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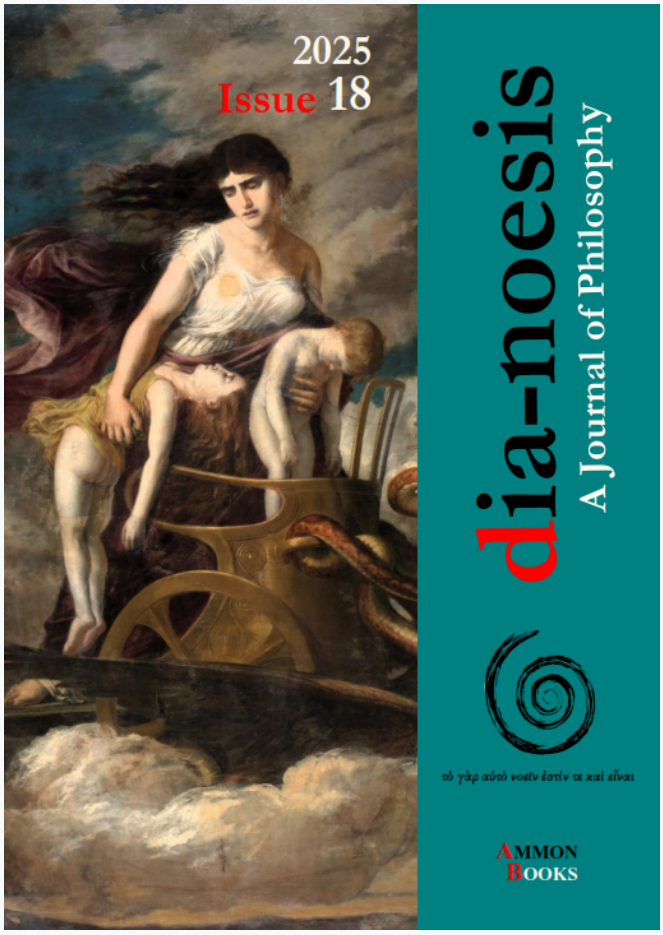

Temporal Wounds and Racial Ruins:

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Temporal Wounds and Racial Ruins: Structural Racism, Traumatic Latency, and Familial Disintegration in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

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Abstract:
Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) reimagines Hurricane Katrina not as an isolated natural disaster but as the culmination of systemic neglect and racialized precarity in the American South. This paper examines how structural racism, manifest in housing, healthcare, and economic disenfranchisement, functions as slow, cumulative trauma that destabilizes Black familial life. Drawing on Lawrence and Keleher's theory of structural racism and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study argues that the novel depicts trauma as temporally dispersed rather than event-based. Esch's fractured narration, the father's survivalist compulsions, and Skeetah's obsessive care for China emerge as expressions of psychic dislocation and deferred affect. Ultimately, the novel reconfigures the disaster narrative by exposing how racial violence persists through affective and infrastructural absences. Ward critiques the myth of a post-racial America, revealing how trauma is encoded into the very systems that purport to safeguard marginalized communities.

Keywords: *Jesmyn Ward, Trauma, Structural Racism, Black Family, Traumatic Latency, Post-Katrina Literature*

Introduction

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) narrates the story of the Batiste family—a poor African American household comprising a widowed father, three sons (Randall, Skeetah, and Junior), and a teenage daughter, Esch, living in a rural Southern town ominously referred to as "the Pit". Set in the twelve days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the novel traces not only the family's physical preparations for the impending natural disaster but also the emotional, psychological, and racial struggles embedded in their daily existence. Ward's characters are steeped in material and emotional precarity, shaped by an inherited legacy of poverty and racism. As Ward herself explains in interviews, her writing is grounded in realism and seeks to bear witness to the struggles of her Southern Black community (Macfound, 2017; Shelat, 2023; Perry, 2023). She fictionalizes this milieu through Bois Sauvage—a stand-in for her Mississippi hometown—to portray the enduring effects of racial inequality on "ordinary Black southerners" (Brown, 2023, p. 58). In this way, Ward connects intimate family stories with broader historical and socio-political contexts (Harrison, Keeble, & Torres-Quevedo, 2023).

While the Batiste family shares a physical space, they inhabit emotionally fragmented and psychologically alienated inner worlds. Though performing certain familial functions, they deviate significantly from normative ideals of the nuclear family, traditionally defined in American culture as a stable, heterosexual, two-parent unit with clearly delineated gender roles. Tolman (2020) notes that African American family structures have historically been shaped by slavery, economic disenfranchisement, and systemic discrimination, often resulting in non-traditional and matrifocal family forms. McAdoo (2007) adds that African American life reflects "more than one reality," shaped by the interplay of economic and social inequalities (p. 12). In *Salvage the Bones*, this multifaceted adversity manifests in the fractured affective ties among family members, further exacerbated by the absence of maternal care, patriarchal dysfunction, and intergenerational trauma.

This paper argues that the emotional fragmentation and disrupted familial bonds in *Salvage the Bones* are not merely the product of individual dysfunction but of structural racism-induced trauma. Race, as a social construct, continues to serve as a key mechanism of systemic stratification in the United States. As Neville and Pieterse argue, racial bias manifests through "denial of access to resources, opportunities, and the power to define reality" (2009, p. 161). Structural racism, as defined by Lawrence and Keleher, is the normalization of inequality through policy, law, and institutional practices, which creates "racialized social systems" (2004, p. 2). As Bonilla-Silva asserts, "mutually reinforce inequality through social structures, cultural representations, and ideologies" (2015, p. 73). In Ward's novel, the cumulative effects of poverty, exclusion, and racialized precarity are internalized by the Batiste family, revealing how trauma becomes both a personal and collective inheritance.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory—particularly her concepts of "inherent latency" and "dissociation" (Caruth 1996, p.17, 144)—this study investigates how structural racism functions as a latent trauma in the characters' lives, disrupting familial intimacy and reinforcing psychic alienation. The paper will thus explore how the interlocking forces of race, trauma, and kinship operate within *Salvage the Bones*, revealing the novel's critique of systemic racial violence and its long shadow over family life in post-Katrina America.

Structural Racism and the Afterlife of Desegregation in *Salvage the Bones*

Structural racism operates as a foundational yet often invisible force shaping American social systems. As Lawrence and Keleher argue, it "underpins white supremacy" and is "woven into the very fabric of our institutions" (2004, p. 2). This form of racism perpetuates the generational subjugation of Black communities, enforcing racial hierarchies that historically privileged white Americans while systematically disadvantaging Black citizens. Though *Salvage the Bones* is set in post-Civil Rights America, it captures the residual effects of this systemic oppression through the daily struggles of its Black characters in rural Mississippi.

Bonilla-Silva highlights how "the practices and mechanisms that keep blacks at the bottom of the social hierarchy have changed from overt to covert and subtle" (2015, p. 7). The novel reflects this subtlety in its portrayal of racial inequality that continues despite formal desegregation. The black community of Bois Sauvage remains largely segregated, both physically and psychologically, from white society.

This divide is illustrated when Esch and Skeetah stumble upon a white couple's house on the periphery of Bois Sauvage—"through the woods," hidden and unfamiliar to them (Ward 2011, p. 50). The house is surrounded by "barbed wire" (Ward, 2011, p. 53), functioning as a metaphor for the boundaries between Black and white communities. As Groos et al. observe, residential segregation serves as a "critical indicator of structural racism" (2018, p. 3), a theme clearly evoked in Ward's narrative. The siblings' journey into this unfamiliar, white-dominated space is filled with fear and caution, reflecting the historical trauma associated with transgressing racial boundaries.

Esch's fear becomes palpable: "I looked back scared, thinking the white people who lived in that house on the edge of the black heart of Bois Sauvage had come after us" (Ward, 2011, p. 54). Her fear is symbolic of an inherited psychological trauma rooted in the legacy of white supremacy, where proximity to whiteness is equated with threat. The presence of egrets that scatter upon the white couple's arrival furthers this symbolism, as the birds—typically emblematic of peace—flee from the implied danger of white intrusion. The wounds Esch sustains during the journey represent not only physical pain but the long history of suffering that accompanies any Black attempt to breach societal boundaries. Likewise, Skeetah's wounds—"there are four of them gouged into his stomach and side. He is failing" (Ward, 2011, p. 68)—serve as a visceral metaphor for the consequences of challenging racial hierarchies. As the narrator remarks, "The wounds are angry" (Ward, 2011, p. 68), evoking generational rage and pain.

The family's chronic food insecurity is another metaphor for structural deprivation: "We are all hungry," Randall tells his father, underscoring how scarcity defines their lives (Ward, 2011, p. 154). Hunger here transcends the literal; it reflects the unmet needs and longings of generations. According to Psilopoulou, the

social status and the financial conditions of the Batiste family are deemed as grotesque by the white dominated society (2021). They live what Agamben calls the "bare life" (1998, 10; Cf. Mitrou/Kolyri, 2025). The term "bare life" denotes a loss of political subjectivity and reduces existence to its most basic biological components. Matthews argues that this reduction to bare life is the result of racial capitalism (2018). The character of Mother Lizbeth, with her "black" and "toothless" smile (Ward, 2011, p. 49), symbolizes the erosion of agency across generations, as teeth often signify strength and autonomy. Skeetah's grim remark—"Why should China be the only one with teeth?" (Ward, 2011, p. 51)—as he tries to eat razor blades, underscores a desperate yearning for power in a system designed to render Black lives powerless. This visceral image suggests that the path to empowerment is fraught with self-harm and loss—a haunting metaphor for the Black struggle for recognition and dignity in a racist society.

The family's home, colloquially known as "the Pit" (Ward, 2011, p. 6), becomes a central metaphor for the cyclical nature of racial disenfranchisement. Originally owned by the grandfather, the land was gradually sold to white buyers, leaving behind a depression, both literal and symbolic. According to Eric Doise, the act of digging and taking soil from the pit by whites makes the Batiste family prone to floods (2023). This space embodies the material and psychological consequences of generational dispossession. As Ward writes, "We took couch by chair by picture by dish until there was nothing left" (2011, p. 49), highlighting how the family survives off the remnants of the past, emblematic of broader African American struggles with inherited poverty and marginalization.

Silva and Lewis argue that while slavery was formally abolished, it sparked white anxieties that led to the establishment of systemic barriers such as Jim Crow laws, aimed at curtailing Black autonomy and upward mobility (1996). Although such laws have been repealed, their structural legacy persists in the form of residential, economic, and educational segregation. In *Salvage the Bones*, the characters are effectively confined to the Pit—physically, economically, and symbolically. Every attempt to transcend these boundaries invites danger, thus re-inscribing the

limitations imposed by a system that continues to operate under the guise of equality.

The Pit, then, represents more than a location; it becomes a symbol of the invisible yet omnipresent restrictions that govern Black existence in Bois Sauvage. The characters' inability to escape it reflects the enduring force of structural racism, the vestiges of Jim Crow, and the limitations imposed on Black life in contemporary America.

Cultural Racism and the Afterlife of Segregation in *Salvage the Bones*

The cultural aspect of structural racism manifests in daily life, normalizing and perpetuating racial discrimination as part of the social fabric (Lawrence and Keleher, 2004). In *Salvage the Bones*, the Batiste family's existence reflects the deep cultural deprivation imposed by systemic racism. The family lives a life deprived not only of material wealth but also of the cultural and emotional resources that might have otherwise provided stability, such as the affection of the mother, the emotional presence of the father, and economic security. This deprivation is symbolized by the metaphor of the "Bare Bulb place" in the title of the first chapter, which paints a bleak picture of the family's cultural and emotional scarcity, representing the emptiness left by generations of subjugation. Lénart argues that the death of the mother in the text not only destabilizes the existing roles in the family, compelling two teenage siblings to perform parental roles for the youngest one, but also causes a gradual deterioration of the domestic environment of the house. According to her, the uninhabitability of the house is evident from the unwashed sheets and neglected yard, causing discomfort to the children. This reflects the lack of physical care and emotional security in the maternal absence (2023). Similarly, the title of the third chapter, "Sickness in the Dirt," underscores the Black community's ongoing struggle within a society that marginalizes them culturally and economically.

In the narrative, Esch's description of the white house as "blind with closed eyes" illustrates the wilful ignorance of white America to the suffering of Black people (Ward, 2011, p. 59). Early on in the novel, Esch cut her hand due to a scattered glass

bottle. The injury, once revealed, gets immediately concealed. As Clark suggests, this brief visibility reflects the broader societal tendency to acknowledge the sufferings of African Americans momentarily before they fade into invisibility, rendering them unaddressed (2015). In contrast to the serene atmosphere of the white community, where a gentle breeze flows around their house, the Black community of Bois Sauvage is enveloped in a "thick and hot" atmosphere, symbolic of the constant danger, financial insecurity, and struggle for survival (Ward, 2011, p. 55). This distinction between the white and Black environments reveals the stark contrast in the lived experiences of these communities, shaped by centuries of racial inequality. According to Clark, the descriptive language used by Ward for Bois Sauvage evokes the landscape, which is "deprived, injured, and hurting". He rendered the landscape as a paradoxical space, both nurturing and injurious simultaneously, where the bleeding landscape symbolizes the social wounds endured by the inhabitants of Bois Sauvage, including the Batiste family (2015, 344).

The imagery of the dog also functions as a representation of the dehumanization Black individuals experience in Bois Sauvage, where death from disease seems a more certain fate than access to proper medical care. The amalgamation of animal and human identities in the text mirrors the cultural stereotypes historically rooted in dehumanizing people of color as "non-human and animalistic" (Clark, 2015, 349). The Black characters, marginalized for generations, feel that death may be a less painful release than enduring the daily indignities of racial discrimination, which render their lives bare and dehumanized. As Bares notes, *Salvage the Bones* forces attention onto the unjust social order that continues to thrive, despite its historical roots (2019). The squalor in which the Batiste family lives serves as a microcosm of this social hierarchy, one where cultural, economic, and emotional deprivation are ingrained in the very structure of society.

Esch, being the only female in the setting, experiences discrimination differently from others. Her self-perception and relations in the novel provide a lens to explore how cultural racism shapes identity in the Black community. Her sense of self is determined by the stereotypes of society and the imbibed cultural messages. Black females tend to stand at the periphery of society, being

doubly marginalized due to their race and gender. While being around white people, Esch feels "small, dark: invisible," a depiction of African Americans being forced to feel inadequate and invisible in the spectrum of Eurocentric beauty standards (Ward, 2011, p. 26). As a result, they begin to seek self-acceptance and worth through their physical identity. Esch, too, attempts to gain acceptance by seeking validation through physical relationships, convinced that she holds no other existential value. This reflects how the bodies of Black women are often hypersexualized and objectified, narrowing their self-perception and sense of agency. Despite offering the men around her what she believes they desire, Esch still lacks a genuine sense of acceptance. She confesses, "it was easier to let them get what they wanted instead of denying them, instead of making them see me" (Ward, 2011, p. 186; Sakizli, 2025). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of seeking validation and repeatedly facing emotional neglect. According to Lénart, the sexual behavior of Esch is a "cry for help and attests to her lack of self-confidence, self-respect and agency, which in turn stem from her young age and, above all, the male-centered sexual culture prevalent in the community" (2023, p. 136). Odgaard, in her thesis, states that Esch's limited autonomy in surrendering her "girly heart" to the boys in Bois Sauvage parallels the lack of agency in Papa Joseph in selling the soil of his land to white buyers (2017, 5). This underscores the systemic disempowerment in their daily choices.

Cultural racism reinforces the stereotypes and societal expectations that devalue the identities of people of color, particularly women. Consequently, Esch views herself through the distorted lens of others' desires. The obsession with physical perfection becomes so internalized that she develops resentment toward a neighborhood girl who embodies the ideal she believes she must live up to.

Institutional aspect of structural racism in *Salvage the Bones*

According to Lawrence and Keleher, the institutional aspect of structural racism includes the rules and policies within the society that reinforce the maintenance and perpetuation of racism 2004. The Batiste family in the novel depicts how, despite legal

desegregation, many Black individuals still face systemic barriers to full social and economic integration in a predominantly white-dominated society. As Anderson argues, desegregation laws merely allowed Black individuals to sit next to white people; they did not grant true equality in education or healthcare benefits (2023). The Batiste siblings, particularly the boys, struggle to achieve financial stability. Having limited access to education compels them to look for odd jobs to support themselves and their family. As Bonilla-Silva and Lewis note, Black communities are often confined to areas where employment is scarce (1996). Bois Sauvage is the town where racial discrimination creates economic marginalization. These constricted financial conditions hinder the upward mobility of black characters, hampering their education. Historically, the black-white educational divide in America has been one of the most persistent forms of discrimination maintained by state institutions (Bonilla and Lewis, 1996). The financial hardships faced by the Batiste father prevented his children from accessing education. The racial disparities in housing and employment opportunities further highlight institutional racism. Kozol refers to these disparities as "savage inequalities," arguing that the American education system remains deeply unequal along racial lines (1991, p. 14).

This struggle is not unique to the Batiste family; many Black young men in the community turn to alternative economic opportunities, such as training dogs for illegal dog fights and drug selling. Skeetah, for instance, sees financial security in his pit bull, China. Her puppies represent a means of economic survival. However, due to the lack of resources, he struggles even to afford dog food. To make ends meet, he convinces the Catholic Church to pay him for cutting grass and weeding at the graveyard: "He mows three times a week during the summer, and in the winter, he weeds. That's how he gets his dog food money" (Ward, 2011, p. 26). He was allowed to do so "Mostly because they knew about Mama" (Ward, 2011, p. 26). This suggests that, if not for the community's awareness of Mama's condition, he might not have been granted even this modest opportunity. Having the puppies offered him a glimmer of hope for some financial stability. "I'm saving them puppies...They're money." (Ward, 2011, p. 50). His financial security is tied to their survival, making him increasingly desperate: "I can't lose no more" (Ward, 2011, p.

56). Involving China in illegal dog fights has been another source of his financial stability. He considers China and her puppies as the means of financial liberation not only for himself, but for other siblings too, because he knew that they could not rely on their father for the fulfillment of their needs. Skeetah's financial desperation is further emphasized when he resorts to stealing cow wormer from a white-owned barn to keep the puppies healthy. One of the puppies contracts parvo and dies, and Skeetah fears that the rest might succumb as well. His actions highlight how Black individuals are often pushed toward crime, not out of inherent criminal tendencies but out of necessity. The novel makes it clear that systemic failures—not individual choices—are at the root of these desperate actions. Feldman argues that: "it is not an individual—human or non-human that is dangerous, it is the very system that produces them" (2021, p. 74). Esch's observations of arrests in her neighborhood further reinforce this reality, illustrating how Black lives are disproportionately subjected to punitive control. According to Bonilla-Silva and Lewis, "the criminal justice system became the modern instrument to perpetuate white hegemony" (2015, p. 28). However, to protect Esch, Skeetah is forced to let go of China, representing the difficult choices Black individuals must make to survive. The novel portrays the immense struggle required to maintain a balance between family, survival, and economic stability. Ward's novel also critiques the broader institutional failures that govern Black lives. The discrimination is not limited to education only; other aspects of social life also reveal constant bias, unequal treatment, and even exclusion in some cases.

The Black community has long suffered from a lack of healthcare benefits. According to Gee and Ford, structural racism tends to remain the fundamental cause of health inequalities 2011. As the Batiste family represents the whole of the black community, their inaccessibility to medical care shows how deprived they are of basic human rights. The mother of the family gave birth to all the children in the "gap in the woods her father cleared and built on that," symbolizing the future of the coming generations who are born into poverty and remain trapped in it (Ward, 2011, p. 6). It further symbolizes the inaccessibility of medical facilities for a black woman in the developed society of the US. Even when her condition got worse while giving birth to

Junior, she refused to go to the hospital because of the financial crunch that the medical bills would come with, as there are no health care benefits for this marginalized community in the white dominated society. After birthing Junior, she stared at the ceiling "like an animal on the slaughter stump," representing how she had been the victim of racism indirectly (Ward, 2011, 6; Vo, 2024). As she finally left for the hospital, Esch remembers the ominous look on her face, warning Esch not to be on that bed. It was a look heavy with understanding, rooted in the harsh reality of what it means for a doubly marginalized Black girl to bear a child within a community constrained by systemic oppression. Only later does Esch fully comprehend the weight of that gaze, as she comes to terms with the profound socio-economic and emotional burdens her unplanned pregnancy imposes. In Psilopoulou's opinion, due to insufficient healthcare knowledge and familial support, Esch feels ashamed of her condition and sees her pregnancy as grotesque and her unborn child as a parasite (2021). Lacking both knowledge of how to end the pregnancy and access to reproductive healthcare, be it birth control or abortion services, Esch becomes emblematic of the reproductive vulnerability Black girls often face in impoverished, racially marginalized settings. The methods Esch heard from other Black girls for terminating a pregnancy included, "'Take a month's worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car, and it hits you low enough to cause bruises, it could bring a miscarriage. Say that this is what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you…I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have money to get them if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department" (Ward, 2011, p. 83). Bares argues that *Salvage the Bones* challenges popular conceptions of black motherhood by telling its tale of reproductive injustice from Esch's point of view (2019). This forces readers to think about how political and economic structures cause pregnancy to be a sign of debility in some groups and how reactionary cultural logics perpetuate debility.

Just as Esch and her mother were denied access to adequate medical care, Skeetah too grappled with the lack of proper treatment for his injuries. When he got injured while stealing from his white neighbors, his wounds were cured by pouring hydrogen peroxide from the bottle that is used for wounds in China. This illustrates that the Black community in Bois Sauvage had access to the same level of medical care as animals—none. It further represents the reliance of blacks on the things readily available to them at home rather than the medical facilities, even when they need them the most. They get infections easily in the pit; they catch boils in the form of bacterial infections. But the treatment was out of the question for them. "He's not going to want to go to the hospital, and Daddy isn't going to want to take him if it comes to that" (Ward, 2011, p.89). This marks the living conditions of the black community in the town of Bois Sauvage.

The novel not only critiques individual economic struggles but also highlights how systemic racism shapes broader disasters like Hurricane Katrina. The storm in itself is the representation of the institutional racism that these characters face in the town. According to Dyson, "the poor had been abandoned by society and its institutions...long before the storm" (2006, p. 2). Regarding *Salvage the Bones*, the injustice begins when white people start removing soil from the pit, creating a hole in the ground that makes it vulnerable to flooding. The land has been used, demolished, and then left to its now-inevitable self-destruction by white people. The Pit during the hurricane, saturated with water like "a cut that won't stop leaking," a lasting wound from a short-lived but devastating act of social violence (Ward, 2011, pp. 230-1). In addition to being an example of economic injustice, the desolate, trash-filled Pit of today also symbolizes a lengthy history of trauma and social violence (Anderson, 2010).

According to Anderson, Hurricane Katrina is labeled as an 'unnatural disaster' (2010, p. 110). The way the father of the Batiste family works for the survival of the family days before the storm shows his awareness that the state authorities were not going to be of any help to the marginalized communities, and they had to work for their survival. At the beginning of the storm, the family lost the connection with the outside world, which can be seen through the image of the dead TV. While the storm had its "strangling hand over the house", the first thing that this black

family lost was "power" (Ward, 2011, p. 171). The lack of power is not just a lack of electricity; it is a symbolic representation of the lack of knowledge about survival and the powerlessness they feel in their lives. In Bois Sauvage, the situation after the hurricane was devastating. The landscape of Bois Sauvage is metaphorically drowned in the past by the rising waters, and the disposable bodies that are left behind remind us of other racial violence victims (Clark, 2015).

It was not only the Batistes who suffered, "every house had faced the hurricane, and every house had lost…there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees, crumpled trampolines, talking with each other, shaking their heads, repeating one word over and over again: alive alivealivealive" (Ward, 2011, pp. 189-90). For African Americans, the very act of survival has historically carried profound significance—a testament to resilience in the face of systemic neglect and devaluation. This persistent struggle to simply stay alive reflects the broader failure of the State to ensure equal care and protection for all its citizens, irrespective of race. Institutional racism, according to Camara Jones, is often evident as "inaction in the face of need" (2020, p. 1). According to him, it manifests both in materialistic conditions and power leverage.

The fact that most of the Black population remained in town demonstrates their lack of resources and inability to evacuate without institutional aid. The destruction caused is not the product of the hurricane itself but of the national political environment that produced and still allows reduction of life to bare and biological (Brown, 2017). They did not have enough food to store for the storm, nor did they have enough money to get it from the market. They relied on help from outside sources, such as "FEMA and Red Cross, who always come through with food. We got that much" (Ward, 2011, p. 154). Being aware of how things work when a calamity hits, Daddy knew they had to fight it alone as they had always done. "We make do with what we've got." Daddy coughs. "Always have. And will" (Ward, 2011, p. 154). The first thing that Daddy instructed Randall to do about the storm was to close all the windows. The windows symbolize the vulnerability of a person. The Batiste family closed the windows in preparation for the storm as a representation of how blacks try to hide their vulnerable state to survive in the dire sit-

uations of extreme circumstances. After storm preparations, the house resembles a 'closed pit,' illustrating both the isolation of the Batiste family and the Black community's resilience in the face of systemic neglect (Ward, 2011, p. 151).

Waiting with the hope of being saved, perhaps this time, the Batiste family was in their house, but no one came to save them. They were in the "open attic" till everything was normal, until "the wind quieted from jet fighter planes to coughing puffs.., the sky brightened from a sick orange to a clean white gray…, the water, which had milled like a boiling soup beneath us, receded inch by inch, back into the woods.., the rain eased to drips.., until we got cold, and the light wind that blew chilled us" (Ward, 2011, p. 186). The open attic portrays the exposure of the Black community to the chaos of the storm and being abandoned by the State at their most desperate moment. It highlights their broader reality of marginalization in society. They were reduced to nothing more than the other non-human things around, like "a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it" (Ward, 2011, p. 186). According to Ward, "Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the south and the country in general—ugly things about race and class and about how certain lives were valued more than others" (Murphy, 2014). Underlying these experiences is a persistent awareness among Black individuals of their marginalized position within the structures of a white-dominated society. Esch knew that no matter how much they waited for help, "No one is coming" (Ward, 2011, p. 195). Like Katrina, previous storms also left Black communities without state support, reinforcing a cycle of systemic neglect. "People were too tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the law outlawing segregation" (Ward, 2011, p. 111). This shows that nothing had changed for blacks from the previous storm till the new one, Katrina.

Amid the instability faced by Black families in Bois Sauvage, Esch develops an emotional detachment from her unborn child, uncertain of its survival. Her doubt reflects the broader existential insecurity experienced by Black individuals in a white-dominated society. The unpredictable future of Black individuals largely

stems from the mass incarceration of young Black men by the police. The legal system in Bois Sauvage vividly demonstrates discrimination against Black individuals. Even the journalists who represent the state authority work under the stereotypes associated with skin color. "Every time somebody in Bois Sauvage gets arrested, they always get the story wrong." (Ward, 2011, p. 9). This illustrates how institutions discriminate against Black people, often without recognizing it. The automated evacuation call the Batiste family received illustrates the lack of empathy toward Black individuals, who suffered the most during the storm. The State blamed the Black community for failing to evacuate, even though they lacked the means to leave and had nowhere to seek shelter. During the previous storm 'Elaine', the condition of the black community had been the same: "the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, the woods" (Ward, 2011, p. 171). The black characters in the novel lack control over their movement. They lack access to migration before the storm. "Before a hurricane, the animals that can leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible" (Ward, 2011, p. 39). Even non-humans can migrate to save themselves from the calamity, unlike blacks living in the poor setting of Bois Sauvage.

Trauma and the family system

Prolonged exposure to discrimination in vital aspects of life affects an individual's psyche, as seen in the characters of the text. The endurance of persistent psychic pain leads to trauma in them. Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth, is an event that "fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation" (1996, p. 6). Trauma can be understood as a disruptive event or experience that has an intense impact on an individual's emotional state and perception of the external world. Bessel van der Kolk defines trauma as "an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories. It is not the story that happened back then, it's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people" (2016, 0:28-0:37). Structural racism creates trauma (Scott-Jones and Kamara, 2020, p. 2). The mental agony endured over

the years affects every aspect of these characters' lives, like their self-identity, consciousness, and relationship with their surroundings. Similarly, it affects the familial relationships of the characters of the text. According to Keeble, this novel is a bridge between slow violence and how it causes trauma (2020). The suffering of the characters in the novel remains unexpressed; hence, the silence becomes the only expression of the pain.

The repetition in the day-to-day life of the characters evokes the unresolved trauma in the novel (Hui and Li-Fu, 2024). The death of the Batiste family's mother, a result of inadequate medical care, devastated the father of the family. After her death, he is seen mostly drunk. Alcohol for him became a coping mechanism for his unaddressed trauma, an escape from the reality that he had to take care of his children financially as well as emotionally. He dissociates from his immediate reality due to this overwhelming psychological distress. His emotional breakdown led to his inability to provide his children with basic nurturing and financial stability. He became an absent father in their lives and started to struggle with his own unresolved psychic pain. His persistent preoccupation with the preparation for the upcoming storm marks the trauma that he contains from the previous storm, after which blacks had to do all the post-storm work by themselves. They were lifting, searching for the dead bodies of their loved ones. This had an impact on the psyche of the father, as he was aware that he had to do all the preparations for the survival of his family during the hurricane. His focus on preparations further distanced him emotionally from his children. "His face says he is smiling, but his voice says he is not," reveals the complexity of his emotions (Ward, 2011, p. 100). It depicts the friction between his outward appearance and the inward realities. He masks his fear, frustration, and pain with the façade of optimism and strength, which his voice fails to conceal. The constant emotional conflict that he has endured over the period is reflected in his emotional dissociation from his children and within himself. As Daddy becomes physically disabled, his condition symbolically reflects his emotional paralysis.

With their father emotionally and physically absent, Randall, the eldest son, takes on the responsibility of caring for his younger siblings. He assumes the role of both mother and father for Junior while also acting as a paternal figure to Skeetah and Esch.

The physical and emotional limitations of their father further burden Randall with family responsibilities. He "looked older than Daddy" in the hospital, representing the new phase of new responsibilities for him (Ward, 2011, p. 105). On the other hand, Skeetah makes China and her puppies his purpose, knowing how they can be the source of his financial stability. When everyone in the family is concerned about the food supplies during the storm, Skeetah arranges food for China. His attentive care for China as she gives birth reflects his unresolved trauma from witnessing his mother's death during childbirth. The moment China refused to feed one of her puppies, Skeetah lashed out and called her 'you bitch!' (Ward, 2011, p. 40). His unexpected outburst of rage may have been caused by witnessing a mother reject her child, which brings back memories of their mother's agonizing absence (Lénart, 2023). Junior withdraws into the crawlspace beneath the house, looking for a place to heal that resembles a womb (Marotte, 2015).On the surface, it may seem that Black people no longer face direct racism. However, when they speak about their suffering—ignored by the world—their true struggles are revealed.

Meanwhile, Esch, as the only female in the household, naturally steps into a maternal role, despite her struggles with identity and survival. The absence of a mother in the family compels Esch to take on a maternal role for her siblings and father. Unaware of what real motherhood is, she feels disconnected from her unborn child. She begins searching for knowledge about motherhood through the mythological figure Medea, her dog China, and even Hurricane Katrina. Medea represents reflected motherhood as a composition of love and vulnerability, while China shows her the duality of motherhood—care and destruction, and Katrina taught her resilience in the face of adversity. These lessons play a crucial role in framing the perspective of Esch towards her child and her identity as a black, single mother living in an abominable society. Unable to find any maternal guidance for her new role, she learned these lessons the hard way, exploring that black motherhood means a multifaceted role. The absence of a mother in her life had taught her the importance of the emotional presence of a mother in a black child's life in a racial society.

Her emotional isolation had an impact on her psyche as it distanced her emotionally from others in the family. "And then

Mama died, and there was no one left for me to hold on to" (Ward, 2011, p. 49). Her unexpressed pain prevents her from articulating her mental anguish, as a result of which she feels disconnected from the family members around her. This dissociation results in Esch oscillating between her reality and the world of the mythological figure Medea. This serves as a means of distance from her immediate reality and psychic pain. It gives her the displacement to process her loss, fear, and uncertainty in the face of her real world. Throughout the text, she struggles to express herself and is unable to complete her thoughts. "I can't help but let a little sound come out of my throat, but then I close it off so that I can't even breathe" (Ward, 2011, p. 53). This constant struggle between expressing and suppressing her emotions makes it difficult for Esch to process the hardships she faces. She avoids directly acknowledging her pregnancy until the storm arrives, when she is finally forced to confront it. This delayed response stems from an inherent emotional latency, as the pregnancy evokes the unresolved grief of her mother's death.

As a Black teenage girl constrained by rigid beauty standards, she struggles with self-acceptance. Esch feels unworthy: "I have no glory. I have nothing" (Ward, 2011, p. 98). She has internalized this racism so deeply that, in seeking acceptance from those around her, she begins to reduce herself to a spectacle for male desire. This was not something she desired but something she felt compelled to do, driven by years of accumulated trauma and a deep-seated sense of invisibility. Upon unexpectedly becoming pregnant, she perceives herself as reinforcing the stereotypes that white society holds about Black girls. This realization deepens her struggle with self-worth and her relationship with her sense of motherhood.

Conclusion

As established in the introduction, this paper has explored the enduring struggles of the Batiste family in *Salvage the Bones*, revealing how structural and cultural racism persist under the guise of a supposedly post-racial American society. Through a close examination of the characters, the analysis demonstrates that racial discrimination has merely evolved into more insidious

and covert forms, remaining deeply embedded in the everyday experiences of people of color in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). This veiled marginalization inflicts unresolved psychological trauma on the characters, manifesting in their fractured relationships, emotional repression, and distorted self-perceptions.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth's insights, the paper illustrates that when such psychological pain remains unacknowledged, it resurfaces in altered behavioral patterns and relational dysfunctions (Caruth, 1996). The father, emotionally numbed by grief over his wife's death, retreats into alcoholism and mechanical survival tactics, leaving a void of parental care. This absence forces Randall into a caretaker role and deepens Skeetah's disconnection from the family. Esch, burdened by both the mother's absence and her own marginalization as a Black girl, struggles to forge a bond with her unborn child, reflecting the internalization of cultural devaluation and trauma. Her attempt to perform the maternal role coexists with her alienation from her own body and identity.

Ultimately, *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates that trauma in the lives of the Batiste family is not confined to individual tragedy, but is embedded in and mediated by the architecture of structural racism. Caruth's theory of trauma helps illuminate how the effects of historical and ongoing racialized violence are not merely remembered but relived—surfacing as emotional numbing, misdirected intimacy, and fractured familial bonds. The characters' psychological wounds are not isolated breakdowns but symptoms of an inherited, systemic affliction. Structural racism, as seen in institutional neglect, economic precarity, and cultural invisibility, operates as the vehicle through which trauma is transmitted and sustained across generations. The novel thus exposes how systemic inequality not only restricts Black futures materially but also damages emotional and psychic interiors in ways that are often invisible but deeply enduring. Unless these intersecting forms of marginalization are dismantled, the cycle of trauma will continue to reverberate across generations in Black communities, distorting lives and foreclosing futures. *Salvage the Bones* stands as a compelling literary testimony to the afterlife of segregation and the enduring wounds inflicted by covert yet deeply entrenched racial hierarchies.

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