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When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's disenchanting America

An interview

In *Men We Reaped* (2013), Jesmyn Ward's recently published memoir, cars emerge as almost magical spaces of escape and communion, spaces of connection that are routinely denied people exposed to the rough end of American racism and a globalized, neoliberal economy that brands large numbers of US citizens "disposable." Cars become shelters, places of refuge that, as Ward explained to me – hesitantly – in an interview in November 2013, partially fulfil the function that churches once performed for an older generation of African Americans. They can become spaces of introspection, reflection, and connection. They also "symbolize freedom," and here lies the irony and the paradox, as Ward readily conceded: the "freedom" that cars have offered to Americans has since the Second World War led to urban sprawl, the atomization of communities, and the devastation of the environment.

Suburbanized car cultures have had the most catastrophic effects on impoverished African American communities who have often been left behind in decaying inner cities at the mercy of a shrinking tax-base. Nowhere were these developments more clearly highlighted than in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when disproportionate numbers of African Americans were left stranded in New Orleans in the late summer of 2005 because they did not own or have access to a car. The setting for Ward's writing is rural Mississippi and cars are essential to daily survival. Yet their magical function is unconnected to their practical purpose or the status they confer as commodities. At these moments the cars are often parked, or going nowhere in particular. The destination is not the point. In this sense they offer a refuge for those for whom, Ward's oeuvre seems to suggest, the linear and productive narrative of the American dream is no longer a viable fiction.

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) is one of the most compelling and certainly the most critically successful novelistic dramatization of Hurricane Katrina. Ward accumulated a number of awards and nominations following its success, most notably becoming the winner of the National Book Award for Fiction in 2011. *Salvage the Bones* importantly focuses on the experiences of Katrina victims residing along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and so decentres the experience of New Orleans that has come to dominate accounts of Katrina and its aftermath. While Ward's prose is strongly reminiscent of writers like William Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston, for whom "place" has played a primary role – and indeed has become a central character – in their work, Ward's native Mississippi avoids the representative clichés that have stalked New Orleans, along with the idea that the city is somehow exceptional.¹ By evoking a location that, in all its particularity, is not perceived as a national novelty – or national "other" – Ward's writing makes a very distinctive contribution to a long tradition of American letters that evokes the fall. The experience of reading Ward is not exactly that of a fall from innocence, but it does usher us into a disenchanted America.

This disenchantment might be said to be the exact opposite of the kind of fall that has cast a long shadow over literary constructions of 9/11 and their critical reception. When President George W. Bush cast pre-9/11 America as the virtual personification of the "Virgin Lands" mythology, he helped to establish a discourse that would be ritualistically repeated across all forms of media: that 9/11 violated US territory and innocence, that the nation had experienced a fundamental shift in perspective. It will never be the same again.² Many literary critics have argued that prominent US writers have been guilty of perpetuating essentially the same myth: of a traumatized nation that needs to retreat back into itself in order to negate the "other," non-American world that stalks the 9/11 moment.

According to critics like Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, US-authored 9/11 fictions represent “a failure of the imagination” (thus echoing the report of the 9/11 Commission which similarly identified “a failure of the imagination” with regards to US government intelligence). Centring on ahistorical and apolitical stories of individual trauma, these fictions “domesticate” the crisis and fail to interrogate the notions of difference, otherness and strangeness that might begin to address the incredible post-9/11 rallying cry: “why do they hate us?” As Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie put it in a 2012 article titled “Storytellers of Empire,” “your soldiers will come to our lands, but your novelists won’t.”³ This unwillingness to venture beyond physical or psychic barriers of the nation represent, according to these critics, a wilful ignorance in relation to US transgressions in the arena of foreign policy, and the maintenance of the national story of innocence that keeps the subject of the 9/11 attackers and the worlds that hover behind them “taboo” in the American imagination.⁴ These calls for a more globalized, empathic twenty-first century US literature challenge the ethical and political foundations of fictions that seemingly refuse to peer outwards.

This is not the place to assess the veracity of these attacks on US literary constructions of 9/11, although it does seem that these texts have been singled out for particularly fierce treatment, with little thought to the ways in which an examination of the neuroses of middle-class American domestic life might shed light on the problem of national insularity. But the suggestion that the only place for the US novel to look to - in order to confront an image that might contradict its sanctimonious claim to innocence - is an external other seems to miss the powerful internal challenges posed by events like Hurricane Katrina and writers like Jesmyn Ward. Ward’s work might similarly be read as a retreat inwards, but this movement is not one of domestication. Her works bring the reader into an intimate encounter with communities

who belong to a grouping that possibly has more claim than any other to call themselves “American,” but who have nonetheless been branded an internal other by a ruthless racist, neoliberal capitalist culture.

Ward’s first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), starkly charts the divergent paths of twin brothers following high school graduation. The one who manages to find employment performs back-breaking and ultimately unsafe labour at the local shipyard, his periods of rest dominated by the need to sleep. The other, bereft of employment opportunities, appealing or otherwise, slips into the hazy world of drug dealing. Both chart downward spirals from a moment that should be a rite of passage, entry into the world of work and progress. An industrial accident and violence leave Joshua and Christophe in a state of suspension at the novel’s end, the reprieve of the parked or destination-less car where life can at least tread water. The closing lines of the book describe Christophe imagining “mullet sliding into the obscure, mulch-ridden water”:

They would float along with the smooth, halting current that was slow and steady as a heartbeat. He could imagine them sliding along other slimy, striped fish and laying eggs that looked like black marbles as the sun set again and again over the bayou and hurricanes passed through, churning them to dance. He could imagine them running their large tongues over the insides of their mouths and feeling the scars where the hooks had bit them, remembering their sojourns into the water-thin air, and mouthing to their children the smell of the metal in the water, the danger of it. They would survive, battered and cunning.⁵

And the reader might have to learn this art, too. The experience of reading Ward is that of immersion into stories, words and images that simultaneously stick to you like mud and slide off like water. It is a lush prose that periodically threatens to abandon you to some of its starkest implications.

In this way Ward's oeuvre might be described as post-Katrina in its sensibility, one that depicts a slow-burning disaster that, in Katrina's immediate aftermath, was often obscured and distorted by the sensationalist footage of New Orleans that was in any case soon forgotten.⁶ *Salvage the Bones* plunges us into the world of the dehumanized, damaged and unloved black body; unlike the bloated bodies which floated in New Orleans for days after the storm, Ward's subjects are humanized through narrative. The natural and social worlds are entwined in the brutal image of a dog, China, massacring and eating her own puppies. "*Is this what motherhood is?*" asks Esch,⁷ with the storm arguably answering in the affirmative. Where 9/11 posited an external enemy, Katrina confronted the United States with a seemingly neutral force – an extreme weather event – that nonetheless unveiled an "enemy within." Where some identified this enemy as racialized poverty and government neglect, others opted to blame the victim, thus highlighting the fact that Katrina challenged all the divisions – between past and present, inside and outside, American and non-American – that 9/11 comfortingly consolidated. Ward's fictionalization of Katrina poses boundary collapses between human and animal, nature and culture, challenging the entire edifice of so-called "civilization" upon which national cultures rest.

Where *Salvage the Bones* is Ward's dramatization of Katrina, *Men We Reaped* is its harrowing backstory, a depiction of the "slow violence"⁸ that condemned five young black men known to Ward – her friends, cousin, and, at the book's heart, her brother – to die

between 2000 and 2004. This brutal story is not the globalized text of the post-9/11 literary-critical imagination, but rather one that charts the story of what Henry Giroux describes as those considered the “waste products of the American dream,”⁹ victims of the fall-out of globalization which outsourced US jobs overseas, decimating vast swathes of urban and rural America alike. It’s the story of those forced to reside under a system Michelle Alexander has described as “the New Jim Crow.”¹⁰ This is a world that has lost its redemptive gloss but one not bereft of hope: as Ward explained to me, there would be no narrative without this.

In the first few pages of the memoir, we are told that DeLisle, a small town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, was named “Wolf Town” by early settlers. “When people ask about my hometown, I tell them it was called after a wolf before it was partially tamed and settled. I want to impart something of its wild roots, its early savagery.”¹¹ Ward’s subsequent book is a journey into the heart of this savagery, a world of shrinking opportunities and soul-destroying poverty. The memoir is Ward’s attempt to make sense of the enormity of her own loss, to pay tribute to the hunted and begin the search for the “thing” – or, as the book suggests, the “nothing” - that is out there, waiting. This is a crushing social environment that deprives Ward’s subjects of any meaningful sense of the future. *Men We Reaped* demonstrates that this fatalism that stalks these young black men is horribly prophetic in a culture that allows them to die.

American literary endeavours that have wanted to highlight a nation that has lost its way is not new: this literary landscape is full of prophetic voices – “jeremiads” as they have come to be known in American studies - that have wanted to illustrate the gap between the American dream and the American reality. African American voices have played a very particular role in this project, so often positioned as whistleblowers in relation to the national myth.¹²

Witnesses not to a unique experiment in freedom, as the United States was imagined by its founders, but rather to the consequences of slavery, imperialism, state-sponsored terrorism, enduring racialized poverty. And yet, during the twentieth century, this narrative has been marked by a redemptive horizon. The idea of “America,” the dream of a meritocratic society where the conditions of your birth need not determine your destiny, sustains the prophetic economy of the jeremiad, even in the work of a writer like Toni Morrison, who has been so instrumental in reminding contemporary America of the horrors of slavery and its afterlife. Jesmyn Ward’s book signals a new departure in this context, whereby hopes for redemption give way to a theme for a less idealistic, more pragmatic age: survival. “We are savages,” the closing lines of the book read. “We who still live do what we must. Life is a hurricane, and we board up to save what we can and bow low to the earth to crouch in that small space above the dirt where the wind will not reach.”¹³

It was *Men We Reaped* - published in the US in September 2013 - that was on my mind when I met Ward in November 2013 at Tulane University, New Orleans, and learned about the refuge to be found in the vehicle that was once a sign of US progress and freedom.

Q. What motivated you to write this book?

A. Living through losing my brother and losing my friends was really traumatic. At the time, it felt like a violation. I was so young, in my early twenties. I was just coming out of that mindset when you’re a teenager that nothing bad will ever happen to you, or those you love. Suddenly the world was asserting that in all actuality things will happen to you and things will happen to those that you love. So I felt that it was something I had to write about because it was so momentous. And it seemed odd to me that these deaths just happened one after the

other. These were all young men, young people, that were dying. So I knew I had to write about it but I didn't want to write about it.

My agent was actually the first person to ever ask me: so have you ever thought about writing a memoir? And I said no I have not. And then she would ask me for these book proposals, and I'd write really bad ones, because I was trying to sabotage a book. So it wasn't until I finished *Salvage the Bones* that I began to think about perhaps writing a memoir again. And I knew that that's what it would be about, it would revolve around that time, between 2000 and 2004. But I still wasn't committed to doing it because I was scared, really. I knew there were things that I would dig up, and there were things I'd have to recount, that I hadn't yet squarely confronted. So I talked to my sisters. They both said that this is a story that needs to be told, this is a story that people need to read. This conversation with my sisters made it possible for me to create some distance, between my personal feelings about what had happened and the pain of living through it. It made me see the material as a reader might. It also made me understand the value that it might have in the larger world. Because this isn't the only place that this is happening - this isn't an exceptional story that is only happening to us, this is happening to communities across the United States.

Q. You write at the beginning of *Men We Reaped* that it was the non-linear structure that enabled you to write this story. Can you say a bit more about this?

When I wrote the essay that the memoir is based on, that's the way the essay came out. I wrote that entire essay – I only tweaked it a little after I wrote that first draft - in one night. I'd procrastinated the entire semester, so I began writing it at 9pm and I finished it at around 5am. That's the way that it came to me. I didn't really understand why it felt wrong for me to

think about telling the story in another way, in another order: chronologically or in a more linear fashion. I didn't understand it until I shared the work with my friends at Stanford, these really amazing, brilliant writers. One of them said it makes sense to me that it's structured in this way because you end it with the heart. I keep saying this and I know it sounds nutty, but it hurt me physically to think about telling the story in another way, there was a pain. And I think the reason I felt that was that I would be working against what was intuitive to me, and what was intuitive for me was to end with the heart, and with my brother. It was natural for me to end with him. That's why the story came to me that way.

Q. How does place, geography and the natural world inform your understanding of the stories you want to tell?

A. I keep hearing people saying "it's like place is a character." I understand that in one respect to mean that the place I write about is so vividly imagined, realized and detailed on the page, that it has a certain presence on the page and maybe it even affects the tone of what the reader is encountering. The other way that I understand place in fiction, and in creative non-fiction too – and I think I explicitly talk about this in the memoir – is that DeLisle, where I'm from, was originally called Wolf Town, and so there's that extended metaphor where I'm saying that sometimes I think the wolf is DeLisle, it's this thing that stalks us and that troubles us in our lives. I think that place is character and character is place. Because I feel like everything about who I am, the choices that I make, the choices that I think that I have, the way that I express myself, the way that I think – how that differs from what I will say, and how I have conversations with other people and my actions - I feel like all of that is informed by place. So it's something that I try to consider all the time in my writing.

For example, when I was writing Esch in *Salvage the Bones*, I would think about the ways that what she's seen, in the place where she's from, and how the culture in the place that she's from, would influence the way that she's seeing the world in those twelve days. On the level of language, I would think about what are the metaphors for what she would see, what are the similes that she'd see, what will stand out for her, what is informing what she's seeing, giving her context for what she's seeing. And then of course in creative non-fiction I think about place really affecting my life and my family – my mum, my sisters, my dad – affecting what we think of as possible.

It is especially true with my brother, and then with the other young men in *Men We Reaped*. They were my friends, and I knew them, but there was much about their lives that I didn't know, that I had to research. And something that was so striking to me over and over again when I was writing about them was how many of them dropped out of school, how many of them slipped through the cracks. And then had really pessimistic, fatalistic ideas about what their lives would consist of, and about their futures. And that was a real surprise to me when I was writing the book. I had not very well formed ideas about how the South was changing, how America was changing. How, for example, the kinds of jobs – and I write about it in the book – that my dad had, those jobs, when my brother grew up, just didn't exist anymore. And I knew that was part of the reason why my brother dropped out.

My mum was the one that told me my brother was going to drop out. I was immediately overwhelmed by worry for him. Because I thought: what is he going to do? What will he do for work? Because I knew in dim ways that the world was changing, and how the world was much different for him than it was for my father. And then writing the book of course really

clarified those things for me because I wrote about them – I had to examine them and look at them in a more objective way.

Q. On the topic of vulnerability to a world structured by a kind of “survival of the fittest” market ideology, in which many, especially those marked by race and poverty, face shrinking opportunities for social mobility, you deploy in all your work a strategy of comparing human beings to animals. Dogs come up a lot. I was particularly struck by the line in *Men We Reaped*: “We are savages.” This reads to me like a re-appropriation of rhetoric that has in other contexts been used to racist ends.

A. There is a rap artist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and he’s used the term in his songs before, claiming that he’s a savage – so it has a different meaning for us. For us it means that you’re a fighter and that you’re a survivor. And that you’ll do what you need to do in order to survive. And so the artist I’m thinking about, he’s thinking about it in terms of hustling and selling drugs basically. The way I wanted to use that term, especially in that part, is to say that we are fighters and we are resourceful. Even in the face of *this*, of the losses that we experience, of this entire interconnected pressure after pressure after pressure. The pressure of racism, the pressure of the history of racism, of economic inequality, of a popular culture that constantly tells you that you’re worth less. Even in the face of all that, we still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity.

Q. Dogs in particular have been important in your own life story. In your work, they make the most prominent appearance in *Salvage the Bones*. They are very powerful, and certainly qualify as characters. I wondered what it was about dogs that drew you to writing about them?

A. I have actually never owned a dog as an adult. Both my sisters and my mum have, and my dad of course has owned lots of dogs. I don't even think when they think of me they think I'm a dog person.

Q. As a reader I felt ambivalence about dogs. As a reader, you admire the dogs but they're also frightening.

A. Yes exactly and I think that's reflective of my experience, which I write about in *Men We Reaped*. I didn't realize until somebody pointed it out to me that the dog that attacked me when I was younger, Chief, was all-white. And then in *Salvage the Bones*, the dog that I'm writing about, China - who is this strange mix of devotion and gentleness, at least with Skeetah, and can be very violent, and is a really fierce dog, invested in being a canine - is also all-white. I didn't realize I was making that connection in my head. I wrote about them in *Salvage the Bones* because when I discovered Skeetah's character in a writing exercise, he was with China. She seemed like such an essential part of him. And they had this really strange, very devoted relationship that maybe - because I haven't owned dogs - I didn't really understand. But I'd witnessed this relationship my entire life - with my father, with my brother with his dogs, other people in the neighbourhood with their dogs. I hadn't fully understood the ways that dogs have really informed me and informed my life, and how embedded in the community they are, until I began working on the memoir. And that ambivalence is there: on one hand, I can love them and I can appreciate them. At least the aspects of their character that is very devoted and affectionate. And at the same time, I'm wary.

Q. This seems to have a parallel with the larger sense of the natural world: a world that can turn on you with little warning. I'd like to make perhaps an abrupt transition to a vessel of the "unnatural world" that seems to play a similarly constitutive role in community: cars. Cars in your work seem to be crucial as vehicles that transport, bridge, and create important spaces. Cars in some ways seem to encompass all that is wrong with the world, including catastrophic environmental effects and the atomization of community, particularly in the United States. But after reading your memoir I see cars can take on new and more positive meanings. Something very special seems to occur in cars in your work.

A. I think so. I feel that much of what happens with dogs happens with cars too – that a lot of that is just coming from another, very intuitive place. And so when I sit here and attempt to think about the role that they play, it makes me think about that last scene with my brother, or that thing that I hope, sometimes, that I hope will happen with my brother, so that I can revisit that reality again. In a way they symbolize freedom. But then also they become these places where we're able to be introspective and reflect and connect in certain ways. And so – and I know this is going to sound, again, nutty - it makes me think of the ways that church can function, or has functioned in the past, in the community. And it seems that for the young, that connection, that sense of intimacy - we don't get that in that environment anymore. And so a lot of that is happening for us in cars.

Q. Yes, as with churches cars can function as a release from a home that might sometimes feel unaccommodating, inhospitable, unhomey. Which in some ways leads me to New Orleans, another ambivalent placeholder in your work that isn't quite home. It can be a place of release but it's also the site of poverty and desperation. It doesn't seem to be central to any of your stories but it looms, interestingly I think, on the periphery.

A. I grew up with all the myths about New Orleans. At one time, when I was growing up, it was a murder capital. And because I grew up with that understanding of New Orleans I wanted to play with that in *Men we Reaped*, and tap into the reader's understanding of New Orleans, things that they may have heard about New Orleans, with reference with to it being a murder capital. I knew that the reader would come to the book with some of that - so I'm saying here are all those things that you've heard about New Orleans. But in actuality it seems like what is going on in the South, in the rural South, is just concentrated in New Orleans. It's not that it's not happening anywhere else: it's just concentrated in New Orleans because there are more people here. So I wanted the reader to be aware of that. Also, maybe in some ways I do feel about this city the way that I feel about dogs. On one hand I really love this city. It's a gorgeous place, it has such a rich history and culture. But then at the same time, I also know from my own childhood, and then of course my adolescence which I talk about in the memoir - when my dad was living here in New Orleans - it's still a place that's fraught with issues of racism and economic inequality and all of those things.

Q. You've written what many think is one of the most successful, if not the most successful, fictionalizations of Hurricane Katrina. Somehow, perhaps like 9/11, it's been a difficult one to write about. What do you think fiction brings to it – what does the process of fictionalization do?

A. I think that it can humanize. In coastal Mississippi, we didn't see what was happening in New Orleans. During that time I should have been teaching in Michigan, but instead I was stranded in Mississippi because of Hurricane Katrina. Getting to Michigan was a crazy process. My car and my sister's cars had been swept away by the flood, by the storm surge. I

had to get a ride over to Mobil, because that was the closest place that had a car rental company that was open. I then came back to my home town, packed up my sisters, my nephew, my cousins and some friends, and we all went to Michigan to wait out the storm until we got power back on the coast.

At home we'd had very little access to news, and the news that we did have access to through a little rabbit ear antennae was the local station in Mississippi, and they are notorious for being really conservative, and weren't even covering what was going on over in New Orleans. We didn't realize what was going on there until we were in Michigan. What was happening in New Orleans was so fraught, and of course it was really horrific. But at the same time people weren't really paying attention to what had happened along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where a different kind of Katrina, a different kind of catastrophe related to Katrina, had occurred. Whereas what happened in New Orleans was much more the result of a man-made disaster, in Mississippi it really was the hurricane itself that had devastated so much. Yet even though the catastrophes differed, the conversations that were going on about both disasters really ignored people, I felt. There was no humanity in the coverage.

Part of what I wanted to do in *Salvage the Bones* was to create real characters: Esch and her family were people who didn't evacuate for the hurricane and who struggled to survive the hurricane and were here throughout and for the aftermath. I wanted them to be as alive and as human and as complicated as they could be, on the page. So they would serve as a counterpoint to that conversation that had taken place after Katrina where people and their stories weren't really heard. It was all about policy issues and land-grabs. The human impact of the storm - I didn't see that represented.

Q. So fiction becomes a kind of antidote to the problematic media coverage of the storm, which often sensationalized and dehumanized storm victims in New Orleans while rendering those suffering elsewhere all-but invisible. At the end of *Salvage the Bones*, you deploy the language of a difficult and painful rebirth. I wondered how you imagined that – it's not the language of opportunity, which has been so used and abused in Katrina's aftermath. But there is still some kind of possibility for a future – a survival narrative.

A. In everything I write I like to at least leave the reader with something to hang on to – this was harder with *Men we Reaped*. I think there has to be hope in any story. Even though I know that might be a foolish impulse because hope can often make it easier for people to be deluded and to not deal with what is in front of them. But I do think it's important in fiction to end with hope. Hope equals meaning, and for me there has to be some sense of meaning to any story, to whatever I write. I was trying to communicate something that I had realized after Katrina. I didn't write for three years after Katrina, I couldn't. I was working at the University of New Orleans which is in New Orleans East – a landscape utterly devastated by Katrina. And I was living at home where so much of the landscape had also been completely devastated. At the same time a lot of my friends and some family members had actually relocated, they'd gone to Atlanta, they'd gone to St Louis, Texas, Houston, through FEMA, they'd moved to different places. You have this event that re-makes the landscape, that dissolves the landscape, and then it also seems to do the same thing to the community in a way, because it displaced so many people. So it was very hard for me after Katrina to write. I didn't write for three years, because I was depressed. I was driving back and forth through the east everyday where *nothing* was changing, it looked like the storm had occurred just the week before. And then I was living at home where everything was so changed. And I didn't have any hope. All I saw was that this really traumatic thing had happened, and it made me

realize that at any time a disaster can happen, and it can erase your home and your community. But at the end of those three years I realized that, yes, disasters can come along and they can totally destroy everything that you hold dear. At the same time, if you survive, you rebuild. People rebuild. They clean up, they attempt to make new homes and new communities. Things change. These awful events doesn't necessarily mean that there won't be any community or any home at all, anymore. You just have a new home, a new community. I had to learn that, and then once I learned that, that was what I was trying to communicate at the end of *Salvage the Bones*. There are new possibilities that can be, that can manifest.

Q. In relation to new possibilities that can present themselves in fiction - reading features in your writing as a form of escape, but there are a number of scenes in *Men We Reaped* in which people insist that what you're writing about is, on the contrary, something "real." Is there a tension here?

A. It's interesting because I did really use reading – and writing too – when I was younger to escape. It was something that was totally separate from my life, my community. When I first began writing stories, they were not at all reflective of who I was or where I came from. It was something that I again used to escape where I was. It wasn't until I went to college and wrote my admissions essay that I actually wrote something about the place that I was from. The response that I got from that essay was very positive: people were so curious about that place. It was then that I started to write about where I came from. So far in my career, as far as my published work goes, it's all centred in Mississippi or on the Gulf Coast. And I think that's because I feel a sense of responsibility to write about that place and to write about the people in my community because I feel like their voices have been absent. And I want them

to be present, to be visible. And I think they appreciate that. When I have readings at home, in Pass Christian – I haven't had a reading in DeLisle - my family come out and the community comes out, and they seem to like the fact that I'm writing about us. For the foreseeable future, at least for the next book, that's what I'll focus on. But after that, I want to write a children's book. Not a picture book, but a children's book, maybe for 8-12 year-olds. Something that is not really rooted in the place that I'm from in any way, but which works as an escape. I would like to write a book that can do for some little girl in South Dakota and rural Montana what literature did for me when I was that age.

Q. In *Men we Reaped*, which is just about as far from the fairytale as you can get, you address the African American literary canon. How would you position yourself in that canon, or any canon? Who are your literary influences?

A. [William] Faulkner is a huge influence, I really admire his work. I'm always amazed by what he is able to accomplish on the page. Although there are aspects of his work that frustrate me. Any time he is writing about a character of colour, the character development is usually dissatisfying to me because he doesn't really develop them as human beings. But he is a definite influence. Who else? Toni Morrison, definitely. Alice Walker was really important to me when I was younger, specifically *The Color Purple*. The first time I read *The Color Purple* I was in junior high I think, maybe 13 or 14. It's a first person point of view, a poor young black girl in the South that's telling the story. I had to read it in order to realize that this was possible. I thought a lot about Alice Walker and specifically *The Color Purple* when I was writing *Salvage the Bones*. Zora Neale Hurston has also been important. One of the biggest reasons I think she was a big influence of course was because of *Their Eyes were Watching God* which includes a hurricane at the end. I remember thinking about that when I

was writing *Salvage the Bones*, and wondering how I could possibly follow Zora Neale Hurston. I just did the best that I could. So I was thinking about the ways that she first wrote about natural disaster. But something else I really admire about her work is how she was so invested in making African American characters, African American communities, really central to the work. Her work was less about how those characters were encountering the larger world, and more about their particular world. So I think a lot about her, especially when I was writing *Salvage the Bones*. I really like Carson McCullers. For her time she was experimental, she was trying different things. I like how she's not afraid to write about characters who are misfits in some ways. I thought about her when I was writing Skeetah's character just because he is something of an outsider.

Finally, there's James Baldwin. I thought about him a lot when I wrote *Men we Reaped*. When I wrote the essay that was the seed of *Men We Reaped*, I had just discovered him and his essays, and I'd read *Notes on a Native Son*. What struck me was the way that he wrote about very personal issues and themes, but then at the same time he's writing about race relations in America. He's able to personalize them, and show the reader how these larger issues really bear down on a person, and on people's lives. And so reading him made me realize how the personal could be put to work in creative non-fiction, and made me want to attempt some of that in *Men We Reaped*.

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¹ See Barbara Eckstein, *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

² See Donald Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

³ Kamila Shamsie, "The Storytellers of Empire," *Guernica*, 1 February 2012: http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/ (accessed 25 July 2014).

⁴ See Fritz Breithaupt, "Rituals of Trauma: How the Media Fabricated September 11," *Media Representations of September 11*, ed. Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 67-81).

⁵ Jesmyn Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* (Chicago: Bolden Books, 2008), 238.

⁶ See Linda Robertson, "How Shall We Remember New Orleans? Comparing News Coverage of Post-Katrina New Orleans and the 2008 Midwest Floods" ed. Cedric Johnson, *Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 269-299.

⁷ Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 130.

⁸ See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁹ Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 24.

¹⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

¹¹ Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9.

¹² See David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

¹³ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 250.