Salvage Watery Memory: Water and Memory in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I will investigate the entanglement of water and memory in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011). To analyze the broad variety of literal and figurative references to water, I will refer to the concept of the Anthropocene, new materialist water scholarship, as well as Black Studies. I argue that the narrated water scales up the time and space of the story and thereby situates Hurricane Katrina in the history of transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. By functioning as a keeper of memory and archive in the novel, water evolves as a substance that enables the concurrent examination of racialized histories and contemporary environmental disasters.

KEYWORDS: Hurricane Katrina; Water; Memory; Materiality; Anthropocene; Middle Passage

> Sometimes I wonder if Junior remembers anything, or if his head is like a colander, and the memories of who bottle-fed him, licked his tears, who mothered him, squeeze through the metal like water to run down the drain, and only leave the present day, his sand holes, his shirtless bird chest, Randall yelling at him: his present washed clean of memory like vegetables washed clean of the dirt they grow in.
>
> (Ward 91-92)

In this passage, Esch Batiste, a teenage girl and the first-person narrator in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*, imagines the process of remembering through water. Water is depicted here as a substance that washes away the memories of her youngest brother Junior who was mainly raised by his siblings after their mother died while giving birth to him. Esch juxtaposes the washing away of memories with the washing away of dirt, suggesting that Junior's memories are burdensome yet central to his growth. Most importantly, in these lines, water shapes the relationship between the past and the present. This quote presents just one of many instances in which water and memory intertwine in the novel.

Salvage the Bones tells the story of an African American working-class family living in rural Mississippi. While the novel leads up to Hurricane Katrina, Esch faces hardships such as an unwanted pregnancy and an unrequited love and deals with the ever-present memories of her mother. Literal and figurative references to water, such as the quote above, are integrated into the entire story and culminate in the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. Water characterizes the landscape of the novel's Southern Mississippi setting, illustrates Esch's experiences and emotions, and indicates human-environmental connections between watery human bodies and other bodies of water. As already stated, the myriad of liquid references

plays a vital role with regard to memory. Whereas the introductory passage refers to individual memories of the protagonist's brother, the novel presents many other allusions to water memory that connect racialized histories to Hurricane Katrina.

Christopher Clark touches upon the historical connotation of the floodwaters in *Salvage the Bones* by stating that "the novel's geography evokes a deeply embedded history of racism. The rising waters that engulf the landscape figuratively drown it in the past, and the throwaway bodies left behind recall other victims of racial violence" (342). By looking more closely at representations of water in the novel, especially at watery connotations with memory, I will widen and expand on Clark's observation of Katrina floodwaters in the novel. I will show that water not only works as a figurative force but that more literal depictions of water complement, mingle with, and reinforce these figurative understandings, as they exemplify water's connection to life and death as well as historical traumas. I will demonstrate that the narrated water scales up the time and space of the story and thereby situates Hurricane Katrina in the history of transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. I argue that by functioning as a keeper of memory and archive in the novel, water evolves as a substance that enables the concurrent examination of racialized histories and contemporary environmental disasters.

To analyze the many-faceted representations of water, I will refer to a recent surge of posthumanist and new materialist water scholarship that provides rich theoretical frameworks for reflecting the many ways in which water is actively entangled with humans. These scholars treat water as "lively materiality" (Chen et al. 5) and highlight "the continuity of watery materiality […] with discursive practices and ways of knowing" (5). Working with the Anthropocene concept enables me to develop the relationship between materiality and memory further and to read the allusions to the planet and deep time in the novel. I will furthermore draw from Black Studies to elaborate on the connection between water, materiality, and memory in racialized histories and contemporary times.

The Memory of Water

Memory studies and the wider humanities have recently undergone a material turn. As "the fields of new materialism, thing theory, ecocriticism, and so on draw our attention to the materiality of the world […], memory studies too has begun to focus more acutely on the physical" (Lloyd, *Corporeal Legacies* 17). The widely discussed concept of the Anthropocene, which situates the contemporary environmental crisis in the deep history of the planet (Davies 2), has sparked discussions on materiality and memory as well. Given the unprecedented and sweeping environmental changes caused by humans, working with the Anthropocene often implies a critique of anthropocentrism and a turn to matter and nonhuman agents. Therefore, some scholars see a need to go beyond the anthropocentric focus of memory studies. Claire Colebrook, for instance, views the Anthropocene as "an *extension* of the archive, where one adds to the readability of books and other texts, the stratifications of the Earth" (507).

According to Colebrook, "it would not be too radical to claim that at the level of geology, the Earth has a memory" (507). My particular focus on water in Jesmyn Ward's novel speaks to this proposed turn to matter. Unlike Colebrook, I do not focus on the memory of the Earth but on the relationship between memory and water because water is directly or indirectly linked to processes of remembering in the novel.

Water discourses in the humanities already present insightful investigations of water memory. Astrida Neimanis formulates different types of "planetary hydro-logics" to label the different manners in which water creates relationships with other bodies ("Water and Knowledge" 53). Among these hydro-logics, Neimanis includes "water's role as *memory-keeper* or *archive* (storing flotsam, chemicals, detritus, sunken treasure, culture, stories, histories)" (54). The great variability among the examples listed by Neimanis, from more material and environmental to cultural manifestations of water memory, gives an impression of the many ways in which water can act and be perceived as a keeper of memory or archive. By exemplifying metaphorical and material expressions of the memory of water in literature and contaminated water, Janine MacLeod and Jody Berland shed further light on this hydro-logic. MacLeod explains that water metaphors in high modernism provide an alternative temporal experience to the temporality of capitalism. According to MacLeod, "literary depictions of the watery 'depths' of memory can help to cultivate a sensual awareness of multi-generational time, and can gesture toward the meaningful integration of personal and collective histories" (40). Berland's analysis of water contamination through E. Coli bacteria in Walkerton, Canada, suggests that water can physically carry memories of harmful environmental practices, leading to broader environmental and social implications. She describes that tiny microbes carry memories of harmful agricultural and economic practices "across a widening range of species and physical spaces. They hoard the memory of where they have been, and they replicate that memory as they multiply in new bodies" (105). While MacLeod and Berland approach water memory from different angles–the literary imagination and the environment–their explanations illustrate that the memory of water is intertwined in material, metaphorical, social, and cultural ways.

Water, specifically the waters of the Atlantic, and memory have distinct connotations in Black history that resurfaced in the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe. Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson draw attention to tangible and intangible processes of memory transmission, including the transmission of memory through water. They point to parallels between Hurricane Katrina and the Middle Passage, claiming that "[t]he images of water—the muddy water, the out-of-control water, the water in which people were drowning, the water carrying bodies, the water covering disappeared bodies—looked like the same water that the Africans saw while on ships from Africa" (55). Considering the millions of deaths that happened during the Middle Passage, Harrison and Thompson emphasize that "[t]he ocean in this context is a metaphor that runs deep in black historical memory, a repository for countless untold stories" (55). While Harrison and Thompson underline the relevance of water in both of these disasters, the water of Katrina is only metaphorically associated with the Middle Passage.

However, the ocean water materially connects to the history of the Middle Passage as well. Referring to what her colleague Anne Gardulski explained to her about the ocean, Christina Sharpe points to the atoms of the people who died during the Middle Passage that are still in the ocean. Sharpe elucidates that the "residence time" (41) refers to the amount of time that passes when a substance enters the ocean until it leaves the body of water. The residence time of sodium, a component of human blood, is 260 million years. Faced with this number, Sharpe maintains that "the energy produced in the water continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake" (41). If the concept of residence time is applied to Harrison and Thompson's observation about water and memory in Katrina, a material link between the Katrina floodwaters and the Middle Passage emerges. I will further explore this manifestation of water memory towards the end of my article.

In the following, I will first expand on the relationship between water and Black history by analyzing the watery landscape in the novel. Afterward, I will widen the regional focus to transnational and planetary allusions to water and memory, to then move inwards again and focus on the watery human body. Building on this, I will elaborate on water's connection to life and death and the Middle Passage.

The Watery Landscape and Racialized History

Considering the watery landscape of the US South is indispensable for a discussion of water and memory in *Salvage the Bones*. The novel is a case in point regarding human-environment relations, which is apparent, for example, in the depiction of a deep relationship between the protagonist's brother Skeetah and his dog China and in the vivid descriptions of the forest surrounding the family's home. Set in southern Mississippi, the landscape of the fictional town Bois Sauvage and its surroundings is also characterized by multiple bodies of water that are closely related to the lives of Esch and her family. The family lives in the Mississippi Bayou, in the vicinity of a river and close to the Gulf. Moreover, next to their house is a small pond situated in the area that is called the Pit. The Batiste siblings and their friends like to go swimming in the river or the pond. Esch has different memories tied to these bodies of water, for instance, of her father teaching her how to swim in the pond. Esch also remembers vividly that her parents took them to the bay for swimming and fishing when they were little (Ward 85-6). Esch's memory of her mother killing and cooking a baby shark she caught in the water introduces the different associations with water related to the Southern landscape in the novel.

At first, Esch describes the landscape of the bay in detail, creating an idyllic atmosphere. She compares the water of the Gulf to the water of the river and depicts it as "murkier [...] and colder, and the bottom was a landscape of oyster shells. We dug up oysters, threw them out farther away from the cove. Marsh grass waved at the edges, and pines leaned out over the water. Pelicans floated in rows" (85). Despite the murkiness and coldness of the water, this

description conjures up images of a peaceful day at the bay. Along with the playing children, the movements of the more-than-human agents—waving, leaning, and floating—are gentle, which generates the impression of harmonic coexistence. This impression is soon after put into perspective. Esch remembers that her mother caught a baby shark at the bay that "was the same color as the water" (85) and presents a detailed account of how her mother killed the shark and then cooked it. She "soaked it in buttermilk to take the wild out of it. When we ate it, it was tender, sea salty, and had no bones" (85). The harmonic description of the coastal landscape, the pleasure of spending time there, and the tasty food[1] that originates from the water are counterbalanced by the portrayal of the shark that looks like the water and the detailed account of how it is killed. In this passage, the water of the bay entertains and nurtures but is simultaneously murky, dangerous, and wild. This is only one example of the contradictory depictions of water in the novel, but it is also indicative of how the novel portrays a complex landscape more generally. According to Clark, "Ward's descriptive language evokes a natural yet romanticized and almost mythologized landscape that is at the same time deprived, injured, and hurting. The South of *Salvage the Bones* is a site of both sustenance and harm" (344). Esch's memory of the deadly human-animal encounter also introduces the major topic of death linked to water.

While the passage above points to water's sustaining and threatening properties, the novel features passages about bodies of water that allude more concretely to structural disadvantages and racialized history in the US South. The pond next to the Batiste family home is a result of Esch's grandfather selling clay to white men who used this material for the foundation of the houses they were building. Her grandfather stopped selling the earth for money

> until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp. (Ward 14)

Esch's narration of her grandfather's trading of clay that threatens the property's continued safety and steadiness alludes to the economic pressures the family has been enduring for multiple generations. The Batiste siblings' lives are characterized by a lack of financial means and structural disadvantages such as little access to healthcare. In taking up the novel's title and providing a possible explanation for Esch's grandfather's business, Christopher Lloyd states that "the characters are continually salvaging because of their precarious position in Mississippi as poor black people" (*Corporeal Legacies* 163). It is notable how Esch narrates the pond's history through an explicitly racial framing. Annie Bares argues that "Esch's description of the Pit's debility […] focuses on the racialized economic conditions that have historically produced debility" (26).[2] The precarious position of the Batiste family that is evident in the

[1] The skillful preparation of the shark may serve as another indication of what Annie Bares describes as "the local multigenerational environmental knowledge that the Batistes possess" (26).

[2] Moreover, the history of the pond already anticipates two main observations about Hurricane Katrina on a

history of the pond is crucial for understanding the vulnerability they show in the face of destabilizing events such as Esch's pregnancy and the hurricane.

Subtler and broader allusions to racialized history are also ingrained in the watery landscape. When the dog falls sick, Esch accompanies Skeetah to a farmhouse located one mile from their home. Esch emphasizes that "[w]hite people live there" (Ward 64). As they slowly approach the place to steal some medicine, Esch describes the road that leads to the house. She remarks that "a vein of oyster shells runs down the middle of the road, but the rest is paved with small rocks that look like they come from the river" (70). Immediately after this, the protagonist recounts the time when she and her brothers had to take a school bus that picked them up early in the morning. Esch narrates that "for the next hour we rode up and out of the black Bois that we knew and into the white Bois that we didn't" (70). The line of oyster shells leading to the white unknown neighbor's house accentuates the segregated community Esch describes directly afterward. Whereas the rocks are from the river and thus a body of water as well, especially the oyster shells stemming from the Gulf water are relevant here. As water "challenges clear-cut divisions" (Klaver 67) and "is always in relation" (66), the water of the Gulf cannot be separated from the Atlantic Ocean water. The vein of oyster shells on the road to the white neighbor is not merely a feature of the coastal landscape, but the oyster shells are charged with the region's history. They subtly connect the contemporary segregation in Mississippi to the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

Lloyd provides further insights into the regional relationship to memory the watery landscape hints at. According to him, "the South and memory go hand in hand" (*Corporeal Legacies* 15). Focusing on this region does not negate broader connections but facilitates "to see how place still exerts force in twenty-first-century culture, and how the long histories of slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, and antiblack racism more broadly work in the US South" (15). Many scholars discuss the region as a central point of reference for the novel, such as Raymond Malewitz (717) and Clark (343). The ways in which racism and racialized history figure in the novel have also been addressed frequently. Katerina Psilopoulou, for example, focuses on the grotesque body, a common Southern trope, and sees Jesmyn Ward as an author who revises the tropes of the Southern Gothic "to expose the continuing haunting of the present by past racial prejudice, discrimination and violence" (66). Overall, the contradictory depiction of the Gulf water, the history of the pond, and the oyster shells leading to the white neighbor propose that the watery landscape of *Salvage the Bones* is suggestive of the region's racialized history.

smaller scale: Just like the water of the pond posed a risk to the poor family and was a result of human action, the hurricane disproportionally affected already marginalized communities in the South (Lloyd, *Corporeal Legacies* 140) and was a human-made disaster at its core (Dickel and Kindinger 9).

Local and Faraway Bodies of Water

While the novel is replete with local manifestations of these histories, my focus on water seeks to highlight some broader connections between the region and the planet's hydrology. I thereby do not seek to oppose the regional emphases. I rather aim to complement these observations by revealing that the novel's web of water bodies points to the Southern relationship with the transatlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. The integration of different bodies of water demonstrates that the story, while being distinctly regional, is also connected to faraway places. The first chapter already illustrates the connection between the region and the wider scale and paves the way for an understanding of the relational hydrology at large.

Esch claims that the weather in Bois Sauvage had "[b]een too dry" (Ward 15) and refers to the low water level in the pond next to their house. She describes that "[t]he water in the pit was low; we hadn't had a good rain in weeks. The shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there" (15). In this passage, the two bodies of water—the pond and the Gulf—are inextricably linked. While the water in the pit serves as an indicator of the local drought, the Gulf is connected to the region as the place where the storm and the long-awaited rainwater are being held. Throughout the novel, the characters repeatedly refer to storms forming over the Gulf that often show early impacts in the region. For instance, Esch's father tells his children, "Gotta new storm in the Gulf. Named José. Supposed to be hitting Mexico" (62). Soon after, Esch looks at the movements of the pine trees in the forest and wonders if they are nodding to "the hum of José out in the Gulf, singing to himself" (66). Whereas *Salvage the Bones* can be read as the personal account of a girl and her family coping with the hurricane in rural Mississippi, the narration of water adds other relevant levels to this local place. The narrated water creates connections between local and faraway waters. Calling for different senses of democracy and justice in the face of "the tangled fate of the planet" (157), Wai Chee Dimock claims that

> world history and world literature have much to contribute to this enlarged sense of justice, for crucial to these fields are just such crosscurrents, a permeable continuum with multiple sources, multiple centers, oceanic rather than territorial. Hurricanes are very much part of this seascape: they are indexes to the hydrology of the world as a whole. (152)

The many references to the Gulf and its impact on the region underline this hydrology of the world and create a larger spatial frame in which the story can be situated: whereas *Salvage the Bones* undoubtedly features Southern themes and functions as a regional story, the novel also carries transnational as well as planetary undertones.[3] The relation between the region

[3] Although Lloyd admits that Dimock's transnational Katrina criticism facilitates the understanding of planetary ecology, he cautions that this transnational perspective "omits some cultural coordinates that are particularly Southern. […] Local knowledge of Katrina forces us to see the storm as partly regional: as informed by, and revealing of, a specific set of memories and histories that are specifically Southern" (*Rooting Memory* 56). Even though I agree with Lloyd in his emphasis on the regional perspective, I propose that the widened scale

and its broader connections also illuminates the novel's allusions to Black history. Early in the novel, the protagonist recounts that each summer, a hurricane "pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses" (Ward 4). Here, the reference to the slave galleys calls the history of slavery to mind, and this history is linked to the present through the hurricane coming from the Gulf. As the Gulf is concurrently evocative of a recent environmental disaster and the history of slavery, this body of water ties the present to the past.

The Watery Human Body

Apart from the alluding web of water bodies, *Salvage the Bones* also underlines the interconnected emotional and physical entanglement of humans with water. Esch recounts her experiences through water. When Esch is rejected by the young man she is in love with but who only uses her sexually, Esch describes that "[t]he pain comes all at once, like a sudden deluge" (Ward 56). At the deathbed of her mother, Esch felt "love running through [her] like a hard, blinding summer rain" (59). When Esch watches the sick dog and has to ensure her youngest brother does not touch her, Esch laments, "I'm so tired; it washes through me like blinding, heavy rain" (112). A similar narrative strategy is employed in all of these similes: they compare feelings like pain and love or a physical state such as tiredness with powerful and uncontrollable situations of water and thereby invite the readers to empathize with the overwhelming experiences of the protagonist.

MacLeod's explanation of watery figurative language facilitates the interpretation of these similes. MacLeod states that "when water appears in a metaphor, its material properties inform our understandings of the concepts it helps to signify. The material and sensual qualities of water, in turn, are always mingling with individual and collective associations" (40). Consequently, while Ward undoubtedly uses figurative language to illustrate the experiences of the protagonist, the material properties of water play a crucial role in creating the intended effect. In these sentences, the material properties pertain not only to situations of water like heavy rain and a deluge but all of these experiences also highlight water in the human body, as "love running through like rain," "tiredness washing through like rain," and feeling "pain like a deluge" refer to workings of water in the human body. Neimanis further elaborates on the human body and water and explains that the watery human body is interwoven with emotions and the imagination. Defining humans as bodies of water suggests that

> we experience our "bodies of water" as brimming with semiotic potential; their physiological functioning is deeply imbricated in a web of social, political, ethical, and philosophical meaning. [...] Water facilitates the stretching and expanding not only of our physical bodies but of our thoughtful, emotional, and imaginative selves as well. ("We Are All Bodies of Water" 83-4)

is particularly helpful for reading the novel's allusions to the Middle Passage.

In the passages that narrate Esch's experiences and feelings through water, the watery language in connection to the body illustrates the challenging daily life of the protagonist who has to face hosts of hardships at once, such as missing her dead mother dearly, dealing with the unplanned pregnancy and an unrequited love, and bearing the brunt of looking after her youngest brother. The figurative watery language reiterates that Esch's daily life is often characterized by overload and misery.

What is more, Esch's pregnancy and the connected theme of motherhood feature prominently in the entire novel and offer another interpretation of the human body of water. Several times, the pregnancy and the resulting physical changes are framed by references to water, for example, when Esch compares the baby in her stomach to "a water balloon in my stomach, makes me feel set to bursting" (Ward 45) or when she pushes her stomach with her hands and "[i]t pushes back, water flush and warm" (88). Later on, Esch complains, "[m]y stomach feels full of water, hurts with it" (159). Her stomach also feels "like a bowl sloshing with water" (207). Esch's recurrent underlining of the fluid in her stomach points to the difficult circumstances of her pregnancy.[4] As she keeps quiet about the pregnancy for a long time, these passages suggest that she does not come to accept the situation herself. She foregrounds the bodily changes caused by the pregnancy. Furthermore, these passages reinforce the presentation of the human body as a body of water. In contrast to the similes before, here the material properties of water in the (pregnant) human body stand out more clearly. The foregrounding of water in the human body reflects material realities because water not only performs vital functions but also makes up large parts of the human body (Wong and Christian 7; Macauley 44-5). Considering the watery makeup of the planet and other species, geophysical and meteorological bodies, Neimanis states that "we soon recognize ourselves as watery bodies among watery bodies, all sloshing around in a watery world" ("We Are All Bodies of Water" 86). By highlighting water in the human body, exemplifying deeply emotional states through water, picturing the watery landscape in the Batiste's surroundings, and indicating the early impact of the distant storm forming over the Gulf on the characters and their immediate environment, *Salvage the Bones* creates a many-faceted web of interlinked watery bodies. Water links the body, the region, and faraway places.

Life, Death, and the Middle Passage

Since water is necessary for the generation of all life (Wong and Christian 7), the depiction of the watery womb indicates a major function of water: water as a giver of life. Life, for the majority of its existence on the planet, has only existed in the water, and "[m]ost of our body blueprints evolved in the ocean" (Mitchell 30). Neimanis describes the many life-giving aspects of water as "gestationality" ("Water and Knowledge" 54). This capacity of water means "to

[4] Her pregnancy can be seen as the result of her "lack of access to healthcare and to information about sex" (Bares 27).

bathe plural life into being in myriad ways" (54).[5] In *Salvage the Bones*, the understanding of water as the giver of life is accompanied by its capacity to destroy life. The hydro-logic of "dissolution" (54), as Neimanis terms "water's capacity to wash away life" (54), applies to hurricanes, floods, and tsunamis. This hydro-logic serves as a reminder "that water's logics are neither benign nor benevolent toward all bodies" (54). In the novel, this logic occurs through the devastating floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina that wash away the beloved dog China toward the ending.[6] The emphasis on the structural violence against the Black body and allusions to Black history in *Salvage the Bones* also point to the many predominantly Black people that fell victim to the Gulf's precarious infrastructure and New Orleans' thwarted levee systems (Lloyd, *Corporeal Legacies* 140). Lloyd elaborates that

> [w]idely documented, mainly black bodies were left for dead, abandoned in the storm's wake. Seen as disposable, the South's black inhabitants were revealed, by Katrina and its aftermath, to be discardable, much like in the region's past. Black southern life in the wake of the storm, as in memory, was precarious and vulnerable. (140)

In addition to the parallel Lloyd draws between the treatment of the Black body in the Southern past and the present, the accentuation of deadly water also alludes to the trauma of the Middle Passage.

The novel further develops the inseparable link between water and death in the intertextual references to Greek Mythology, which widen the time span and facilitate the integration of the Middle Passage into the contemporary novel. Esch identifies strongly with the figure of Medea, who falls in love with Jason and births their children. When Jason cheats on her, she kills their children.[7] In the intertextual reading of the ancient story, Esch emphasizes that water takes life, as exemplified through the passage "Medea's journey took her to the water, which was the highway of the ancient world, where death was as close as the waves, the sun, the wind" (Ward 159). Another passage highlights the hydro-logic of dissolution as well and connects the ancient story with the present. When the hurricane approaches, Esch reads at night that

> [i]n ancient Greek, for all her heroes, for Medea and her mutilated brother and her devastated father, water meant death. In the bathroom on the toilet, I heard the clanking of metal against metal outside, some broken machine tilting like a sinking headstone against another, and I knew it was the wind pushing a heavy rain. (216)

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[5] That storing and supplying drinking water are major concerns in the preparation for and the aftermath of the hurricane in the novel further underlines this logic of water.

[6] In the dog fights, water is associated with danger. The metaphors "red rain" (Ward 82) and "a red flood" (172) illustrate the blood in the fights and contribute to the novel's emphasis on the hydro-logic of dissolution.

[7] One way in which the protagonist makes sense of her experiences, such as being deeply in love with a man but only receiving violence and sex without affection, is by reading Greek mythology. Benjamin Eldon Stevens reads this practice as "a way of understanding her own experience as a young woman coming of age, entering motherhood and confronting the responsibilities it entails, and more generally responding to forces–in her body, in her community, and in nature–that are beyond her control but nonetheless let her show an impressive power" (158).

This passage demonstrates that whether in the present or the distant past, water can act as a force inimical to life. The reference to the heavy rain is reminiscent of the figurative language in the novel that illustrates overwhelming situations for the protagonist through uncontrollable situations of water. That this is not a simile or metaphor but unambiguously refers to literal water right after underlining the deadly property of water enhances the impression that Esch and her family are in a life-threatening situation. Accentuating water's capacity to generate and wash away life in different times and places also has planetary allusions, which fosters the observation of the relatively recent climate-driven event of Hurricane Katrina against the backdrop of the aftermath of slavery in the South. In drawing attention to environmental neglect as "part of a long and varied history of racial oppression in the South and in the nation more generally" (229), which intersects with the US contributions to climate change, Richard Crownshaw asserts that "the environment has been coopted in the perpetration of systematic and institutionalized racism, to which southern black bodies in particular are subjected" (229). Crownshaw concludes that "Ward's […] novel moves both centripetally *and* centrifugally, as it moves through the intersections of embodied local, regional, national and planetary histories" (230). What is more, by repeatedly underlining water's destructive but creative force, the novel develops a cyclical temporality, which points to the recurring revictimization of Black people in the South. The cyclical temporality of the novel ties in with the allusions to slavery in the watery landscape as well as the expansion of space and time, and hence proposes that the contemporary story is entrenched in the historical trauma of the Middle Passage, where water also equated death. As Sharpe's explanation of residence time suggests, the narrated water in *Salvage the Bones* can be interpreted as carrying memories of the Middle Passage that resurfaced in the Katrina floodwaters.

Black Studies scholars like Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman emphasize the ongoingness of slavery. Expanding on the multiple meanings of the term "wake," Sharpe looks at the afterlives of chattel slavery. She traces the precarious conditions of contemporary Black life back to transatlantic slavery, which, according to her, "was and is the disaster" (5). In resonating with the novel, Sharpe states that Black contemporary life is "lived near death, as deathliness, in the wake of slavery" (7-8). Sharpe goes on to elaborate that "in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). Echoing the novel's disruption of linear time as well, Hartman explains that "[h]istory doesn't unfold with one era bound to and determining the next in an unbroken chain of causality. [...] If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison" (133). Instead of perceiving the present as haunted by transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage, water can also point to "the inextricable *material* effect of the past on the living" (51), as Taija Mars McDougall's tidalectical[8] materialism suggests. McDougall contends that "[t]he Middle

[8] "Tidalectics" is a term coined by poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite. In short, "[t]idalectics engage what Brathwaite calls an 'alter/native' historiography to linear models of colonial progress. This 'tidal dialectic' resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel's dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual

Passage, rather than haunting us, is still open, […] with water flowing forth in a constant, violent rush" (57). Tidalectical materialism acknowledges the continuation of structures and institutions that "[l]ike the waters of the tides, […] crush black bodies in the sweep of their violent movement" (60). In the novel, water acts cyclically as well, constantly interweaving racialized history with contemporary structural violence. Water is by no means only symbolically charged, but water's material force makes it a decisive substance in the reappearance of the past in the present.

Resistance or Revictimization?

In the novel's ending, many of the different understandings of water surface again. Esch joins her brother Skeetah together with her other brothers. Skeetah waits for the washed-away dog China next to a fireplace in the damaged woods. While sitting around the fire, Esch imagines how Skeetah would experience the return of the dog and describes that he would

> look into the future and see her emerge into the circle of his fire, beaten dirty by the hurricane […], dull but alive, alive, alive, and when he sees her, his face will break and run water, and it will wear away, like water does, the heart of stone left by her leaving.
>
> *China.* She will return [...] and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence.
>
> She will know that I am a mother. (Ward 258)

The expressions "run water" and "wear away like water" function figuratively here as metaphor and simile that exemplify Skeetah's imagined overwhelm at the sight of his lost dog. Because they are happening on the face, they also connote the crying of tears and are therefore also suggestive of the way the body and water are materially interwoven in the novel. The repetition of the word "alive" emphasizes the aliveness of the dog in Esch's imagination, whereas the hydro-logic of dissolution appears shortly afterward, which again reinforces the cyclical temporality *Salvage the Bones* develops in connection to life and death. Moreover, this passage merges dualities of fire and water, dead and alive, leaving and returning, human and animal, and, in this way, sheds light on the existential forces operating in Esch's life. Amid the destruction, Esch, for the first time, admits that she is a mother, which highlights the continuation of life after disaster and can be interpreted as a hopeful note in the novel's ending. On the one hand, the novel's ending therefore foregrounds resistance in the face of environmental disasters.

On the other hand, when considering all of the manifestations of water, specifically the cyclical temporality developed through water, another interpretation of the novel's ending emerges that highlights the ongoingness of Black life lived close to death in the aftermath of slavery. In the concluding pages, Katrina is described as "the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. [...] Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large,

movement and rhythm of the ocean" (DeLoughrey 2).

merciless hands, committed to blood, comes" (Ward 255). The characterization of Katrina as a mother committed to blood ties in with the recurrent alternation of life and death through water in *Salvage the Bones*. The references to blood, slaughter, and Katrina in the context of remembering reiterate the continuation of violence against the Black body.

According to Astrid Erll, "[l]iterature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory" (391). This observation applies to *Salvage the Bones*. In narrating the hurricane from the perspective of a Black teenager in rural Mississippi, the novel actively participates in the memory-making process of Hurricane Katrina, and water takes a vital role in this regard. It acts as the memory-keeper and archive for intangible, multigenerational memories of the Middle Passage. Reading the novel with a strong focus on water and memory facilitates the concurrent and interlinked contemplation of recent and past disasters. By proposing that the water involved in environmental disasters carries collective memories of racialized histories, the novel also reaches into the future in which already marginalized communities will continue to be disproportionately affected by the environmental crisis. It makes sense to take a closer look at the waters of the Anthropocene and the many more histories of human misconduct they carry.

I conclude this article with a reflection about water and memory by lawyer-poet M. NourbeSe Philip in her poetry cycle *Zong!* In this text, Philip uses the words of the case report Gregson vs. Gilbert, the single document available that is related to the murder of enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard a slave ship in 1781. For Philip, water serves as one of the central entrances to the past in this context. She juxtaposes memory with ocean water and points out that both are in motion and static. Philip writes that "[o]ur entrance to the past is through memory—either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water. And, as the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always" (Philip 201). By pointing to the ongoingness of transatlantic slavery in the climate-driven disaster of Hurricane Katrina, *Salvage the Bones* enables us to approximate this watery memory.

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