integrity of all life on earth. Put more simply, Hurston and Ward speak natural truth to artificial power.

Chapter Two examines *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a fictional account of the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane. Through the character of Janie Crawford—a woman objectified, inferiorised, and negatively aligned with nature throughout her adolescent and adult life—Hurston demonstrates the ways in which hierarchical subjugation is *normative* for black women, rearing its head in persistent and insidious ways. As such, Hurston's novel functions as “a high stakes confrontation between an extra-human natural other and the most historically degrading naturalized stereotypes of African Americans” (Outka 189). However, this powerless position paradoxically equips Janie to practice trans-species empathy and care. That is, because Janie attempts to “find new ways and models of imagining trauma free relationships with the social and natural world” (Berger 2), she ultimately embraces a vision of nature that prizes mutuality over dualism and affirms those traditionally cast as subhuman. Though Janie suffers through two failed marriages, the physical destruction of her community via hurricane, and the loss of her third husband via rabies, she nevertheless develops into a woman who lives out the ideals mutuality and kinship.

Chapter Three examines Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, a contemporary novel that takes place in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. Newly pregnant, fifteen-year-old Esch struggles to claim agency—as a black woman, a new mother, a community member—in a world

that renders her simultaneously exploitable and disposable. Forced into traumatic relationships with the realms of nature, animality, and subsistence, Esch becomes particularly vulnerable to the powerful forces of Katrina—both physically and socially. Paradoxically, however, this position of powerlessness equips Esch to practice “the politics of interdependency[,] ... making kin as a ... method of survival on an ‘earth [that] is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge’” (Bares 32). In other words, because Esch sees herself “as one vulnerable life form among many,” she becomes better attuned to the suffering surrounding her—both human and nonhuman—and better qualified to imagine trauma-free relationships with the social and natural world (qtd. in Lloyd 255). Ultimately, then, Katrina’s influence on Esch is twofold: on the one hand, the storm reveals the ways in which Esch experiences degrading alignments with “inferior” nature. On the other hand, the storm positions Esch to sustain life amidst the basest social and environmental exploitation.

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As a white student writing about African American ecological perspectives, I am compelled to begin the following chapters with a caveat. Because this thesis lends itself to cultural perspectives drastically different than my own, I hope to approach my subject with as much empathy, intentionality, and humility as possible. Empathy, however, cannot replace direct experience, and I acknowledge that my analysis will be limited by my status as a white woman. Additionally, since my thesis includes an implicit critique of patriarchal and racial structures, I am particularly careful not to generalize populations (both white and black, male and female) into homogenous, easily-defined groups. That said, using the lenses and methods listed above, I hope to take a persuasive, respectful, nuanced stance on this topic.

Chapter Two: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

“I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, not lurking behind my eyes.... I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal.”

—Zora Neale Hurston

In September of 1928, the Okeechobee hurricane struck the state of Florida, leaving thousands of victims in its wake—rich and poor, white and black, male and female. However, black agricultural workers suffered the worst of the hurricane’s storm surge, in large part because they occupied the segregated communities in Central Florida’s lowlands (Brochu). Neighboring Lake Okeechobee—once a crucial wellspring of these workers’ agricultural livelihoods—overwhelmed levees, upended houses, destroyed crops, and devastated lives. Though the hurricane *itself* did not discriminate, its social consequences were nevertheless unjust, exacerbating inequality among races, classes, and genders. Local authorities forced devastated black communities to participate in the state’s cleanup efforts, which consisted of burying white victims in individual caskets and tipping black victims into unmarked mass-graves (Brochu). Meanwhile, black women remained confined to domestic spaces—responsible for sustaining their shattered households and nurturing their broken families. Considered inferior, expendable, and unworthy of care—even *before* the hurricane struck—these populations bore the brunt of the storm’s damage, demonstrating that “vulnerabilities to disaster... are not equally distributed” (Enarson and Morrow 2).

In her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston offers a fictional account of the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane, calling particular attention to the ways in which

natural disasters expose vast inequalities among races and genders.⁶ As literary theorist Paul Outka observes, “in a different novel—a more conventional white one—the tremendous hurricane that blows in and disrupts the ... community” might not manifest itself as such a profound or permanent wound (193). However, for protagonist Janie Crawford, a black woman objectified and inferiorised throughout her adult life, the storm *exacerbates* her already-precarious existence. In other words, hierarchical subjugation is *normative* for Janie, rearing its head in persistent and insidious ways. As such, Hurston’s novel functions as “a high stakes confrontation between an extra-human natural other and the most historically degrading naturalized stereotypes of African Americans,” revealing the ways in which nature signals trauma for black women and renders them defenseless (Outka 189). However, this powerless position paradoxically equips Janie to practice trans-species empathy and care. That is, because Janie attempts to dismantle dualistic hierarchies and “find new ways and models of imagining trauma free relationships with the social and natural world” (Berger 2), she ultimately embraces a vision of nature that prizes mutuality over dualism and affirms those traditionally cast as subhuman. Despite hopeless or unsalvageable odds, then, Janie “[remembers] and [acts] in accordance with a deep connection to all life” (Pinn 104).

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Before engaging in a close reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one must first situate Hurston’s work within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Though ecowomanism and ecofeminism were not established disciplines during the early twentieth century, Hurston nevertheless expresses themes, values, and insights consistent with those later formalized in

⁶ Though Florida native Zora Neale Hurston did not personally experience the 1928 Hurricane, she conducted extensive survivor interviews in Central and South Florida in the months and years following the storm. Additionally, Hurston “herself ... survived a 1929 hurricane in the Bahamas” (Boyd).

these fields. Per Alice Walker's foundational definition of womanism, Hurston demonstrated a particularly intense love of "the Folk" and, by extension, a profound respect for humans and nonhumans alike (xi).

When scholars refer to the Harlem Renaissance, they typically focus overwhelmingly on the flowering of culture occurring in America's urban centers. However, Zora Neale Hurston recognized that the Harlem Renaissance did not simply denote a physical migration to the North, a distancing from the rural South, or an emulation of white literary techniques. Against the grain of her contemporaries, Hurston strove to give voice to rural, Southern populations whose lives did not mirror the aims of the elite modernist movement. Whereas some Renaissance artists "repudiated their folk heritage as a product of slavery" (Hemenway 52), Hurston rejected the assumption that folk experience was *only* traumatic, demonstrating instead that it uniquely embodied the fullness of black life. In other words, instead of repudiating her Southern roots, Hurston amplified them. By composing in vernacular forms and harnessing "low" culture, Hurston turned her back on white discourse and formed a new discourse of her own. As Hemenway observes, "the folk were creating an art that did not need the sanction of 'culture' to affirm its beauty" (Hemenway 54); in other words, "[Hurston] did not find racial liberation in the terms of white domination, or selfhood for the black woman in the arrogance of male supremacy. Black people became free not by emulating whites, but by building from the cultural institutions of the black community" (238). Consequently, Hurston's characters—"[Negroes] furthest down," in her words—were not simply byproducts of white oppression, but fully viable human beings with traditions and celebrations of their own (qtd. in Hemenway 238). In fact, in Hurston's conception, dominant masculinism was devoid of vitality—"unfeeling, excessively materialistic, [and] hopelessly rational" (Hemenway 77). "By emphasizing the art in the folkloric

phenomenon,” Hemenway observes, “Hurston implicitly told white: Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our own culture, which as a matter of fact is more alive, more esthetically pleasing than your own; and it is not solely a product of defensive *reactions* to your actions” (221).

Hurston’s “folkloric phenomenon” grounds itself squarely in the rural South and, by extension, in the natural world. As aforementioned, Southern landscapes carry with them the legacy of slavery—the deliberate relegation of millions of African Americans to a life of agricultural labor. In Hurston’s narratives, the environment accordingly functions as a source of both profound trauma and profound intimacy. According to Robert Hemenway, African American folk art “arises out of the specific needs of a given community,” is “perpetuated through the most oppressive of circumstances,” and “becomes a major instrument of survival” (Hemenway 54). In line with these aims, Hurston intentionally highlights African Americans’ fraught relationships with the natural world and subverts natural symbols as a means of survival and resistance. In other words, Hurston harnesses natural symbols *not* to reify African American oppression, but to ensure her culture’s preservation and empowerment. For example, Hurston frequently used the term “mules and men” to insist upon her people’s dignity: “the phrase meant not only that black people were treated as mules, but also that they were defiantly human—mules *and* men” (Hemenway). In sum, Hurston’s folk traditions reject the supremacy of rationalism and dominant masculinism, imaging the natural world as an entity worthy of respect—even a source of power and personal agency.⁷

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⁷ See also Kameelah L. Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (HarperCollins, 2009).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's initial (pre-disaster) understanding of self and nature stems from two sources: one traumatic—representative of dominant masculine ideologies—and one constructive—representative of a more egalitarian folk sensibility. Throughout the novel, these two worldviews battle for supremacy over Janie's identity: while the former renders her subservient and throwaway, the latter affirms her worth as an independent and valuable subject.

In accordance with this first, traumatic worldview, Hurston places Janie into a series of negative symbolic relationships with the natural world. Indeed, “dualist conceptual structures identify [Janie] with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality, and flesh”—qualities typically deemed inferior in the dominant Western tradition (Lorentzen and Eaton). For example, Janie's initial understanding of dualist concepts stems from her grandmother, a woman with visceral memories of slavery. Unsurprisingly, Nanny “associates nature with ... fear and terror,” a sentiment she passes along to Janie (Berger 16). More specifically, because “Nanny is not able to find a healthy bond to nature, [she] is overcome by the bondage of trauma, reinforcing the human/nonhuman dichotomy” (17). Indeed, prevailing masculine ideologies conceive of black women as inferior animals: as Nanny asserts, “de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston 19-20). As creatures excluded from the realm of human achievement, as property bought and sold without consent, and as laborers “forced to work long hours,” the mule aptly symbolizes the black female's denigrated status in a world both physically and ideologically dominated by men (Hemenway 222). Indeed, by aligning black womanhood with the plight of an animal subordinated under the power of the whip, Nanny emphasizes the ways in which dominant

masculine strands of thought impose (and will continue to impose) themselves upon Janie's life, ensuring that she remains inert, passive, and obedient. Under society's anthropocentric gaze, in other words, Nanny understands the very real possibility that Janie will become an exploitable, disposable brute. Literary scholar Rachel Stein explains how these cultural-symbolic associations are constructed and reified: "racial and sexual inequities are grounded in the representation of black women as animals"; consequently, "[black women's] sufferings [are] dismissed as inevitable, and the social pyramid that rests upon their backs can be justified as natural" (54). Because Nanny suspects that Janie will inherit these symbolic associations, she passes her fears along to Janie, paradoxically reinforcing the dualistic split between human and nature.

In an attempt to protect her against subjugation, Nanny envisions for Janie a life in which she withdraws from nature completely, marries a man of means, and dwells solely in the realm of "superior" culture. Inadvertently, however, Nanny pushes Janie into a series of loveless marriages that violate her inherent worth and place her at odds with the natural world. As Janie enters an abusive relationship with Logan Killicks—and another one with Joe Starks—she paradoxically fulfills the denigrated role that Nanny so earnestly endeavors to steer her away from. Indeed, Logan Killicks subjects Janie to involuntary agricultural labor, and Joe Starks confines Janie to the silent domestic sphere. Though these two initial marriages are not the primary focus of this chapter, it is nevertheless important to note that both of these men, in their respective ways, "deny [Janie] a feeling of wholeness" and conspire to restrict her freedoms (Hemenway 233-234). Estranged from the concepts of mutuality and interdependency, both men rationalize their sexist practices by aligning Janie's superficial differences with "inferior" natural processes and characteristics. As Joe Starks claims, for instance, "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none themselves"

(Hurston 71). Consequently, Janie effectively embodies the role of mule—“a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture” (Plumwood 4)—and “falls into ... slavery’s essential conceit, a traumatic repetition of a much older and widespread pattern in the relation of African Americans to the natural world” (Outka 192).

Luckily, Janie recognizes that these relationships are inadequate and debased, for they separate her from the natural landscapes that so intimately feed and sustain her. As such, Janie positions herself *against* “destructive and dualising [forms] of culture” (Plumwood 39). In other words, Janie uniquely understands what her grandmother cannot: that the human impulse to “be *above* others” inevitably leads to “denying the humanity of those below” (Hemenway 237). Like Janie’s grandmother, who seeks an escape from environmental trauma, Janie’s husbands believe “that freedom is symbolized by achieving the position on high” (Hemenway 237). However, Janie discovers that the “superior” realm of culture is profoundly harmful to the sanctity of both human and nonhuman life: “Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her grandmother’s neck tight enough to choke her” (Hurston 89). Indeed, for Janie, dominant masculinism is restrictive and prohibitory—a chokehold premised on dominance rather than mutuality.

Consequently, Janie returns to the natural world, supplanting her traumatic encounters with new ecological paradigms that close the gaps between human and non-human, culture and nature, subject and object, oppressor and oppressed. Most notably, Janie carries with her the image of a pear tree, an environmental symbol which teaches her to value “respect, benevolence, care, friendship and solidarity” with earth-others (Plumwood 155):

[Janie] was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. Hurston 11

As Janie observes a bee pollinating a blossom, she notices that the exchange between organisms is completely nonhierarchical. As literary critic Rachel Stein affirms, this passage “refigures women’s association with nature as healing rather than debased” (73). As a symbol of nonhierarchical love, the pear tree “[directs] and [measures] the stages of [Janie’s] life against the social limits she encounters[...] offers Janie a ... vision of the transformative possibility beyond the confines of racist and sexist social relations, and ... spurs her growing resistance to confining external definitions of black women as mules” (Stein 73). In other words, the pear tree allows Janie to envision a positive rather than degraded role for herself: here, “nature, rather than being the base object of environmental scorn, is sacralized. Female sexuality, rather than being bestialized, is revelatory Human and natural are merged, not hierarchically separated (Stein 74). This constructive ecological vision remains with Janie throughout the novel: even when Janie’s experiences align with trauma rather than wholeness or “the promise of fecundity” (Alquilone CITE), Janie strives to bring herself into “harmony with her initial vision of the pear tree.” (Alquilone CITE).

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With these two disparate ecological worldviews vying for supremacy In Janie's mind (one traumatic and one generative), Janie meets and falls in love Tea Cake, a man positioned at the intersection of these two warring ideals. Janie and Tea Cake get married and move to a rural lakeside farming town, where the two initially live in a manner that mirrors the egalitarianism of Janie's pear tree vision. Even "the muck" itself is idyllic:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that half a mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. Hurston 129

In this isolated center of black culture, nature flourishes alongside of its people. Without the dominating forces of predatory capitalism, white subjugation, or gender discrimination, Janie experiences ecological balance within the institution of marriage for the first time (Alquilone 15). That is, Tea Cake does not force Janie to till the land on his behalf (as Logan Killicks does), nor does he confine her to the home or deny her kinship with her wider community (as Joe Starks does). Instead, Tea Cake defines his relationship with Janie in terms of "mutual submission and equal care from and to both members ... , regardless of prescribed gender role" (Alquilone 2-3). Janie and Tea Cake labor together, share their earnings equally, and live in harmony with the natural world.

Eventually, however, this idyllic landscape collapses into trauma, revealing the ways in which ecological violence is persistent and insidious in the lives of black women. As news of an impending hurricane arrives at the muck, egalitarianism gives way to ingrained social hierarchies

and injustices. In particular, Tea Cake dismisses the local Seminoles' warning to evacuate the area (without Janie's consent), in large part because he wills himself to believe that his newfound capacity for ownership, domination, and control will save him. As animals, natives, and neighbors flee to higher ground, Tea Cake places his trust in dominant masculine ideologies, "convinced of the authority of those who built and possess the muck" (Berger 29). Indeed, as literary critic Judie Newman observes,

for all his apparent open-handedness, his lack of interest in prestige on white terms, and his ability to function on a footing of equality with Janie, Teacake is still mired in the world of money.... Significantly, Teacake's tragic mistake [is] to ignore Indian folk knowledge. He discounts the warnings of the local Seminoles that there is a hurricane on the way, in the first place because they are not property-owners ('Indians don't know much uh nothin' [. . .] Else they'd own this country still' (p. 231)) and secondly because of the lure of money: 'Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, must be wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans' (p. 229). 823

Like Logan Killicks and Joe Starks before him, Tea Cake falls into dominant masculinism's deception. "Here," Johanna Berger argues, "Tea Cake [yields] to the power and authority of the prevalent culture, knowingly ignoring the warnings of those in long existing proximity to the local natural world" (29). Again, it is crucial to note that Tea Cake's fatal decision is made without Janie's express consent; in this manner, Tea Cake devalues Janie's voice and inadvertently forces her into a position of increased precarity.

However, "as the dyke bursts" and the hurricane arrives, "[Tea Cake] sees his error" (Newman 823): "the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead

and given death to so much that had been living things” (Hurston 236). Tea Cake realizes, too late, that the “momentary havens of invulnerability” associated with dominant masculinity do not hold in the midst of disaster (Ruether 32). Because the storm does not heed the social cues or constructions posited by humans, social hierarchies are equalized and *everyone* is brought low. As such, “Hurston gives us a realistic and tender scene: an exhausted man asleep on the ground who doesn’t possess an infallible knowledge of the natural world, and a woman who is not simply helpless, but doesn’t know what she is doing in the storm” (Outka 196).

However, despite the ways in which the hurricane levels the ranks between man and nature, the storm is nevertheless an essentially *social* event—one that exposes already-entrenched disparities among races, classes, and genders. For example, when Janie and Tea Cake flee their home for higher ground, the town’s white residents deny them passage onto the bridge that leads to safety: “[they] had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room” (Hurston 164). Furthermore, “after the hurricane’s destruction, ... the white authorities are quick to reimpose supremacy by conscripting black men to bury the victims in segregated graves” (Hemenway 240). Exploiting Janie and Tea Cake at their most vulnerable, the novel’s white populations reinstate hierarchy precisely when *community* is crucial. Indeed, even the face of a common natural threat, “there is no fate in this book that is unaffected by race” (qtd. in Mullaney 130).

In the novel’s climactic moment, Tea Cake suffers a rapid dog bite as the storm rages around him, an event which leads to his tragic and violent decline into bestiality. According to Paul Outka, this unfortunate event “replays the [traumatic] collapse ... we have seen played out relentlessly in representations of African American relations to the natural world” (197): by contracting rabies, Tea Cake becomes the vehicle by which man transforms into an

“unreasoning, savage, and uncontrollably violent [beast] whose only urge is to attack and infect others” (198). As Janie observes, for instance, “He gave her a look of blank ferocity and gurgled in his throat.... And she was beginning to feel fear of this strange thing in Tea Cake’s body” (182). Here, the trauma initiated by Nanny reasserts itself in Janie’s life. Indeed, rather than restore Tea Cake back to his full humanity after the storm, Hurston instead gives us “trauma’s collapse of the subject into that natural other, a return of the horrific postbellum identification of blackness and the bestial that fueled lynch mobs for decades” (Outka 199).

Though Tea Cake’s decline into animality is certainly instructive, I am more interested in examining how this event shapes *Janie*. As Tea Cake’s spouse, Janie effectively takes on the role of caregiver when Tea Cake can no longer care for himself. That is, given Tea Cake’s bestial state, Janie assumes responsibility of his sustenance and care—she feeds him, clothes him, and contacts the town doctor on his behalf. These implicit female responsibilities align with Enarson and Morrow’s evaluation of post-disaster gender roles: “Women’s paid and unpaid caregiving responsibilities... position them to emotionally and materially sustain kin and community through the experiences of disaster and recovery”; consequently, “caregiving roles [are] intensified rather than abandoned (5). In this manner, Janie demonstrates an ethic of trans-species empathy: though Tea Cake merges with animal life and becomes unrecognizable, Janie nevertheless treats him as kin. That is, though Tea Cake himself is effectively “gone,” Janie’s decision to sustain his life constitutes a powerful and brave act of care (Hurston 181).

Unfortunately, these instances of kinship go unnoticed and unrewarded: as Tea Cake’s condition escalates, Janie shoots him “to end trauma’s transmission” (Outka 200). In his last moments of life, however, Tea Cake clamps his teeth on Janie’s arm and leaves her liable to

contract rabies, as well (Outka 200). According to Paul Outka, this scene is crucial to Hurston's message, for it

[leaves] open the very real possibility that ... [Janie] will herself go mad and die, that her voice and independence will be swept away and that she will herself incarnate the seemingly endless violence and animalized trauma that indelibly marks the history of African American natural experience. That such an ending would feel horrible, forced, unnatural, brutal—as pointless and familiar as Tea Cake's—might well be Hurston's point. 200

Again, it is important to bear in mind why Janie has become vulnerable to disease in the first place: as Tea Cake's primary caretaker, a role typically relegated to the "inferior" female sphere, Janie occupies an already-powerless and precarious position. As Raymond West affirms, "ongoing domestic social [structures]" such as the one Janie inhabits are "critical [sources] of disaster vulnerability" (63-64).

To compound upon these traumatic experiences, Janie is accused and tried for murdering Tea Cake. Though the jury ultimately finds her innocent, this event nevertheless provides crucial insight into the prevailing cultural narratives that cast black women as disposable and reify their subjugation post-disaster. After Janie testifies, for example, the presiding judge offers the following instructions to the all-white, all-male jury:

"Gentlemen of the jury, it is for you to decide whether the defendant has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a *poor broken creature*, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy. If you find her a wanton killer you must bring in a verdict of first degree murder. If the evidence does not justify that then you must set her free." Hurston 188, my emphasis

This speech, particularly the phrase “poor broken creature,” reinforces the ways in which black women are systematically “typecast as hapless victims” rather than affirmed for their significant roles in disaster recovery (Enarson and Morrow 7). Indeed, as Janie’s fellow townspeople observe the trial, they remark that ““uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth”” (Hurston 189). At first glance, this statement seems nonsensical; however, given black women’s historically denigrated status, it is actually a clear reference to black female disposability. Whereas white men are free because they wield unchecked power and influence, black women are “free” because they have become culturally invisible. As “images of [black women as] tearful and exhausted” victims circulate in our public consciousness and “[reinforce] dualistic notions of women’s subordination and male power, ... the instrumental and proactive work of women and the disaster-relevant skills and knowledge developed by [their] daily lives” remains largely unnoticed and discounted (Enarson and Morrow 6). Though Janie practices unconditional love for her spouse and bravely resumes her life after he dies, Janie’s public image remains one-dimensional.

Despite the public sentiments that cast her as a disposable and helpless widow, Janie proves herself to be a vital community rebuilders capable of creating new ecological paradigms, imagining sustainable relationships with humans and non-humans, and demonstrating care in the wake of disaster. This inner strength is exemplified most notably in the manner in which Janie memorializes Tea Cake: “the seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things ... Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance” (Hurston 191). Indeed, the task of planting seeds becomes for Janie an outlet of free expression, creativity, and sustenance. By claiming this small ecological task as her own, Janie discovers a form of labor which is restorative rather than oppressive. As Carolina Núñez-

Puente confirms, private gardens such as these provide black women with “a space... to imagine truly ethical ways of life with the hope ... of putting them into practice” (135). Likewise, Janie salvages Tea Cake’s memory and transforms it into a source of personal power, survival, and resistance. In other words, Hurston harnesses the natural symbol of planting *not* to reify Janie’s negative alignment with nature, but to ensure her continued preservation and empowerment. Ultimately, “[Janie] breaks up the human/animal and/or culture/nature dichotomy, ... dares to reveal her difference to the world,” and displays a radical “model of sympathy” (Berger 32). Though Janie cannot control her social positioning, reverse the hurricane, or alter Tea Cake’s tragic fate, the care she bestows upon her garden elevates her to the position of independent agent.

Finally, the act of storytelling becomes Janie’s most powerful tool for imagining productive ecological and human relationships. As Melissa Harris-Perry contends in a passage worth quoting at length,

Their Eyes Were Watching God never articulates an explicitly political role for Janie.

Instead of leading a community or movement, Janie chooses a solitary and contemplative life. But she is not entirely alone. The novel consists of Janie’s retelling of her story to her sympathetic girlfriend, Phoeby, knowing that Phoeby will share the story with the other women in town. Although Hurston does not tell us exactly what Phoeby does with Janie’s story, we do learn that by listening to Janie, Phoeby comes to feel ‘ten feet taller.’ We know that she plans to return home to her husband and demand to be treated more equally. Phoeby’s task is to hear Janie’s story, be made taller by it, and use it to demand changes in the systems of racism and patriarchy that circumscribe American life. She challenges us because we, as readers, are in the same position relative to Janie. We have

heard the story, and it is our job to make politics out of it. The book in your hands is not so much Janie's story as Phoeby's.

By sharing her story with Phoeby, Janie embodies the ecowomanist call to engender transformative social and environmental dialogue. That Janie's audience isn't large or public is perhaps Hurston's point: truth need not come from prominent, high places in order to dismantle unjust hierarchical systems. Indeed, domestic, traditionally "female" spaces are revolutionary, too.

Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie posits productive models of community and kinship, even when traumatic relationships with nature overwhelm. Though dominant masculine forces rob Janie of her humanity, destroy her community, kill her husband, and mark her as disposable wreckage, Janie nevertheless keeps her nonhierarchical pear-tree vision alive by defining those around her—both human and nonhuman—as kin. Furthermore, through the act of storytelling itself, Janie creates the necessary space for silenced "natural" voices to speak their truths. Thus, if Janie is indicative of the silenced black female voice, she is *also* indicative of the voice that subverts and resists—the voice that speaks her culture's worth and affirms more egalitarian sensibilities.

Chapter Three: *Salvage the Bones*

“I like to think that after I die, my children will look at that place and see a place of refuge, of rest. I hope that at least one of them will want to remain here in this place that I love more than I loathe, and I hope the work that I have done to make Mississippi a place worth living is enough. I hope they feel more themselves in this place than any other in the world, and that if they do leave, they dream of that house, that clearing, those woods, when they sleep.”

– *Jesmyn Ward*

In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Southeastern United States. Though the storm claimed more than 1,800 victims—both rich and poor, black and white, male and female—its devastation was far from even-handed. In fact, according David Brooks of the *New York Times*, Katrina exposed vast inequities along America’s Gulf Coast, effectively “[washing] away the surface of society” (qtd. in Belkhir and Charlemaine 120). That is, Katrina was not simply a large-scale accident, but rather a “quintessentially social [event], reflecting ... the interaction of hazards and natural events with social structures” (Enarson and Morrow 1). In particular, Hurricane Katrina disproportionately devastated poor women of color, revealing the ways in which governments, communities, and individuals alike failed “to remember and act in accordance with a deep connection to all life” (Pinn 104). Considered inferior and expendable long before the storm struck, women of color were denied adequate protection against social and environmental threats.⁸

⁸ In their article “Abandoned Before the Storms: The Glaring Disaster of Gender, Race, and Class Disparities in the Gulf,” Avis A. Jones-Deweever and Heidi Hartmann note, “The multiple disadvantages faced by women of the Gulf both increased their vulnerability in a time of crisis and ... remain an impediment to their ability to rebuild their lives long after the storm (85). These pre-existing disadvantages are particularly brutal “with respect to employment and earnings, educational attainment,” healthcare access, “and ultimately, the likelihood of living in poverty” (85).

Mississippi author Jesmyn Ward personally witnessed Hurricane Katrina “[unmake] the world, tree by water by house by person” (Ward 262). When the category-five storm struck her coastal hometown, she and her family huddled in cars for survival, denied shelter by their white neighbors. Thus, for Ward, her family, and her wider community, Katrina was not simply a *natural* disaster. In Delisle, a town divided sharply along race, class, and gender lines, Katrina exposed vast systems of oppression premised on damaging hierarchical dualisms.

In her 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, Jesmyn Ward transforms her personal and communal experience of Hurricane Katrina into stunning fiction. Set in the rural margins of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi—DeLisle’s fictional counterpart—Ward’s novel follows fifteen-year-old Esch Batiste as she and her family stand at the edge of environmental and social catastrophe. However, as literary theorist Annie Bares observes, *Salvage the Bones* is not a typical “Katrina novel.” That is, Ward does not portray the storm as “an unfathomable disruption to... subjecthood that is overcome by narrative humanity, which attempts to restore the Katrina subject to the full humanity denied to him following the storm” (24). Instead, Esch is never endowed with independent subjecthood to *begin with*. In this manner, Ward shifts her focus away from “the white men for whom Katrina was a shock and a break from the normal” and towards the silenced black woman, who suffers “slow, quotidian violences” every day (Bares 23). Newly pregnant, Esch struggles to claim agency—as a black woman, a new mother, a community member—in a world that renders her simultaneously exploitable and disposable. Forced into traumatic relationships with the realms of nature, animality, and subsistence, Esch becomes particularly vulnerable to the powerful forces of Katrina—both physically and socially. Paradoxically, however, this position of powerlessness equips Esch to practice “the politics of interdependency[,] ... making kin as a ... method of survival on an ‘earth [that] is full of

refugees, human and not, without refuge” (Bares 32). In other words, because Esch sees herself “as one vulnerable life form among many,” she becomes better attuned to the suffering surrounding her—both human and nonhuman—and better qualified to imagine trauma-free relationships with the social and natural world (qtd. in Lloyd 255). Ultimately, then, Katrina’s influence on Esch is twofold: on the one hand, the storm reveals the ways in which Esch experiences degrading alignments with the “inferior” nature. On the other hand, the storm positions Esch to sustain life amidst the basest social and environmental exploitation.

As ecofeminist theorists Lois Lorentzen, Heather Eaton, and Rosemary Radford Ruether contend, sexual, racial, and environmental exploitation take place on two levels, one conceptual (or cultural-symbolic) and one socioeconomic. According to Ruether, “the first is an ideological superstructure that reflects and ratifies the second [As] domination is shaped socially, ideological tools [are] constructed to ratify [that domination] as a reflection of the ‘nature of things’” (22-23). In other words, hegemonic systems “present ideas about the world in a hierarchical and dualistic manner,” which is subsequently “lived out in the way the world is organized” (Lorentzen and Eaton). Though these metanarratives of human domination are purely artificial, their implications are nevertheless real. That is, conceptual inferiority is internalized in tangible ways, producing harsh socioeconomic inequality as a result.

In accordance with these theories of how dominance is conceptualized and enforced, Ward places Esch into a series of negative symbolic relationships with the natural world. Indeed, “dualist conceptual structures identify [Esch] with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality, and flesh”—qualities typically deemed inferior in the dominant Western tradition (Lorentzen and Eaton). According to Christopher Clark of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, “the link between Esch’s body and the body of the South is intrinsic” (15); that is, Esch’s raced, gendered identity is

inextricably bound to traumatic interactions “with the landscape around her” (15). By aligning Esch with natural elements and processes, casting her as a “lesser form of humanity” (Plumwood 4), and cancelling her independence of self, Jesmyn Ward “unsparingly narrativizes the insidious, slowly violent ways that pervasive cultural narratives have construed the [identities] of poor women of color as illegitimate,” inferior, and disposable (Bares 28).

Early in the novel, Esch internalizes this logic of natural inferiority through the act of sex. More specifically, Esch’s symbolically traumatic conception of self becomes particularly clear when masculine figures cast her as a lower form of nature and exploit her as such. In particular, Esch’s romance with Manny—a local boy four years her senior—renders her inert, passive, “abject, commodified, and subaltern” (Outka 25). Though Esch does not actively resist these sexual encounters, Manny’s actions are clearly exploitative:

Manny touched me first where he always touched me: my ass. He grabbed and pulled, and my shorts slid down. His fingers tugged my panties, his forearms rubbed my waist, and the brush of his skin burned like a tongue. He had never kissed me except like this, with his body.... The pines seemed to circle like a ring-a-rosy, and I fell. *It will be quick*, I thought. *He will bury his face in my hair. He will growl when he comes.* I dug my heels into the back of his thighs ... my hair my pillow in the red dirt.... Manny was loving me.

Ward 16-17

Here, Esch enmeshes her understanding of love with environmental exploitation: human intercourse mirrors the hunt of a predatory animal (“*He will growl when he comes*”), the swift felling of pine trees (“*The pines seemed to circle... and I fell*”), or the merging of body and earth (“*my hair my pillow in the red dirt*”). Crucially, Esch fulfills the role of *prey* in these metaphors—the stripped-down, objectified object of male desire. As theorist Paul Outka

observes, natural metaphors like these are inherently problematic, for they carry with them connotations of male exploitation and violence: just as “American nature” has been aligned with “a feminized and domesticated pastoral, a landscape ‘tamed’ by men” (3), Manny justifies sexual objectification by casting Esch as a natural resource. Womanist scholar Delores Williams echoes these concepts in her article “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies”: because dominant masculinism portrays black women “as belonging to a lower order of nature,” women like Esch are accordingly “controlled and tamed like the rest of the natural environment” (Williams 24). As such, Manny’s actions cannot accurately be described as gestures of love. Rather, they are gestures of “defilement,” which “[manifest themselves] in human attacks on creation so as to ravish, violate, and destroy creation: to exploit and control the production and reproduction capacities of nature, ... to obliterate the spirit of the created” (Williams).

Crucially, these traumatic sexual codes appear unremarkable to Esch, mirroring the ways in which cultural debility is learned, “endemic, [and] perhaps even normative... to disenfranchised communities” (qtd. in Bares 23). For instance, before narrating her first encounter with Manny, Esch explains her particular sexual philosophy: “I’d let boys have [my heart] because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it” (Ward 16). Instead of the consummation of love between two equals, Esch understands sex as a one-sided act in which woman gives and man takes. Consequently, she internalizes the role of natural resource and unconsciously reifies female subordination as “the nature of things.” Furthermore, Esch correlates sex with learning how to swim, a memory intimately tied to male violence and traumatic natural alignment:

Daddy taught every one of us to swim by picking us up when we was little, around six or so, and flinging us in the water. I’d taken to it fast, hadn’t coughed up the muddy pit

water, hadn't cried or flailed; I'd bobbed back up and cut the surface of the water and splashed my way back to where Daddy was standing in the shallows. I'd pulled the water with my hands, kicked it with my feet, let it push me forward. That was sex. Ward 23-24

As this passage suggests, Daddy teaches Esch to swim by forcing her into positions of physical helplessness. In a similar manner, sex for Esch is a form of *symbolic* helplessness: conditioned to tolerate male violence, she gives her heart to those who "[want] it" as a means of staying afloat.

When Esch becomes pregnant with Manny's child, this internalized sexual trauma translates directly to motherhood. Accordingly, Ward aligns Esch's "pregnancy and maternity" with natural elements such as "rain, floods, storms, and trees," emphasizing the ways in which dualistic, masculine structures force already-vulnerable women like Esch into postures of further powerlessness (Moynihan 563). Indeed, the same winds that decimate Bois Sauvage "[drag] at [Esch's] clothes and [show her] body for what it is" (Ward 196)—sexually abused, impregnated, objectified, and used. According to critic Sinead Moynihan, for example,

storm metaphors are deployed to convey Esch's feelings of powerlessness regarding her pregnancy. When she takes a pregnancy test, the 'terrible truth' is conveyed to her by '[c]olor wash[ing] across the stick like a curtain of rain' (Ward 36). When she describes the fetus being nourished by the food she consumes, she imagines 'the food turning to mush, sliding down my throat, through my body like water through a storm drain to pool in my stomach' (41) ...What she carries in her stomach is 'relentless' (205); similarly, the storm's rain bears 'relentlessly...down on the house' (225). At one point during the storm, Esch thinks she is miscarrying ('Why are my shorts wet? Is it gone? Am I bleeding?') but soon realizes that water is, in fact, coming into the house (226). 563

As these textual examples illustrate, Ward employs the language of storms to suggest the more “permanent disaster” of black female debility. In other words, Katrina’s impending forces parallel the slowly violent ideologies that destine women like Esch (and the children they carry) to become ecological and social wreckage.

Ward also aligns Esch with animal life—most notably with Skeetah’s pit bull, China. The immediate parallels between Esch and China are obvious: both are female. Both are new mothers, inexperienced yet tenacious. Both are stereotyped and exploited on the basis of physical appearance. Most importantly, both are simultaneously manipulated and loved by their male “owners.” Like Esch, violated and objectified by Manny and the other boys of Bois Sauvage, China’s body suffers comparable abuse. As Esch herself observes, China’s worth is inextricably tied to her breeding—her ability to wield her body as a weapon and bring her owner honor. For instance, Esch describes an impending dogfight as follows: “They will throw their own dogs into the ring, each hoping for a good fight, a savage heart, a win, a return home from the woods ... to be able to say *My bitch did it*” (Ward 160). Similarly, when Esch tells Manny that she is pregnant with his child, the two engage in a comparable dogfight sequence (“I am on him like China”) in which Manny brands Esch a “stupid bitch” (Ward 203, 204). Indeed, Ward demonstrates that the intersections between “black [female] life and animal life” are sites of “mutual tension and redress” (Bares 31); together, Esch and China reflect the ways in which dominant masculine ideologies fail to recognize “earth others” as autonomous subjects with “limitless heterogeneity” and needs of their own (Plumwood 137).

Furthermore, Esch’s traumatic alignment with nonhuman nature manifests itself in her family’s specific environmental history. According to Christopher Clark, the Batistes’ multigenerational land is “a site of both sustenance and harm, and the image of a bleeding

landscape mirrors the social injury experienced by [its] residents” (344). In the following passage, for instance, Esch narrates the history of her family’s property, calling attention to the hegemonic structures that render it debilitated and abused:

My mama’s mother, Mother Lizbeth, and her daddy, Papa Joseph, originally owned all this land: around fifteen acres in all. It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money. Ward 14

Given the aforementioned instances in *Salvage the Bones* in which Esch’s experiences mimic natural processes, it is logical to presume that the Pit—an “overlooked, liminal zone of... neglect”—shapes and mirrors Esch’s identity in traumatic ways (Bares 25). Like the plundered land she lives upon, Esch withstands the plunder of her physical body. That is, in the same way that Papa Joseph “let [white men] take all the dirt they wanted,” Esch consents to bodily theft: “he started touching me... and it was easier to let him keep on touching me than to ask him to stop” (Ward 23). However, it is important to note here that Esch does not characterize the *Pit* in terms of inherent dysfunction or debility or deficiency. Instead, she emphasizes “the racialized economic conditions that have historically *produced* debility”—ecological abuse, predatory capitalism, and racial inequity (Bares 26). For Esch, the Pit is not fundamentally useless; rather, it is the product of “ruthless acquisitiveness [and] environmental exploitation” (Bares 26).

By extension, Esch's inferior alignment with nature (i.e. her status as a poor, pregnant, black woman) is not inherent, either; rather, it is produced by dominant social and cultural forces. In fact, according to Annie Bares, Ward "describes Esch's pregnancy in reference to a debilitating lack of access to healthcare and to information about sex"; consequently, "*Salvage the Bones* flips the script on mainstream narratives of black motherhood, forcing readers to consider how political and economic systems produce pregnancy as a form of debility in certain populations and how reactionary cultural logics sustain debility" (27). In one of the novel's pivotal passages, for instance, Esch describes her limited options post-pregnancy:

I've heard girls at my school talk.... [They] say that if you're pregnant and you take a month's worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car and it hits you low enough to call bruises, it could bring a miscarriage. Say that this is what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what's inside of you.... I wouldn't be able to afford the birth control pills; I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have the money to get them if I did, ... and have never been to the Health Department. Who would bring me? ... These are my options, and they narrow to none. 102-103

This reflection (particularly the phrase "nobody wants what's inside of you") is indicative of the ways in which dominant masculinism renders black women disposable. Crucially, however, Esch's pregnancy is not an individual failing; instead, it is the cultural product of "discriminatory social... practices and environments" (Cella 578). Indeed, Esch's limited socioeconomic choices are products of the "nobody"s who deem her (and her child) as throwaway. Cognizant of these

realities, Ward casts blame on the unjust cultural narratives that justify inequality, restrict reproductive access, and bar vulnerable populations from full human community.

As aforementioned, metanarratives of human domination are enforced on a conceptual level. However, their implications are nevertheless real. Consequently, Esch's symbolic inferiorisation manifests itself in tangible ways: when Hurricane Katrina finally arrives, Esch is rendered particularly vulnerable to its effects—both physically and socially. By subjecting Esch to tangible environmental and social harm, Ward illustrates the ways in which natural disasters “[exacerbate and expose]... scenes of injustice” among poor women of color (Bares 22). In other words, the “disproportionate ‘vulnerability bundles’” in Esch's life converge to ensure her material suffering (Enarson and Morrow 2) and impede “[her] ability to rebuild [her life] long after the storm (Jones-Deweever and Hartman 85).

Nowhere are the tangible effects of social vulnerability more salient than in the novel's climax, a jarring scene in which familial infrastructures collapse and the logic of dualism is affirmed:

the floods of Hurricane Katrina and Esch's pregnancy intersect when the latter becomes apparent to her father because her ‘wet clothes show the difference’ of her body (Ward 234). He reacts by pushing her into the water, nearly causing her to drown. In a moment where the reader might expect a linear narrative progression toward rescue, ... this scene of familial rejection represents the height of Ward's ruthlessness. Bares 32-33

At Esch's most susceptible state—in the center of a massive hurricane—Esch's own father refuses to engage in an ethic of kinship. Instead, he becomes complicit in the workings of dominant masculinity, relegating Esch to the status of inferior nature. Such a choice robs Esch

of human dignity, and in this single act of familial rejection, Esch morphs from daughter to detritus.

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Though Ward aligns Esch with nature in traumatic ways, she *also* draws explicit attention to the ways in which nature mirrors female *agency*, demonstrating that women are independent subjects who need not consent to dominant masculine ends. In line with Val Plumwood's intentional stance, Jesmyn Ward recognizes that a truly ethical response to inferiorised populations requires that nature be reconceived "as capable of agency and intentionality" and that humans be "reconceived in less polarized and disembodied ways" (Plumwood 5). Through Esch, Ward recognizes what dominant masculinism fails to consider: despite their continued subordination, black women have *already* found "fullness of human life," premised on new paradigms of mutuality and kinship (Pinn 104).

In accordance with these ethical principles, Jesmyn Ward emphasizes the ways in which Hurricane Katrina aptly mirrors black female agency. On the one hand, *Salvage the Bones* uses Katrina as a conceptual framework to show that "those who are already vulnerable... suffer [the storm's] effects most drastically" (Moynihan 564): as aforementioned, Katrina renders Esch, her family, and her community "all broken, all crumbled" (Ward 242). On the other hand, Ward's depiction of Katrina as a "murderous *mother*... with large, merciless hands" mirrors the ways in which womanhood embodies much *more* than mere vulnerability or victimhood (255). From Katrina—a natural force repeatedly correlated with womanhood throughout the novel ("like the worst, she is a woman")—Esch learns that her particular identity need not adhere to normative, masculine definitions; it is rather dynamic, nuanced, and complex (Ward 124). When examined in view of Val Plumwood's theories on independent subjecthood, this revelation makes all the

more sense: “earth others may be fearful or enticing, fruitful or bitter, intimate or indifferent, but *whose presence is always more than the nullity and closure of the [masculine] world presented by mechanism*” (Plumwood 140, my emphasis). Ultimately, Esch uniquely understands that Katrina is an independent entity “which places limits on the self and on the kinds of use which may be made of it”—an entity with unparalleled, defiant power (Plumwood 142). By the end of the novel, Esch begins to recognize these qualities in *herself*—exemplified by her brazen declaration that “[she is] a mother” amidst unsalvageable wreckage (Ward 258).

Furthermore, *Salvage the Bones* clears space for black women like Esch to articulate their stories and posit models of care that defy the “state or corporate actors who [create disasters and exacerbate] their consequences” (Bares 33). In this manner, Esch’s response to Katrina is consistent with ecofeminist and ecowomanist ethical modes. As womanist scholar Katie Cannon observes, “black women’s analysis and appraisal of what is right or wrong and good or bad develops out of the various coping mechanisms related to the conditions of their own cultural circumstances. In the face of this, Black women have justly regarded *survival* against tyrannical systems ... as a true sphere of moral life” (4, my emphasis). Here, I want to call attention to the word “survival,” similar in meaning to Ward’s “salvage.” According to Ward herself,

The word *salvage* is phonetically close to *savage*. At home, among the young, there is honor in that term. It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope. When you stand on a beach after a hurricane, the asphalt ripped from the earth, gas stations and homes and grocery stores disappeared, oak trees uprooted, without any of the comforts of civilization—no electricity, no running water, no government safety net—and all you have are your hands,

your feet, your head, and your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: you *survive*. You are a savage. 264, my emphasis

As Sinead Moynihan observes, “the Batistes salvage and reuse as much as possible, thus calling into question the status of that which Esch herself calls ‘rubbish,’ ‘refuse,’ and ‘detritus’ (565). Consequently, “whereas some post-Katrina discourses would frame the Batistes themselves as ‘so much garbage,’ Ward’s emphasis on both recycling and salvaging constitutes a powerful counter-discursive gesture” (Moynihan 565).

At the end of *Salvage the Bones*, Esch and her family lose everything. However, this deprivation is precisely why Esch becomes so morally strong. Because Esch occupies a position of powerlessness and sees herself “as one vulnerable life form among many,” she becomes better attuned to the suffering surrounding her—both human and nonhuman—and better qualified to imagine trauma-free relationships with the social and natural world (qtd. in Lloyd 255). As a result, she practices survival strategies that more accurately resemble “infrastructures of care” (Bares 31-32). “Surrounded by nature and connected to the animal world,” Christopher Lloyd observes, “Ward’s southerners are companion species in the face of ecological and sociological collapse.” As Esch and her family shelter from the hurricane, for example, Skeetah tells Esch, “‘Everything need a chance, Esch... Everything.’” (Ward 214). This statement is perhaps the novel’s moral core—a reminder of the human necessity to “remember and act in accordance with a deep connection to all life” (Pinn 104).

Esch’s respect for all life manifests itself in China: though Esch’s and China’s identities certainly reflect mutual trauma and tension, they are *also* “mutually constructive” (Lloyd 254-255). When China births puppies, for example, Manny assumes that she has descended into a state of weakness: “Any dog give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don’t think it.

Take a lot of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female” (Ward 96).

However, with a knowing glance towards Esch, Skeetah responds, “You serious? That’s when they come into they strength. They got something to protect That’s power” (Ward 96). By focusing on these positive convergences between black womanhood and animal life—namely the strength that arises from motherly instinct—Skeetah deconstructs epistemologies of female disadvantage and implicitly affirms Esch’s worth. Rather than define motherhood (both human and nonhuman) in terms of inferiority and disability (as Manny does), Skeetah recognizes that care, nurturance, and kinship are legitimate sources of female agency and power. These positive correlations carry into the novel’s final lines, in which Esch describes China in a way that emphasizes her resiliency—as female, as mother, as hurricane survivor: “[Skeetah] will look into the future and see [China] emerge ... , beaten dirty by the hurricane so she doesn’t gleam anymore, ... but alive, alive, alive” (Ward 258). Through this account, Esch indirectly affirms *herself*: like China, she “[learns] to crawl... [and] salvage” despite being deemed “precarious, creaturely, and throwaway” (Ward 255, Lloyd 256).

For Esch, salvaging, survival, and kinship are most prominent in the role of motherhood. As a black woman, Esch shoulders the responsibility of bringing a child into a disaster-prone world—a world organized according to hierarchical dualisms and stacked against the survival of disenfranchised communities. Without access to reproductive healthcare or other institutional support, Esch nevertheless decides to sustain life and render it meaningful. That is, Esch “[does] the only thing [she] can”: she survives, folding her child into an infrastructure of kinship in which community members serve as caregivers (Ward 264). Furthermore, by giving her child a family name—Jason, after her brother, or Rose, after her mother—Esch “reveals how

infrastructures of care... are... replicated through kinship” and function as “desirable, imaginative forms of ‘social recuperation’” (Bares 34).

Finally, Esch embodies the ecowomanist call to “share dialogue,” remembering rightly the trauma she endured and transforming that trauma into a form of resistance. For example, as Esch surveys the extensive damage left by Katrina’s winds and rains, she gathers shards of glass with the intention of crafting them into a narrative: “I will tell [Skeetah] this. *This was a water bottle*, I will say. *And this, this was a window. This, a building....* I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and *tell the story* of Katrina” (Ward 254-255). Here, the reader’s task is to hear Esch’s story and “use it to demand changes in the systems of racism and patriarchy that circumscribe American life” (Harris-Perry). That Esch’s audience isn’t large or public is perhaps Ward’s point: truth need not come from prominent, high places in order to dismantle unjust hierarchical systems. Despite her low social standing, Esch is revolutionary.

Through Esch—at once inferiorised, independent, and resilient—Jesmyn Ward demonstrates that black women are not adequately valued as full human subjects with valid desires, needs, and talents. Though these disparities manifest themselves most prominently after natural disaster, they are, in reality, *daily* challenges—daily violations of human dignity. As natural disaster experts Elaine Enarson and Betty Morrow observe,

Images of tearful and exhausted mothers... reinforce dualistic notions of women’s subordination and male power.... Less self-evident is the instrumental and proactive work of women and the disaster-relevant skills and knowledge developed by women’s daily lives. Typecast as hapless victims..., women are in fact... present in every disaster response as mitigators, preparers, rescuers, caregivers, sustainers, and rebuilders. 6-7

What might happen if these roles were validated rather than dismissed, valued instead of inferiorised? Throughout *Salvage the Bones*, Esch answers these questions by positing productive models of community and kinship. Indeed, she recognizes that community rebuilding starts with recognizing the dignity inherent in *everything* (in the most expansive definition of this word), practicing active kinship, and salvaging resources rather than discarding them. By casting those around her—her unborn child, China, the land itself—as kin rather than disposable wreckage, Esch creates the necessary space for “earth others” to speak their truths.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Nothing clarifies our priorities like a crisis. As social facades fall away, we're left with our bare, foundational ideologies. At the time of this writing, for example, the Coronavirus is sweeping through the United States, destabilizing thousands of lives. Naturally, pleas for normalcy circulate in our homes, on our social media accounts, and in the press. However, as poet and activist Sonya Renee Taylor reminds us, "Normal never was. Our [pre-disaster] experiences are not 'normal'—other than the fact that we've normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack." Though large-scale disasters such as the Coronavirus negatively impact all demographic groups, ideologies premised on hate and hierarchy force our nation's most vulnerable—people of color, people in poverty, women, and caregivers—into positions of further precarity.

Crises such as these are not new. In fact, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* demonstrate that structural inequities based on race, class, gender, and nature are enduring and timeless. From 1928 to 2005 to the present day, precious little has changed for those occupying the bottom of the Western hierarchical ladder, especially when it comes to natural disasters. That is, as Americans, we have failed—repeatedly—to meet the needs of our most vulnerable. In analyzing hurricanes in both of these novels, I have attempted to show that "dualistic notions of women's subordination and male power" have become normative ideals, rendering black women especially at risk of suffering environmental damage (Enarson and Morrow 6). Inferiorised as nature, brutalized in quotidian ways, and denied a voice in the process of disaster recovery, black women have borne the brunt of environmental trauma for centuries. Accordingly, both Zora Neale Hurston and Jesmyn Ward assert that natural disasters are

premised first and foremost on *human* domination—a “failure ... to remember and act in an accordance with a deep connection to all life” (Pinn 104).

However, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Salvage the Bones* also demonstrate that black women’s moral strength is timeless, too. Though hurricanes are indeed “definitive [events] revealing the inequalities of society, ... the women who endured [these storms] are more than ... survivors: they are workers, mothers, daughters, aunts, pastors, doctors, friends, and congregants” (Harris-Perry). As Zora Neale Hurston understood almost a century ago, and as Jesmyn Ward undoubtedly understands now, black women are not simply the products of their trauma; they are *also* vital community members who possess lifestyles premised on mutuality and respect. As such, Hurston and Ward’s novels reveal black women’s remarkable ability to sustain life, articulate stories of care, pose more productive models of ecological stewardship, and exemplify kinship amidst the basest social and environmental oppression. Why, then, have we failed so miserably to value black women as intentional and autonomous beings?

We’ve failed, in part, because we have forgotten that all living things are intimately connected in a web of mutuality. In short, we have forgotten how to practice empathy.

However, fiction is a powerful counter-discursive tool. That is, novelists like Hurston and Ward provide us with excellent templates for re-learning empathy and, by extension, reversing the traumatic cycles associated with oppressive hierarchical structures. On the one hand, fiction poses the risk of “[making] already vulnerable persons into little more than characters in a story” (Harris-Perry). On the other hand, however, the advantages of fiction far outweigh the disadvantages: as Melissa Harris-Perry notes, “literary parallels can reveal truths that might otherwise be obscured.... Literature crafts a specific story to reveal a universal truth.” Here, *specificity* makes fiction transformative. That is, to empathize with a single character is to walk

in another's shoes. It is to live a life different than one's own. It is to recognize that behind every natural disaster or national tragedy lies an individual testimony. Whatever the next iteration of environmental or social trauma will be, the characters crafted by Zora Neale Hurston and Jesmyn Ward have called me to better vigilance.

How, we must take the lessons we've learned from fiction and transform them into a comprehensive politics. After all, in line with the aims of ecowomanism, storytelling is a perfect vehicle for "taking courageous action for environmental justice" ("Sacred Blood"). By discovering the dignity of a few—in this case, Esch and Janie—the next natural step is to widen our reach, affirming the lives of *all* in our real, non-fictional lives. Concretely, these transformations might look like more conversations about environmental justice, more access to institutional aid for our nation's most vulnerable, and more policies that treat black women as instrumental community members with instrumental ideas. If black women were given vital roles on community, state, and national levels, America might be better equipped—as a whole—to implement better social policies premised on kinship.

When the next natural disaster strikes, let us not return to "normal." Let us instead seek new visions of environmental justice that extend "beyond that of powerless inclusion in nature, beyond that of reaction against... exclusion from culture, and towards an active, deliberate and reflective positioning of [women] with nature against a destructive and dualising form of culture" (Plumwood 39). Let us seek new ecological paradigms that close the artificial gaps between human and nature, male and female, white and black, self and other. Finally, let us free ourselves from futile power struggles and imagine more sustainable futures for all.

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