

Post-Katrina African American Coming-of-Age Novels: A Study of Two Selected Novels

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Abstract—This paper focuses on the impact of Hurricane Katrina—which hit parts of the U.S. South, especially New Orleans, in 2005—on African American coming-of-age novels. In particular, we argue that Hurricane Katrina constitutes a watershed moment in African American coming-of-age narratives, bringing about changes in identity formation and self-realization concerns that are typically associated with pre-Katrina African American coming-of-age novels. To develop our argument, we study two post-Katrina African American coming-of-age narratives: *Ninth Ward* (2010) by Jewell Parker Rhodes and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward. We suggest that these two narratives exemplify those changes through conforming to the Black Radical Tradition, as theorized by Cedric Robinson. The two novels, we show, not only lay bare the systemic racism that came to the fore in the aftermath of the hurricane but also highlight African Americans' resistance strategies in the face of such racism.

Index Terms—African American coming-of-age novels, Black Radical Tradition, Hurricane Katrina, identity formation, resistance spirit

I. INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Katrina 2005 has had a huge impact on U.S. society, especially because it strongly exposed problems that have to do with infrastructure (such as the levees and lack of preparations for the storm), the governmental response (especially evacuation and transportation-related issues), reconstruction after the storm, and its psychological effect on children. Although all the people in the region hit by the hurricane were affected, some were affected more than others due to varied factors.

African Americans who already live in low economic and social conditions have lost more than others. Lee et al. write that “[L]ow-income African Americans...disproportionately experienced the greatest suffering” compared to all other citizens (2008, p. 5). Many African Americans inhabited the South, as they mostly work in the tourism industry (Johnson, 2011, p. xxvii). The centralization of the African American population in the South “made it impossible to ignore the racial disparities still prevalent in the United States” (Lee et al., 2008, p. 6). Further, O’Neil in “Broken Levees, Broken Lives, and a Broken Nation after Hurricane Katrina” explains that there have always been “policies that produce ... vulnerability to floods,” which “led to the concentration of poor African Americans in locations at risk of flooding” (2008, p. 92). Sharpe (2016), too, focuses on the enormous damage which African Americans go through during natural disasters due to “dysgraphic positioning of Black people via abjection everywhere” (p. 33). Being the most vulnerable in the face of the Katrina disaster brings to the surface the causes of such vulnerability: systemic racism, negligence of the South, and neoliberal policies.

In this context, children are the most vulnerable. Connolly (2012) states that accounts delivered by children indicate “a collectively shared experience of disaster” and “a record of the psychological and physical stresses of natural catastrophes on children” (p. 3). To help children overcome their fears, Smyth and Housen (2016) stress the importance of teaching novels about a historic event like Katrina to young children “because they offer a gripping view of what it means to live in a predominantly Black neighborhood affected by crime, drugs, and gangs” (p. 343). It is thus unlikely to separate what happened because of Hurricane Katrina from social/environmental injustice. In fact, disastrous events like Hurricane Katrina pinpoint questions of justice, equality, and humanity; reflecting on those questions often contributes to forming a collective consciousness that tends to be revolutionary and radical. Such a consciousness embodies stories of survival and resistance to unbearable conditions and carries the spirit of resistance that Robinson discusses in his book *Black Marxism: The Black Radical Tradition* (1983).

In it, Robinson argues against the sufficiency of Eurocentric Marxist theories of social change, as such theories lay claim to universality but exclude people of color at the same time. When he analyses the works of some radical thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois, C. R. L. James, and Richard Wright, he states that those thinkers express “[a] Black radical tradition ... in opposition to that civilization [European civilization] and conscious of itself” and highlight “the

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privations of racial capitalism” (1983, pp. 317-318). Their legacy emphasizes the fact that African Americans’ struggles for freedom and justice are ongoing, but for them to become more effective they have to be based on “an ideology of liberation” (p. 317). As such, resistance can turn into a legacy of survival and a strong urge to own one’s destiny and destination. It is with this spirit of resistance and liberation that we associate post-Katrina literary works.

Those literary works, particularly African American coming-of-age novels, addressed the hurricane and its aftermath. Several scholars studied those works from different perspectives. In *Ten Years after Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity* (2015), Marotte and Jellenik argue that what they call “Katrina narratives” help readers reflect on and critique “the ways that specific narrative structures inform our understanding and develop our [U.S.] cultural identity” (pp. ix). On the other hand, Lloyd’s article “Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of Southern Wild*” (2016) suggests that post-Katrina narratives bring into focus the intensification of the disposability of African American bodies in the aftermath of the hurricane under an ongoing racial order in the South.

While this paper benefits from these scholars’ perspectives, it has a more specific focus. It explores the way African American writers portray the impact of Hurricane Katrina on African American characters’ coming of age. We argue that Hurricane Katrina forms a turning point in African American narratives that is best represented and traced in coming-of-age narratives. In Rhodes’s *Ninth Ward* (2010) and Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), children struggle to understand themselves and the world around them amid a threatening hurricane while dealing with issues like self-image, poverty, poor parenting, educational aspirations, and the consequences of systemic racism. As a result, we suggest that the two novels are not only testimonials to the hurricane but also critical of systemic racism in the U.S. By engaging the effect of the disaster on the young characters’ lives, the two novelists highlight the spirit of resistance which African Americans employed to survive both natural and human-caused disasters throughout history. We thus argue that—unlike pre-Katrina narratives—these novels adhere to the principles and spirit of the Black Radical Tradition (BRT), as delineated by Robinson. Indeed, the two novels exemplify Robinson’s insights. For instance, they both focus on the impact of racial capitalism in the aftermath of a disaster. Robinson laments the fact that “the appearance of literally millions of Black refugees, drifting helplessly beyond the threshold of human sensibility, their emaciated bodies feeding on their own tissues, [has] become commonplace” (p. 318). The novels, likewise, bring into consciousness the naturalization of the dire conditions under which African Americans still live.

Our claim is that resisting that naturalization process can best be enacted in the coming-of-age novel. Unlike the bildungsroman which is a Eurocentric genre that is predicated on nationalism (see Jeffers, 2005; LeSeur, 1995), African Americans, we suggest, turn to coming-of-age narratives that primarily shed light on the conditions of African Americans without offering naïve hope and think of the coming-of-age process as a non-conclusive one. Dawson’s recent study on an African American coming-of-age novel labels it a step-by-step process (2020), which recalls Hall’s (1999) process “of becoming” in the context of identity formation (p. 222). This process manifests itself in such novels, as African American characters often do not experience definitively happy resolutions but continue to lead complicated lives due to the intersection of race, class, and gender. It is also a process that those characters do not go through on their own but as part of a collective. For that reason, African American coming-of-age narratives grant more room for the representation of sometimes unsolvable problems which exceeds the personal capacities of its characters, a lesson that the BRT effectively teaches. In the next two sections, we show how *Ninth Ward* and *Salvage the Bones* attest to the conscious ongoing process of African American identity formation that consistently responds to the demands of BRT, especially in times of crisis.

II. “IF I BUILT A BEAUTIFUL BRIDGE”: BUILDING BRIDGES AS A RESISTANCE STRATEGY IN RHODES’S *NINTH WARD*

Rhodes’s *Ninth Ward* (2010) is a story about twelve-year-old Laneshia, who is looked after by Mama Ya-Ya in Ninth Ward, New Orleans after her mother dies. Motherless, fatherless, and abandoned by her family alone can lead to the collapse of young Laneshia. The support that Mama Ya-Ya provides, however, helps her endure in the face of poverty and many other problems. As Hurricane Katrina approaches, Laneshia must face it alone with her friend TaShon and his dog Spot, as Mama Ya-Ya is extremely ill. Against the odds, Laneshia comes of age, but that process does not guarantee a safe future.

Ninth Ward is often mentioned in the context of teaching literature about strong African American girls. Schmidt et al. (2013) discuss Laneshia’s strength and responsibility in the face of Hurricane Katrina (p. 16). Other studies like Toliver’s (2018) endorse Rhodes’s *Ninth Ward* for the promotion of hope that young African Americans need as they grow up. Toliver also asserts the scarcity of narratives on African American girls growing up and accordingly focuses on such works. She uses Hamilton’s term “hopescape” to refer to “a space for authors to portray the community, culture, history, and tradition of African Americans as parallel, rather than beneath the larger American culture” (qtd. in Toliver, p. 15). A hopescape constitutes an integral part of the BRT, in which African American culture is prominent and celebrated. Following the BRT, we argue that the characters who witness Katrina are more likely to develop a revolutionary consciousness that resists the naturalization of African American subjugation.

The novel details Laneshia’s growing consciousness and self-realization. She realizes that she is from a different class than her “Uptown” family because she lives in “Ninth Ward” (pp. 1-2). She knows her own poor “place” and is aware of her social status in comparison with the rich side of the town. By positioning the “Uptown” against “the Ninth Ward,

New Orleans,” Laneshia prepares the reader for an ongoing comparison between the two places throughout the novel, triggering questions of equality, social justice, the racial state, and the post-racial claim before, during, and after the hurricane. The novel suggests that Laneshia is like New Orleans, poor and abandoned during the hardest times. Laneshia’s journey of becoming a more radical and revolutionary person begins when she realizes the confining borderlines of her race and class.

Laneshia embarks on this journey with nothing but her gifts and an atypical family structure. With no answers about her father’s identity, Laneshia expects that her father is poor and darker than her mother because her mother is “fine brown”—whose family brags about “their French Heritage” (p. 5). They thus feel “superior” and abandon Laneshia. Abandonment turns Laneshia into a strong independent person who knows how to live by her own standards without considering racial difficulties (p. 18). Laneshia and Mama Ya-Ya may look like a weak family structure. However, Rhodes uses their talents to make them appear stronger than other neighbors because they cling to their traditions and spirituality. This rings a bell for Spillers’s (1987) critique of labelling African American families as pathological ones. Mama Ya-Ya tells Laneshia, “You’ve got the sight. It’s grace to see both worlds” (Rhodes, 2010, p. 2). Since their religion is a mixture of “Catholic saints and voodoo gods” (p. 12), Mama Ya-Ya’s gift is to see dreams and to interpret signs of numbers and objects around her. Laneshia can see the ghosts of the dead. She is also adept at Math and words (p. 15). These special powers enable her to survive and be resilient before, during, and after turbulent times.

Such powers enable her to predict unpleasant events before they occur. Mama Ya-Ya sees a bad dream whose interpretation she does not know, but she expects something bad to happen to them (p. 50). She tells Laneshia that she knows of the hurricane before the news media announced its arrival because she “saw the birds leaving their trees. Saw the water was slow to boil” (p. 49). Furthermore, Laneshia starts seeing more ghosts (pp. 74-75), which can be thought of as a warning sign that many deaths are to occur soon. Resorting to the BRT and African American beliefs helps Laneshia and Mama Ya-Ya deal with the severity of the storm more than relying on the government. Rhodes’s *Ninth Ward* thus depicts African American spirituality that “is rooted in African traditions and is a part of their life and who they are” (Taylor-Antal & Rhodes, 2011, p. 160). According to the BRT, resorting to traditional thoughts and beliefs is one way to survive white supremacy and assert the self. Robinson (1983) views the values and traditions of African American people that they insert in their daily lives as tools of resistance to inconvenient situations that are mostly caused by racial capitalism (p. 309). African American spirituality and familial love strengthen Laneshia to stand against the disparities of the hurricane, and that makes her a model for young African Americans. In an interview with Taylor-Antal (2011), Rhodes states that she “was especially worried about the children, and [she] knew [she] wants to find a way to honor what they had been through” when the hurricane hit (p. 160). In other words, the novel prepares African American children for a more conscious engagement with their lives under a brutal racial order without accepting the naturalization of that order.

Such naturalization appears in the pre-storm-conditions of living in New Orleans that include poverty, governmental negligence, and the lack of effective education in the city. These situations should not be surprising, as Robinson mentions that the conditions in “the metropolis” continue to get worse for African Americans under capitalism and its manifestations, including health conditions, housing, and employment (1983, p. 318). Laneshia tells us how Mama Ya-Ya has been collecting money to buy her an encyclopedia for years because she receives no governmental support for taking care of Laneshia (Rhodes, 2010, p. 66). She does not apply for official adoption because she fears they will take Laneshia away (p. 85). Likewise, poverty strikes TaShon’s family (Laneshia’s friend), both of whose parents work but cannot afford to feed a pet (p. 39). Moreover, schools’ conditions reflect governmental negligence of New Orleans. Laneshia states that their “school is old and crumbling, but it always feels brand-new ‘cause the blackboard changes” and the “school yard is nothing but concrete with an old handball wall and fading basketball lines” (p. 29). With its poor facilities, the school is now under the threat of a destructive hurricane.

Governmental negligence manifested itself as well in the unpreparedness for the storm, especially when the government offers no transportation to evacuate people like Mama Ya-Ya and Laneshia. Mama Ya-Ya gets angry because nobody provides them with buses or cars: “[h]ow can it be mandatory if I don’t have a way to go? ...If only we had a car. If I had some more money” (p. 90). They do not go to the Superdome, where Laneshia’s friends TaShon and Ginia go according to government’s recommendations, because it is not safe (p. 95). Later, water floods the Superdome. Other signs of governmental unpreparedness for the storm include neglecting building the levees and the poor infrastructure of the city. So, Laneshia comes to the point where she understands that poor people are left alone to face the storm. Unfortunately, the Black body is humiliated and left alone to face its destiny and hardships with no governmental support, a fact that African Americans have had to deal with since the times of slavery (Robinson, 1983, p. 318).

But that state does not prevent Laneshia from learning and living up to the spirit of the BRT. Robinson encourages African Americans to build on their intellectual project (p. 5). In Rhodes’s novel, Laneshia gets her education in two ways: traditional learning in the house through different methods such as storytelling and her school education (2010). She learns from Mama Ya-Ya about signs, dreams, ghosts, and common sense. She says that “[she] need[s] everything Mama Ya-Ya teaches[her]. And...everything that school teaches [her], too” (p. 31).

Even though Laneshia is a smart student, her caretaker Mama Ya-Ya warns her about not working hard at school. In a racial society, African American students need to work harder to achieve their educational goals. Mama Ya-Ya tells

Lanesha, “You have to set your mind to learning, Lanesha. Each and every day” (p. 32). Rhodes highlights the significance of having African American teachers who encourage students to be better and to have a future vision of their own. For instance, Miss Johnson supports Lanesha and inspires her to become an engineer because of her talent for drawing bridges. Miss Johnson has a future vision for Lanesha and for New Orleans. She helps Lanesha imagine that she can become an engineer and build things like “bridges.” Miss Johnson’s words arm Lanesha with a dream to which she clings during the hurricane by drawing bridges to both calm herself and promise herself of a better future (pp. 14-15). Recognizing the value of bridges for her community and human beings at large, Lanesha says, “It’d be useful with patterns, shapes that did something—helped people and cars cross the street, over water” (p. 35). Miss Johnson, then, acts as a bridge and a connection between Lanesha and her future aspirations as well as between Lanesha and her community. Lanesha also needs a metaphorical bridge to remove the class gap between her and her family. In the twenty-first-century racial state, African Americans need a bridge between themselves and the society in which they live. They require a bridge of compassion, cooperation, respect, and social justice which would take African Americans to the other side safely. Imbibing this vision would enable Lanesha to contribute to rebuilding the city after the massive destruction of bridges and levees (already crumbling before the hurricane) after the hurricane.

Just before the hurricane, everything starts to change for Lanesha, and an opportunity for her to strengthen her independence emerges. Previously, she lived with her mother’s ghost and with Mama Ya-Ya. When Mama Ya-Ya states that “Mr. Death is losing patience. He’ll come and ferry me down the Mississippi” (p. 10), her everyday routine changes before the hurricane and during it, indicating both her coming death and the approaching storm (pp. 49, 51). Mama Ya-Ya says that “the storm ain’t the problem” (p. 69), referring to the unnatural causes of the disaster, as many critics did. During these times of loneliness because of the absence of family and governmental support, Lanesha works to soothe her own fear as an independent person without relying on Mama Ya-Ya or her mother’s ghost. By solving algebra problems (p. 89) and drawing bridges intensively (p. 99), she teaches herself to face fearful events. She thus embodies the BRT, which promotes responsibility, independence, and growth within the African American community.

Lanesha’s growth and coming of age become clearer because of the hurricane. Neither Mama Ya-Ya nor Lanesha’s ghost mother have answers to Lanesha’s questions about the storm (p. 119). Her coming-of-age process is at the climax when she realizes that her survival is her own responsibility. The hurricane appears as a test of her endurance and resilience and enables her to face the grown-up world without her beloved ones at her side. She talks to herself to make sense of the responsibility ahead: “grow up. Time for me to make things safe—for me, Mama Ya-Ya, and Spot” (p. 115). She thus closes the windows and prepares meals for the storm. This shift in consciousness confirms our argument that Hurricane Katrina constitutes a turning point in the lives of African American children and in their coming-of-age processes. To survive the storm alone, without the help of Mama Ya-Ya or any ghost is going to be Lanesha’s test for overcoming childhood dependency.

Indeed, the horror of being in the hurricane’s eye plays a crucial role in strengthening Lanesha. During the storm (p. 128), Mama Ya-Ya is at the weakest point in her life because she is dying. Lanesha is forced to take care of Mama Ya-Ya, Spot (TaShon’s dog), and TaShon—who joins them later. In the climax of the hurricane, Lanesha becomes helpless and starts to cry because she cannot prevent this horror (p. 133). When the storm subsides, Mama Ya-Ya crowns her as a grown up; “You’re strong Lanesha ... Your turn to meet the future, precious” (p. 142). She testifies that Lanesha is responsible and strong. After her death, Lanesha survives the flooding of the house with the body of Mama Ya-Ya, Spot, and TaShon—who loses his parents and witnesses the destruction outside (p. 145). Lanesha’s mother’s ghost acts as an encouraging presence telling her: “You’re going to be fine, Lanesha” (p. 211). From this moment on, Lanesha is not only responsible for her own life but also the lives of others around her.

When Rhodes inserts ghosts in her text, she integrates the BRT’s adherence to African American traditions, as we have already suggested (Robinson, 1983, p. 309). Lanesha wishes that ghosts could build bridges to save people: “if they could, the dead would build a bridge. Help the living... we, and the rest of the Ninth Ward (all of New Orleans), would be forever safe. Ghost levees. Ghost bridges” (Rhodes, 2010, p. 215). Later, she realizes that ghosts are helpless in some situations, which is a hallmark of her coming-of-age process. Rhodes strategically deploys this ghostly helplessness (e.g., levee construction and the preparedness of the city), as this ghosting process could apply to the government which does not shoulder its responsibilities. While African Americans have always been produced in the U.S. as invisible, ghostly presences, Rhodes radically reverses this process. Moreover, Lanesha pays credit to her ancestors who, since the times of slavery, have been forced to build the levees along the Mississippi and now haunt the levees. Most importantly, Lanesha realizes that relying only on the ghosts of the past would not be useful, as she needs to take the initiative and contribute to building the necessary bridges.

Post-Katrina Lanesha differs from pre-Katrina Lanesha. She becomes responsible and aware of herself and the world around her. She also has an unobstructed vision of her future despite the loss of Mama Ya-Ya and the house. Lanesha is aware of the change in her after the hurricane. She knows who she is and longs for the beginning of a new epoch in her life (p. 217). The ending of the novel is an open one, yet we sense hope between the lines. The first phase of change is self-awareness. Lanesha knows herself and her aspirations as a “[f]uture engineer” (p. 217). She accepts her physical appearance, her future plans, and her supernatural gifts (p. 217). To come of age is to embrace one’s identity and reality after questioning it earlier. Lanesha learns to love her difference, to be grateful for surviving, and to cling to her dreams

for a better future despite the painful losses. Lanesha is a model to be followed by African American young adults whose lives are clearly complicated.

Lanesha's survival narrative adheres to the spirit of the BRT in which resistance against struggles requires strength, resilience, and self-preparation (Robinson, 1983, p. 316). Lanesha shows awareness of the racial state policies and systemic racism in New Orleans. Besides her awareness of the lack of sufficient infrastructure in the city (like bridges and schools), the comments her caretaker makes on the evacuation process that does not take their needs into consideration is another sign of her growing consciousness. She also understands that the help is going to be late after the hurricane: "No one is coming. All day and all night, we waited" (Rhodes, 2010, p. 192). Although she tries to give TaShon hope by telling him biblical stories, she is not convinced that help is really coming (pp. 191-193). Over time, Lanesha (who is part of the African American community) develops a lack of trust in a government which failed them. Lanesha learns the necessary qualities that allow her to endure and resist this state of affairs: responsibility, self-reliance, and taking the initiative. Equipped with those qualities, Lanesha is now ready to resist the naturalization of the dire conditions that African Americans experience. Conscious of her class and race positions and strongly grounded within the African American tradition, Lanesha becomes a promising member of the BRT, a tradition that does not accept despair but thrives on hope.

III. OUR BONES HAVE BEEN EXPOSED

Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) also provides a vision of hope. The novel tells the story of the Batiste family who witness and survive the hurricane. The protagonist Esch is the only girl amidst three boys: Randall, Skeetah, and Junior. Their father is Mr. Claude, whose wife died giving birth to Junior. Being the only young woman in a family of men and boys complicates her situation, especially because she becomes pregnant at fifteen. Moreover, the baby's father Manny refuses to acknowledge the baby as the hurricane approaches. Esch narrates the story of her coming of age in the days prior, during, and post the storm. Unlike pre-Katrina novels such as Curtis's *Bud, not Buddy* (1999) and McMillan's *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001), both of which represent successful futures that are full of happiness, Ward's novel—armed with the BRT's spirit—provides a more realistic, but hopeful picture of the racial dynamics of the U.S.

Critical reflections on *Salvage the Bones* range from environmental studies to formal ones. Raices (2019) claims that Ward's narrative is a "transcorporeal bildungsroman" in which Esch grows into gaining "a transcorporeal identity" (p. 1). "Transcorporeality" means "that humans are some of the very stuff that constitutes the natural world, and that there is a crucial material interconnectedness between the two" (p. 1). Esch's coming-of-age story is marked by her abandonment of an anthropocentric concept of herself and her adherence to an environmental one (p. 1). When it comes to genre, Coby studies Ward's novel from the perspective of southern literature giving prominence to the difference between historical southern literature and Ward's (2019). He states, "Ward uses the backdrop of the storm as an opportunity for reevaluation of place" and "to dismantle and reconstruct fundamental misconceptions about the field of southern literature, specifically, those pertaining to African American southerners' connections to nature, and of the 'throwaway body'" (p. 84). In other words, Coby attributes the importance of Ward's novel to its rootedness in southern literature through its representation of such themes as nature and the discarded body.

Similarly, Lloyd's (2016) article tackles the dehumanizing treatment of African Americans, especially by connecting the present with the history of the South, in Ward's novel and Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (p. 246). Lloyd states that "the exposure of the South's inhabitants to social, historical, and natural forces during Katrina revealed a kind of creatureliness; humans and nonhuman animals were simultaneously stripped of security, defenses, and bodily stability" (p. 248). Likewise, Wardi (2011) emphasizes the idea "of creaturely southerners; seen as throwaway... Black southern life in the wake of the storm...was precarious and vulnerable" (p. 130). Other critics like Marotte (2015) suggest that Esch's pregnancy means that the pain associated with childbirth and the storm's destructive force represent hope for a better future. Unlike the abovementioned studies, we argue that Ward's novel follows the spirit of the BRT by portraying the revolutionary aspects of Esch's coming-of-age process. The main character in *Salvage the Bones* realizes the reality of her situation within the African American community in New Orleans, and she keeps reflecting on the terrible life conditions that African Americans must endure.

Esch and her family are part of an African American community which suffers from monstrous poverty that is facilitated by the dominant racial order. That state of poverty leads to dog fighting, the absence of parental guidance, theft, and hunting. Boys used to fight dogs to earn money from "illegal dogfights" besides working in other jobs (pp. 12-13). Although this act can be seen as violent and irresponsible, Skeetah's (Esch's brother) and the other boys find it necessary because they need the money. Some children even resort to stealing. In the absence of parental supervision, Skeetah, Randall, Esch, and others go to a "White" people's house to steal a supplement for the dog because it is suffering from canine parvovirus after giving birth to its puppies (p. 43). They look at "White" people's houses as treasure places. Another example of this attitude is when Skeetah promises Randall to pay him the money he needs to go to a "basketball camp" if he helps him in the theft (p. 74). Esch also steals a pregnancy test from the shop (p. 30). We would be remiss to think of those acts as being representative of African Americans, as Ward suggests that such acts are driven by needs that are not met by the state's racial order despite the African American characters' willingness to work hard. To put it more clearly, we should think of those acts as a symptom rather than a cause.

That emphasis on poverty, then, indicates class differences, of which Esch becomes more conscious as she comes of age. At the grocery store, she notices differences in people's clothes according to their class. She states, "[T]he rich ones wear khakis and yacht club shirts, the others wear camouflage and deer prints" (p. 28). She understands the existence of class and its effect on the relationship between her and Manny (the father of her baby), who leaves her for a richer girl (p. 102). In addition, the problem of medical insurance appears twice in Esch's life: first, when her mother dies giving birth at home (p. 2), and then when her father cannot see a doctor after he cuts his fingers. It is an endless cycle of poverty of which Esch becomes conscious and in which she lives. Lack of medical insurance got worse after Katrina. To understand one's real status in the community is the first step towards self-consciousness. This is one of the main lessons that Robinson (1983) stresses as a constitutive element of the BRT, which is interested in resisting injustice. As a result of learning that lesson, Esch has the will to survive and keep resisting the egregious conditions with which they must deal, so that she can live a better life.

Learning is important in the making of a character with a revolutionary consciousness. Like Laneshia, Esch learns in two ways: at school and at home. For example, she likes to read for her Mythology assignment (Ward, 2011, p. 7). At home, she and her brothers shoulder the responsibility of the house at an early age. Due to her mother's death and her father's constant work and alcoholism, Esch understands her role as the sister-cum-mother of her siblings. Along with Randall, she helps raise her baby brother and does the chores around the house (p. 113). With almost no outside support, they learn that their life is their own responsibility. They create their paths in life on their own; Skeetah chooses to fight dogs to earn money, Randall plays for the school to get a scholarship for a basketball camp, Esch studies at school and becomes a mother at an early age, their father works hard to provide for his family, and Junior grows under the care of his siblings. Later, Esch realizes that she needs to be responsible for the consequences of a wrong relationship when she becomes a single mother.

Apart from her individual and family responsibilities, Esch becomes more conscious of the government's racist responses to the needs of her community. She observes the harsh reality of the government's negligence of vulnerable school buildings that eventually get "smashed flat as a pancake" (p. 249). Renovating old buildings before the storm and reconstructing them after it was not a governmental priority, a situation which reflects African Americans' creatureliness to which Lloyd (2016) refers. While people were facing the hurricane on their own, Bush's government showed no adequate response to the storm and FEMA refused to enter New Orleans (Burke, 2018, p. 35). When the mayor calls for mandatory evacuation (Ward, 2011, p. 135), people who do not have or cannot afford transportation to leave the city are left to their own devices (like Laneshia's situation) (p. 217). Esch and her family, among other people of color, face Katrina alone and survive it alone, as well.

Esch's radical and revolutionary personality is shaped before, during, and after the hurricane. Before the hurricane, she prepares food and water. During it, she is less afraid of the exposure of her secret pregnancy because she wants to protect her child. Her relationship to her baby is unidentified and unclear. However, after surviving the storm, she wants to give birth to her baby, name it, and take diligent care of it. She says, "If it is a girl, I will name her after my mother, Rose, Rose Temple Batiste ... If it is a boy, I will name it after Skeetah. Jason. Jason Aldon Batiste" (pp. 247-248). Naming the baby means that Esch bonds with it and forms a relationship that she does not want at first. She even starts worrying about a place for it: "Wonder where the baby will sleep, wonder if it will lay curled up in the bed with me. If I will teach Junior to give it a bottle, the way Daddy taught us" (p. 247). This responsible relationship becomes stronger because of the storm and is complicated because of residency issues after the destruction of many of the residents' houses. Esch learns how to ask for help like a grown up because she asks Big Henry (a friend and a neighbor) to stay with her family at his house (p. 243). These signs show that Esch becomes in charge of her life and of her speech, a situation which supports the argument that Katrina affects the coming-of-age processes of the characters who witness it.

But the novel does not indicate that this struggle is an individual one. The title of the novel *Salvage the Bones* suggests that the roots and traditions of the community need to be covered, protected, and appreciated from exposure. So do the events of the novel. Ward's Esch and her family cling to their traditions of living to face the hurricane (2011). Mr. Claude (Esch's father) knows how to prepare for coming hurricanes because he has either witnessed them or heard from his parents how to do so. This inheritance is significant because Mr. Claude passes it down to his children as they prepare for the storm. Similarly, Esch and her brothers remember how their mother used to do things and follow her ways (p. 199). After the hurricane and because of the Batistes' displacement, Old Ms. Bernadine (Big Henry's mother) helps them; she wraps Mr. Claude's injured hand, offers the family water and food, and supports them emotionally (p. 244). Such generous acts reflect a sense of hospitality, care, and solidarity that is deeply felt in the BRT, particularly in times of crisis, and can be thought of as a form of resistance to racial capitalism.

Ward's novel represents what we argue is a rubric for survival, whether rhetorical or physical, that is rooted in the BRT (Robinson, 1983, p. 316). That rubric depends on self-realization and a change of perspectives. First, the family prepares for the storm by fortifying the house and fixing it. Meanwhile, they reach out to each other to help solve each other's problems. Esch reveals her pregnancy after confronting Manny and hitting him for denying that he is the baby's father (Ward, 2011, p. 203). During the hurricane, every member of the Batiste family plays a role in their survival. Even the memory of their mother becomes part of their survival process. At the end, Esch emerges as a revolutionary and radical character who adheres to the spirit of the BRT. She revolts against her weak self who seeks love in the

wrong direction and thinks that the mythical stories she reads are applicable to life. She thus proudly decides to name the baby and take care of it alone (p. 258).

To live in the wake of Katrina is a burden on young Esch, especially because of her already existing problems. However, she does not lose hope. Sharpe in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) introduces the term “in the wake,” which—among other things—means living after slavery. African Americans are always living in the wake of a dehumanizing event because governmental treatment of African Americans remained the same over the years (2016, p. 3). People in *Salvage the Bones* (2011) live in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and witness elevated levels of racism despite or perhaps because it is a time of disaster. Katrina has been a turning point in Esch’s coming-of-age process. We can trace this when Esch shows the fear she feels during the hurricane by describing the storm as a “murderous” mother who “slaughtered” and “cut us to the bone” (Ward, p. 255). She indicates the harshness and severity of Katrina on her and her community. When she describes herself and others as “babies,” “puppies,” and “baby snakes,” she reflects the state of New Orleans and its residents who lost everything and are going to start from scratch without the guidance of a mother (i.e., a state) (p. 255). Esch recognizes that this hurricane is an experience “to learn to crawl,” and that it is her positive starting point. The storm gives Esch the strength to face the world with her true self, an African American young girl who is pregnant and who survives the storm amidst a tough life. However, she realizes that the storm is not going to beat her. The storm is a metaphor for any difficult situation that she is going to go through in the U.S. from now on.

There are other characters in the novel whose coming-of-age processes are highlighted. Each character has a different direction after the hurricane. Randall loses the opportunity for a scholarship to the camp because his friends fight during a game. Skeetah loses his dog and the puppies, which means he has no opportunity for dogfighting. Big Henry is a logical boy: he shelters Esch’s family and shows Esch support during her hardest times. So, the novel does not focus on Esch’s survival story but on the survival of the family as well as the whole community.

By grounding the novel in the South, Ward reflects on the setting as a determining factor in characters’ lives. She uses the Pit in Bois Sauvage to “deconstruct the idea that undomesticated rural spaces are inhabited only by adventurous young, white men” (Coby, 2019, p. 87). The South is thus used to criticize its vulnerability in the face of the hurricane. Railsback (2016) suggests that Esch in the novel criticizes the incident when her grandfather used to sell clay from the Pit to White people because it made the place “susceptible to flooding and vulnerable to the destruction Hurricane Katrina has in store for it” (p. 190). Coby and Railsback show the way that African American people have always been treated with: as being throwaway and disposable. Coby (2019) states that Esch indicates “that she will fight to fix and remain in the area to which she has such a firm attachment” (p. 8). He also adds that “Esch emerges with a more prosperous sense of self and of her place in community” living by “newfound strength and autonomy” (p. 11). We argue that this change in Esch’s perceptions of herself and her community after the hurricane suggests the emergence of a resisting spirit that abides by the BRT.

More importantly, we suggest that Ward’s novel conveys the spirit of the BRT by representing characters whose future lives are going to be full of struggle and constant survival. As such, coming of age is an ongoing process, as we have explained earlier (Hall, 1990; Dawson, 2020). It is the accumulation of eye-opening incidents that leads not to the creation of a perfect, happy individual but a person who is willing to survive and resist White supremacy and systemic racism. *Salvage the Bones* eloquently articulates that ongoing project of resistance.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ninth Ward and *Salvage the Bones* depict the daily lives of African Americans living in New Orleans on the verge of a hurricane. By showing their quotidian routine and their daily struggle for survival, the two novelists highlight the fact that those people who died in the hurricane were human beings and were not mere numbers whose lives do not matter. We have argued that African American coming-of-age narratives on Hurricane Katrina indicate a shift in the identities of African American characters because of the hurricane. They indicate a shift in how African American characters perceive themselves as young people growing up in the United States. We have also suggested that Rhodes and Ward speak to the spirit of the BRT by focusing on a historic event like Hurricane Katrina, which exposed neoliberal racial policies, negligence, and the marginalization of a city mostly populated by African Americans. Pre-Katrina lives of young characters and their families are totally changed by the disastrous hurricane. Factors like homelessness, destruction of schools and city buildings, loss of family members and pets, displacement, and unresolved psychological issues have made them conscious of their disposability and the necessity for resistance.

Some critics claim that Hurricane Katrina was only one of the factors that initiated the Black Lives Matter Movement and activism. Police brutality and the killings of unarmed African Americans played a more vital role. However, Katrina’s images stayed at the back of young people’s minds and their collective consciousness long and deep enough to create an activist movement that is always based on the BRT. By focusing on African American characters living on the verge of a natural disaster along with their already complicated lives, Rhodes and Ward allude to the spirit of the BRT, which offers potential approaches to the problems brought about by systemic racism. The two novels suggest that one way to resist such racism is to realize one’s real self and to become a more conscious African American member of the community.

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