WRITING THE GROTESQUE BODY IN JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES*

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ABSTRACT

In her work, Jesmyn Ward has revitalized the Southern Gothic tradition and its tropes to better reflect the realities of Black American life in the 21st century. This essay explores the reconfiguration of the grotesque body in Ward's sophomore novel, Salvage the Bones, which follows an impoverished Black family in Mississippi in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. In contrast to her literary predecessors, Ward defines the grotesque as a state of debility imposed on Black bodies and then deemed uniquely problematic to them as a class and race, rather than the result of centuries of structural oppression. As such, she understands the trope as encompassing far more than bodily or intellectual difference, the way in which it was previously utilized by Southern writers like William Faulkner and Carson McCullers. Instead, Ward theorizes the grotesque as a biopolitical state, in which populations that do not conform to the status quo, and specifically the dominant capitalist mode of production and consumption, are driven to the margins and their lives deemed expendable.

Keywords: African American Gothic, Jesmyn Ward, Southern Gothic, Hurricane Katrina, grotesque

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, amidst the turmoil of the Black Lives Matter protests spurred by the killings of unarmed Black Americans by police, a new literary and cultural phenomenon has been on the rise. The new African American Gothic is a school that engages with the legacy of American slavery and racism, while at the same time linking it to the present and to the precariousness of Black American lives. Jesmyn Ward, twice-winner of the National Book Award, has

been on the frontline of this emerging school of writers and artists.[1] Her work has contributed to the development of the new African American Gothic by reviving the modes of the so-called Southern Gothic, a tradition preoccupied with the "haunted" South and its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. A native Mississippian, in her oeuvre Ward seeks to historicize the Southern Gothic, revising its tropes to expose the continuing haunting of the present by past racial prejudice, discrimination and violence. Thus, she revitalizes the genre while pioneering a new school of writing that shifts the focus from White subjects to the ongoing Gothicism of Black existence and the precariousness of Black lives in America. This essay explores one aspect of this revisionist project by examining how Ward repurposes the familiar Southern Gothic trope of the grotesque body in her novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011).

In contrast to her literary predecessors, Ward defines the grotesque as a state of debility imposed on Black bodies and deemed uniquely problematic to them as a class and race, rather than the result of centuries of structural oppression. As such, she understands the trope as encompassing far more than bodily or intellectual difference, as it was previously utilized by Southern writers like William Faulkner and Carson McCullers. Instead, Ward theorizes the grotesque as a biopolitical state, in which populations that do not conform to the status quo, and specifically the dominant capitalist mode of production and consumption, are driven to the margins and their lives deemed expendable. In *Salvage the Bones*, the grotesque manifests physically in the changing body of a pregnant teenager, Esch Batiste, and in the animal imagery that is repeatedly used to describe her and her family. The Batistes live on the margins of society, in a dilapidated plot of land nicknamed "the Pit," trapped by poverty and lacking prospects as Hurricane Katrina approaches. Their financial and social status is seen as a grotesque by mainstream society, and Esch's body is initially described as embodying and carrying the effects of this othering. The result of this othering is that people like the Batistes are stripped of their political existence—what in *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben termed *bios*—and are living in a permanent state of *zoē*, or bare life, which is defined as grotesque by mainstream, typically White and able-bodied society (Agamben 10).[2] Agamben's theory expanded on the Greek concept of *zoē*, meaning biological life, and *bios* which encompassed one's political existence as a citizen. In this context, *bare life* implies loss of political subjectivity and the denigration of life to its barest biological components. Ward exemplifies this theory through the Batistes, who live in a state of survival, forgotten by the State. Hurricane Katrina exacerbates the precariousness of their existence and exposes how devalued and grotesque the lives of Black Southerners are to the eyes of the State. By incorporating Agamben's theory alongside

[1] Other contemporary writers who work within the framework of the African American Gothic include Colson Whitehead, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Maurice Carlos Ruffins, and Reginal Bradley, to name a few.

[2] Agamben's concept of *zoē* and *bios* has been previously utilized by Holly Cade Brown in her "Figuring Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker." Brown examines the effects of Hurricane Katrina through Agamben's lens, yet the concept has not been applied in the context of Ward's revisionism of the Southern Gothic.

the language and imagery of the Grotesque, Ward modernizes the trope to better reflect the reality of contemporary Black American life in the South and the ways in which it remains subject to disenfranchisement and othering along both racial and economic lines.

I. The Gothic and the American South

The Gothic, a nebulous term which has greatly evolved since its inception in eighteenth-century British literature, has always had a close relationship with race and class. In the early British tradition, the Gothic focused on "the past, and immoderate, ungovernable passions" and was marked by familiar tropes such as ruined castles, supernatural elements, dark villains and innocent maidens (Weinstock 1). Its early iterations were often allegories for the decline of rigid British class structures and critiques of the aristocracy. However, the genre became particularly problematic when it was exported to America and lost its usual referents: gloomy castles, ghosts and hapless heroines paled beside the wilderness and the natural and human threats the first settlers encountered in the New World. Rejecting the structured class system of Britain, America was seemingly founded on Enlightenment ideals of reason and equality, characteristics antithetical to the traditional Gothic. However, what links the two traditions is the legacy of slavery, as the emergence of the genre coincided with the height of the slave trade. Slavery is widely acknowledged as the "central historical context that produces the Gothic and against which it responds," from the eighteenth century to the present (Goddu 71). In 1960 Leslie Fielder even argued that the American literary tradition "is almost essentially a gothic one," given the nation's two particular sources of culpability: "the slaughter of the Indians and the abominations of the slave trade" (142,144). His interpretation, which introduced the question of race in the discussion of the American Gothic, calls for a sociohistorical reading rather than a psychological one. These two "original sins" in the Edenic garden that was newly-settled America did not correspond with the nation's self-mythologizing of innocence and new beginnings. Thus, instead of being defined in national terms, the American Gothic became most recognizable as a set of regional forms, including the Southern Gothic, which developed following the Civil War. The South's literary and material history, that is, the Gothic's relation to America and the South, is critical in understanding the scope and importance of Ward's new approach to the Southern Gothic tradition.

The adjective "Southern" gives regional specificity to the Gothic and displaces any unsavoury aspects of American history onto a single part of the nation. Teresa Goddu notes that the South is "identified with gothic doom and gloom…[and] serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself… a benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery" (3). Similarly, David Punter and Glennis Byron describe the Southern Gothic as "investigating madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities" (Punter and Byron 116-7). The South was constructed in opposition to the

North, reaffirming the latter's identity as the progressive, true face of America. Similarly, Blackness was constructed in opposition to Whiteness: the slave master projected his own brutality onto the Black slave body, where he could whip it out of existence (Wester 57). For Black Southern writers, then, a version of Southern Gothic limited to the works of William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor is incomplete, particularly if we consider their portrayal of Black characters. As Ward said of Faulkner, "the failures of some of his Black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion, how they fail to live fully on the page—work against that awe [of him] and goad me to write" (Hoover 2). The legacy of Southern Gothic informs the writing of contemporary Black authors who are keen to explore the history and literature of their nation, whether they are Southerners or not. However, instead of fixating on the South's past sins and glories, many contemporary Black writers refocus those narratives on the lingering effects of slavery and racism in contemporary America.

For Black as well as White writers, "Southern Gothic can be understood as a genre that is aware of the impossibility of escaping racial haunting and the trauma of a culture that is not just informed by racial history, but also haunted and ruptured by it" (Wester 25). This haunting emerges through a fascination with the grotesque, usually manifested in the bodies of marginalized characters as a form of disability or disfigurement, as well as ghost stories and a sense of claustrophobia and impending doom inherent to the Southern landscape. Such elements have long been evident in the works of African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Jean Toomer and Richard Wright. Indeed, Wright famously noted in his introduction to Native Son (1940) that "if Poe were alive [in the poor Black districts of Chicago in the 1930s], he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him" (31); in other words, for Black Americans, life was and is a Gothic tale that needs no imaginary embellishment.

Ward, a native of DeLisle, Mississippi, is unusual amongst contemporary Black Southern authors in that she left the South and, despite her ambivalence about the region, returned to raise a family. Ward acknowledges that she feels at home in Mississippi and that its context has shaped who she is, but at the same time "I dislike the fact that I have to bear up under the weight of the history of this place, of the history of slavery and Jim Crow and sharecropping, the history of this place that made me" (Block). Taking cue from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Ward situates her three novels—Where the Line Bleeds (2008), Salvage the Bones (2011) and Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017)—in the fictional Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage, inspired by her hometown. All three novels have contemporary settings, detailing the lives and hardships of rural Black families struggling with generational poverty, addiction, systemic racism and an inability to progress while haunted by the region's past.

II. The Grotesque Body

Salvage the Bones follows 15-year-old Esch as she grapples with the implications of her unplanned pregnancy in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. Ward situates the narrative

within the parameters and tropes of the Southern Gothic, including the grotesque, which takes on new meaning through her work. The grotesque is no longer simply the perceived, oftentimes shocking effect of physical difference, as found in the traditional Southern Gothic of O'Connor and Faulkner; instead, Ward's grotesque is the result of interpretation, of how dominant society observes and classifies populations deemed other and expendable, both in terms of race, gender, and political and financial status.

The grotesque has had a peculiar relationship with the Southern Gothic, and is particularly identified with the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. A concise definition of what constitutes the grotesque has been notoriously difficult to pinpoint, leading to Alan Spiegel bemoaning that the term has been "applied so frequently and so recklessly" that it has become "increasingly difficult to use [it] with any degree of clarity or precision" (426). Spiegel was one of the first critics to propose a definition of the grotesque, but one which is rather limiting: he posits that the term does not refer to a mood, style, or situation, but to a character type often found in Southern fiction that is always a "physically or mentally deformed figure" (428). For Spiegel, what makes characters—such as Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*—grotesque, however, is their transcendence of their disability, to the point where readers can evince pity and compassion for them. As such, the grotesque character is:

> …a thorn in the side of the society which produced him. His existence tells the society something about itself whether it wishes to acknowledge his presence or not. He informs society that his deformity is *real,* that it is *there*, and will continue to be there because it is society's deformity [which produced it] as well as his own (Spiegel 431, emphasis in original)

Spiegel's definition uncovers the ableism inherent in the grotesque trope. Characters with mental or physical disabilities are used either for shock value or as objects of pity for the presumably able-bodied reader, or as vehicles for the writer's attempt at social criticism. As such, these characters tend to remain one-dimensional, their function and importance limited to their disability which forms the entirety of their personality.

Other definitions of the grotesque emphasize its radical potential as a disruptive agent operating at the margins of society. Mikhail Bakhtin links the grotesque with a body of "unashamed excess, anathema to authority and pious austerity" (303), a body that interacts intimately with the world and challenges its limits and hierarchies. Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as potentially radical, able to disrupt social homogeneity, yet his definition implies a certain loose morality and inability to control individual urges, stereotypes often levelled at Black Southerners who were typically the objects of grotesque characterization. As such, the grotesque figure is a politically and socially charged symbol. As Patricia Yaeger has argued, grotesque bodies "provide a particularly condensed and useful figure of thought for presenting a set of problems plaguing the South," such as oppressive ideals of womanhood and the pervasive memory of slavery and racial violence (25). For Bakhtin and Yaeger, these bodies also have the potential to disrupt the status quo, disclosing "the potentiality of an entirely

different world, of another order, another way of life" (Bakhtin 48). In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward appears to agree that there is potential for transformation through what others deem grotesque and thus aligns herself with this more radical tradition. However, she remains realistic about the difficulty of overcoming the stigma attached to the notion of the grotesque body, particularly as it is linked with years of intergenerational trauma.

III. Debility and Bare Life as the Modern Grotesque

In her use of the grotesque, Ward challenges its traditional and problematic equation of physical or mental disability with either moral corruption or child-like innocence. Her characters are not in the vein of Faulkner's innocent Benjy or O'Connor's nihilistic Hazel Motes. Instead, Ward works within the framework of what Jasbir Puar has termed "debility": that is, her aim is to capture the felt effects of "biopolitical control of populations that foreground risk, prognosis, life chances… and capitalist exploitation," which is "endemic, perhaps even normative to disenfranchised communities… a banal feature of quotidian existence that is already definitive of the precarity of that existence" (16). Debility implies a larger scheme of structural violence that marginalizes and oppresses certain groups and communities, manifesting tangibly as lower-quality infrastructure and schooling, fewer job opportunities, poverty, drug abuse and even premature death at the individual level. In *Salvage the Bones*, debility partly manifests as lack of healthcare which results in the death of Esch's mother in childbirth, and in Esch's little knowledge about her own pregnancy and options. She cannot access birth control, saying "I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have the money to get them if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department" (139). Her peers seem as uninformed as she is, with Esch recalling snippets of conversations from other girls about how to terminate an unwanted pregnancy:

> 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…This is what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you. (138)

Esch concludes that "these are my options, and they narrow to none" (139). Thus, debility is figured as a form of intergenerational trauma, carrying over from mother to daughter, whose effects white writers would deem grotesque. Ward, however, sees these characters as victims of a system of debility and structural violence. She does not interpret the seemingly grotesque aspects of their bodies or their situation as indicators of their moral value, but rather the product of an environment of sustained violence.

Puar's concept of debility is closely related to Agamben's theory of *zoe* and *bios*, the two states of human existence. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben elaborates on the concept of the "sacred man," a figure in Roman culture who has lost his rights to citizenship and can thus be killed by anyone with impunity, but cannot be sacrificed for religious purposes. As such, *homo sacer* is someone living outside the law, not afforded its protection, and must thus live outside of

society. Those deprived of a political existence are living in a state of *zoe,* "bare life," while those participating in society are part of *bios*, political life. Esch and her family are living in a state of bare life as illustrated, according to Holly Cade Brown, in the complete disregard the State has for their survival before, during and after Katrina's landfall. Brown argues that "while the state in contemporary democratic societies is often portrayed as a force of protection, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrates that the power of the modern state rests on a process of exclusion that can leave bodies to be rendered dispensable at any time" (1). When applied to Ward's revisionism of the Southern Gothic grotesque, however, bare life extends to individual autonomy, or lack of thereof, as well as the state's disregard of those bodies. In other words, bare life can be the result of debility, which begins on a structural, state-level, but is ultimately experienced individually in the bodies of those affected and in the lack of choice and autonomy afforded to them. As pregnancy and motherhood are central themes of *Salvage the Bones*, debility and its grotesque effect are most clearly visible on Esch's body. It is clear, however, that this cycle did not begin with her, but that she is part of a chain of intergeneration trauma, passed on from her mother and stretching far to the past.

IV. Grotesque Motherhood in *Salvage the Bones*

The grotesque can be, then, defined as the result of loss of bodily autonomy due to an already precarious existence, an effect of living in a state of *zoe* instead of *bios*. In *Salvage the Bones*, that loss is exemplified through an unplanned pregnancy which literally takes over and transforms Esch's body. In a family dynamic partly inspired by *As I Lay Dying*, young Esch finds herself pregnant, a precarious position made even more so because of her mother's death in childbirth a few years back. Motherhood and pregnancy, typically perceived as joyous life events, are figured as a form of debility and grotesquery for poor, Black Southern women like Esch. Lacking proper healthcare and familial support, and feeling ashamed of her condition, Esch retreats into herself and interprets her pregnancy as grotesque and the child she is carrying as a parasite intent on taking over her body. She sees herself as a confirmation of White society's stereotypes of young Black women, and its "disdain for the ghetto and its outlaw sexualities… premised on an unspoken threat of an association with disability" (Erevelles 72). These "outlaw sexualities," relegated to poor Black communities, echo Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque as a body of unashamed excess, reinforcing the stereotype of Black women as sexually insatiable and reckless. Thus, Esch's pregnancy is seen by White society as the result of her own recklessness and sexual profligacy, a condition only slightly better than an animal.

Ward depicts the bodily processes of pregnancy and birth viscerally and at times even grotesquely, illustrating her understanding of the South as a "place where Black people were bred and understood to be animals" (Ward 5). *Salvage* opens with the family's pit-bull, China, giving birth to a litter of puppies, effectively introducing the theme of motherhood through an animal. The physicality of the birth is rendered in stark realism, with China "turn[ing] on herself," snarling, her sides rippling and then "she seems to be turning herself inside out" and

"splits" as she delivers (Ward 1,4, 9). Watching the birth, Esch thinks "that is what killed Mama" (10), while delivering her last child, Junior. Esch recalls her mother, "chin to chest, straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try and stay inside her, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born" (10). In her final moments, Esch's mother "shook her head…raised her chin to the ceiling like an animal on the slaughter stump" (221). She does not speak to Esch, but looks at her for a last time, and Esch imagines her mother saying to her, "*Don't do it. Don't become the woman in this bed, Esch*" (222, emphasis in original). The grotesque descriptions of bodies in the act of turning in on themselves and transforming signify that motherhood is inscribed in Esch's mind as a life-threatening situation, one to be avoided at all costs, suitable only for animals and those privileged enough to be able to afford a safe pregnancy.

These animalistic, grotesque aspects of Southern Black life—and motherhood, in particular—are punctuated by moments of literal bodily damage, leaving characters maimed and deformed, seemingly conforming with the original definition of the grotesque as a form of physical disfigurement. Christopher Lloyd observes that Ward "is interested in the ways bodies are never quite entire, intact, or solid… Black southerners are complexly presented as precarious, creaturely and throwaway" (255). Ward maintains the parallelisms between humans and animals in a scene of shocking violence where China eats one of her puppies, occuring simultaneously with Esch's father losing a finger in an accident: "The blood on Daddy's shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China's mouth…Daddy's middle, ring, and pinkie finger on his left hand are sheared off clean as fallen tree trunks. The meat of his fingers is red and wet as China's lips" (190). Dogs are figured in the novel as stand-ins for humans, mimicking their behaviour, power dynamics, and social hierarchies. China's attack on the puppy is prefigured by a vicious dog-fight she is forced to participate in against the puppies' father, Kilo. The fighting dogs are all maimed in some form, with "sliced ears," "gashes on [their] shoulders" and multiple cuts on their bodies (242-3). When it is China's turn to fight, one of Esch's brothers objects, saying, "*How you going to fight her?... She's a mother!*" to which Skeetah, the eldest, replies "*And he's a father…and what fucking difference does it make?*" (247). Life has taught Skeetah and Esch that living is a struggle, and that relationships between men and women, mothers and fathers, cannot exist without violence.

Motherhood is denigrated from an almost holy, untouchable state, to simply a biological phenomenon that does not differentiate between humans and animals. The fight between Kilo and China is described in quasi-sexual terms; "they meet. They rise. They embrace. They bite, neck to neck" (255). However, this dance soon devolves into violence of a particularly gendered nature. Kilo notices China's teats, full with milk, and attacks. He "bows his head like a puppy to drink. But he doesn't drink. He bites…Her breast is bloody, torn. The nipple, missing" (253). Esch uses the human "breast" to describe China's teats, thus strengthening what she perceives as a connection between herself and the dog, the only two mothers in the novel. Kilo's attack is pointedly aimed at China's role as a mother and he deforms her by attacking

the symbol of her motherhood. The dogs seem to physically carry the psychic wounds inflicted on their owners by the everyday hardships of life and by each other's cruelties. Their grotesque deformities are inflicted upon them by a system of violence—dog-fighting—which is figured as a microcosm of larger society, with man pitted against man, dog eating dog. Ward takes the analogy a step further by drawing parallels between the dog fights and the antagonistic relationship between the sexes and the precariousness of being a woman and a mother in such an environment. Esch, after witnessing China's attack on her puppy, thinks to herself, "*Is this what motherhood is?"* (191 emphasis in original). She understands womanhood and motherhood as grotesque states, not simply because of the bodily changes they entail, but also because of the violence they seem to generate and attract. In other words, Esch understands how vulnerable she is bio-politically as a Black pregnant girl, living in poverty, branded deviant and grotesque.

However, despite the zoological imagery associated with Esch from the beginning, Ward makes it clear that she possesses a sophisticated inner-world that is deeply inspired by the environment around her and from her readings, which include Faulkner and Greek mythology. Esch recalls reading *As I Lay Dying* in ninth grade and getting an A for answering "the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*" (16, emphasis in original). Having also lost her mother at a young age, Esch understands Vardaman's need to mythologize his mother as a way of dealing with her death. Esch does not think her mother is a fish, but her ghost lingers in the periphery of the text and in the depictions of violent motherhood that recur in the novel. Esch's literary interests, then, influence the way she thinks about motherhood and her own pregnancy, which is initially described in Gothic terms, in the vein of Faulkner or Toni Morrison. Upon first discovering that she is pregnant, Esch thinks, "the terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach… There is something in there" (36). Later, when she vomits, the child is described as a mysterious thing clinging to her insides: "I cannot stop heaving up air and spit, but still I am not able to throw it all up. Inside, at the bottom, something remains" (48). The foetus is figured as an unknown parasite and Esch's womb almost like a haunted house, terrorized by an unseen ghost. The situation recalls Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where the ghost of the titular child returns to haunt her mother, Sethe. Like Sethe, Esch struggles to maintain a separate sense of self as the child takes over. The fear of birthing a monster, another common Gothic trope, is present in Esch's feelings about her pregnancy. Monsters often represent unwanted aggressive or sexual thoughts and thus embody what humans fear is evil and destructive in themselves. They are also "like caricatures –larger than life—… By seeing them this way," argues Barbara Almond, "we can deny their connection to our own impulses and feelings" (51). Esch's othering language when referring to her pregnancy and her fear of disclosing it to anyone reinforces this notion of the baby as something alien and hostile to her body, separate from herself.

Lacking any female figures to relate to, apart from China, Esch navigates her new, confusing state, by turning to Greek myth. Like other African American writers — including

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison —, Ward is drawn to the classics, although she complains that many readers and critics still assume that "the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as 'other'" (qtd. in Hoover 3). She therefore "wanted to align Esch with that classic text…to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage" (Hoover 3). As such, Greek myth gives Esch a framework through which to understand and contextualize her situation, placing her amongst a long line of women who were branded grotesque and deviant, but who persevered in the face of a patriarchal and racist society. The figure that looms throughout the text is Medea, notorious for murdering her children and becoming the quintessential symbol of monstrous—or grotesque—motherhood, but also the archetypal 'other': a witch and barbarian (non-Greek) in the eyes of Greek society, she is an example of how the oppressed victim will strike back against their oppressor.

Esch views her relationship with her child's father, Manny, as parallel to the one between Medea and Jason, romanticizing their affair, but also recognizing its toxicity. Manny is solely interested in Esch sexually and does not reciprocate her deeper feelings and Esch understands, but cannot fully accept it. Of Medea, Esch says, "But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her" (60). Esch is torn between her devotion to her family, particularly her older brother Skeetah, and her love for Manny, which mirrors Medea's dilemma, being forced to choose between her brother and Jason. In one version of the myth, Medea "kills her brother herself…chops him into bits: liver, gizzard, breast and thigh…" (225), an atomized list reminiscent of the myriad injuries on the fighting dogs' bodies. In fact, Medea is most closely related to China, both in her battle with Kilo and from committing infanticide. After the latter incident, Esch describes China as "bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea" (191) and the reader is left to wonder if Esch will follow her to a similar violent conclusion, given the parallelisms between the girl and the dog.

Medea's power is also linked to Hurricane Katrina, the inevitable conclusion to which the story is heading. Hurricane Katrina was often figured in the media as a "monster of the Atlantic" and Ward, who lived through the catastrophe, explains that "Medea is in Hurricane Katrina because [Medea's] power to unmake worlds, to manipulate the elements, closely aligns with the storm" (qtd. in Hoover 4). In the storm's aftermath, grotesque images of bloated bodies circulated in the media, bodies which Katrina had exhumed in a perverse kind of rebirth. Esch talks of Katrina as "the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes…" (337), highlighting the storm's power to both create and destroy. What was brought to the surface, however, were not only bodies, but also "racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy… in which entire populations are considered disposable" (Giroux 307). Lacking the resources and means to escape the storm, Esch's family ignores the call for evacuation and brace for its impact,

aware that they might lose their lives and livelihoods in the process. Their situation mirrors that of countless families in the wake of the storm, who were later blamed by the media and officials for not heeding the alarm, deeming their losses as the product of their personal choice and not the result of chronic, structural disenfranchisement. The storm highlighted existing inequalities and the environment of debility they were bred in which disproportionally target poor, Black Southerners. To use Giorgio Agamben's terminology, these people's lives were relegated to the status of *zoē*, bare, animalistic life, and their *bios,* their political existence as citizens, was excised. *Zoē* is the reality for grotesque characters appearing in Southern Gothic fiction, characters who exist in the margins and have no control over their lives and destinies. For Ward, their physical or mental difference is only the symptom, not the cause of this exclusion. What pushes these characters to the edges of society is their inability to "contribute to the prevailing consumerist ethic" (Giroux 309), their unwillingness or inability to participate in an economy of production and consumption that characterizes modern America. As Esch says, "Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes" (337), indicating that she knows the cycle of poverty and debility has not ended with the storm.

Despite the catastrophe, there is a subtle sense of optimism running through the later part of the novel. Katrina destroyed, but what followed was a form of rebirth, a renewed awareness of the faults and prejudices of the system and hopes of reform. Esch's changing attitudes towards her pregnancy indicate that the storm has brought about a reconfiguration of values and priorities. Toward the end of the novel, Esch's identification with Medea intensifies, but does not take the violent turn of the original myth. Esch confronts Manny about the pregnancy and forces him to acknowledge her:

> … all I have ever wanted, here. He is looking. He is seeing me, and his hands are coming around to feel the honeydew curve, the swell that is more than swell, the fat that is not fat, *the budding baby*, and his eyes are so black they are all black, and they are a night without stars. All I have ever wanted. He knows. "Fuck!" Manny yells, and he is throwing me up and off of him (195, emphasis added)

When she is finally seen for who she is, Esch can acknowledge the foetus as a "budding baby," despite Manny's disgusted reaction. In a later confrontation, when Manny questions the paternity of the child and calls her a slut, she erupts and attacks him: "This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (270). The fight between them mirrors the one between China and Kilo, but in this instance, it is Esch doing the damage, attacking and disfiguring Manny just as Kilo had done to China. She refuses to be stigmatized and have her motherhood and womanhood diminished, marked as grotesque and other for her state.

As Esch's approach to herself and her pregnancy change, the kindness of the people around her is also revealed, fuelled by the storm and the need to rebuild the community. When her father discovers the pregnancy amidst the chaos, he is not cross or disgusted, like

Manny; instead, he is gentle and understanding, saying only that she needs to see a doctor to "make sure everything's okay…So nothing will go wrong" (326), so Esch will not have to repeat her mother's fate. Her father's subtle interjection points towards a gradual break of the cycle of violence and intergenerational trauma that has marked the family's life. When asked by Big Henry, one of the neighbourhood boys, who the father is, Esch replies, "It don't have a daddy." Henry, though, answers, "You wrong… This baby got plenty of daddies" (254). Esch is not a single mother in the traditional sense, as she is supported by a community similar to that found in *Beloved* (1987). In Morrison's novel, that community comes together and their united song finally banishes Beloved's spirit. In *Salvage*, after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, the community's joint efforts not only rebuild what was lost, but also foster new life out of the debris. Thus, Esch's story moves from grotesquery to hope, from decay to regeneration.

V. Conclusions

Ward uses the conventions of the grotesque to consider the impact of addiction and teenage motherhood and their correlation with racial and socioeconomic factors in the rural South. In doing so, she writes against traditional Gothic narratives which cast Black people as "objects of discourse, rather than as social agents" (Wester 53) and which allowed White writers and readers to meditate upon complex realities and behaviours without having to claim responsibility for them. Her Gothic tales speak against the strictly sociological narratives imposed on Black communities. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), Ward presents statistics on poverty, drug addiction, police brutality and death rates within Mississippi's Black communities. What those sociological statistics tell her is that a Black life is worth nothing in the South: "in searching for words to write this story," writes Ward, "I found more statistics about what it means to be Black and poor in the South,"(433) more numbers than human stories. Ward insists on the Gothic essence of those disparaging numbers and statistics, noting that "We were bewildered. There is a great darkness bearing down on our lives, and no one acknowledges it" (250). Her work gives words and voices to the men and women deemed merely unfortunate statistics. Her oeuvre also reclaims the labels of "grotesque" and "savage" which Black Southerners have been time and again stigmatized with. According to her, "[savage] has a different meaning for us [Black Southerners.] For us it means that you're a fighter and that you're a survivor… We still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity" (Hartnell 212). Ward's characters are indeed thorns in the side of the society which produced them—but, she insists, they are also human. Her work demands that the reader not look away from their plight.

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