

NAVIGATING ECOFEMINIST AND WOMANIST READINGS IN THE WORKS
OF JESMYN WARD

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examines two major novels of Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), that use eco-feminist and womanist theory to establish how intersections of gender, race, and class inevitably impact broader ecological concerns of the American South. Conflating the influence of American racism as an ecological extension of southern identities not only informs but reconstructs our perceptions of polarizing southern mythologies that have constrained Black women to cycles of historical alienation.

Ward aligns her female protagonists with nature, and suggests that through motherhood, southern Black women reclaim and heal from a landscape that has historically devalued Black women by making them apologetic for existing through means of social and policy discrimination. Ward's manipulation of southern landscapes brings forth an exciting creative expression of womanism and ecocriticism that ultimately manifests into a subculture of itself: eco-womanism. Ward's combination of these two theoretical lenses enriches our perceptions of southern culture because she repurposes the landscape as an exclusive place of flourishing and abundance for southern, Black women.

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 13th, 2020, Breonna Taylor was fatally shot in her home in Louisville, Kentucky, after police officers conducted a botched drug raid on her residence. After hearing the police forcefully enter Breonna's home and open fire, Kenneth Walker (Breonna's boyfriend) returned fire (Associated Press, "A Timeline of Events"). Later, it was reported that no drugs were found on the premises (New York Times, "What do Know about Breonna Taylor's Death"). Media platforms cut into Breonna's story; they validated her death because of her skin color, defended blue lives, and disparaged her name even in light of her innocence. Breonna was treated as collateral damage; I see in her case parallels to why Jesmyn Ward's articulation of marginalized stories matters. Whether it be Mississippi or Kentucky, southern regions try to unnaturalize Black women from the lands that profited from the labor of their ancestor's Black hands. Contemporary Black writers demand that we be suspicious and critical when interpreting narratives in spaces that have historically and empirically designated American Blacks to positions of inferiority.

Jesmyn Ward is an Black American novelist who chooses to work within the racially charged confines of the southern American landscapes opposed to without. Her works investigate the nexus of community and familial love, as well as demonstrate how pervasive, southern myths translate to the ecological realms of literature. Ward uses images of nature to decipher the social, political, and ecological forms of discrimination that target poor, vulnerable Blacks living in the American rural South. Ward's representations of Black women and motherhood in nature appeal strongly to womanist theory because she relies on collective experiences of intersectionality to diversify the

theoretical lenses in which we address environmental writing. Examining her texts strictly under ecofeminism does not acknowledge the shared, collective struggle within communities of Black mothers, nor does it prioritize Black female interactions with nature. Without authors like Jesmyn Ward, there would be limited spaces for southern Black women to memorialize their own mythologies within southern landscapes. Her novels are important because they dedicate space to unraveling the complex membrane of a southern female, Black identity by giving her room to unfold each layer. Ward creates portraits of southern landscapes that are guided by empathy, united through collectivism, and transgressive in character.

The goal of this project is not to fixate on the violence, loss of autonomy, and social scrutinization that Black women have suffered against the racially stratified American South. Rather, I want to understand and defend how Black women can reclaim their worth, identity, and voice through natural landscapes, most particularly those on southern soil. The emphasis on intersectional identities, and the unique experiences that its warrants, is what ultimately accomplishes the reclamation, validation, and integration of Black women within the natural environments of the American South. Ward asserts that honoring the historical, cultural, and socioeconomic implications of southern Black womanhood is the only way to achieve full ecological liberation, as well as accomplishing a cultural dedication to nature as a neutral and explorative theoretical territory.

Jesmyn Ward's fictional contribution to womanist and ecofeminist theories draws an important connection between the intersectional experience of Black women and their surrounding nature. Ward illuminates a crucial, self-identifying connection to Black

identities and southern ecology. In her novels *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Ward intertwines political and cultural worlds to create her narratives. She creates a powerful space of reclamation within the natural world for Black women, challenging the extractive and exploitative ecological history of Southern landscapes. Addressing ecological oppression allows Black women to reclaim a sort of biological wholeness that instead evokes images of healing and abundance.

Jesmyn Ward's attention to Mississippi's environment resists traditions of southern writing as exemplified in famous novelists such as Faulkner and O'Connor that have largely ignored or villainized the presence of its marginalized voices. Ward is aware of the socialized and institutionalized racism that southern geography produces within its communities, and uses it as her basis to reinvent narratives of strength and loss for those that are undervalued and underrepresented in the American South's literary cannon.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Ecofeminism and the Natural World

I do not base my research only on ecofeminist concerns because the ideology requires that you suspend the factor of race when evaluating texts through this lens. However, knowing the theoretical framework is useful when studying novels working with a myriad of natural images. When reading Ward, the landscape of Mississippi acts as a character in itself, and many times the natural world reveals important information regarding her protagonist's internal dialogue and emotional state. Ward's protagonist propose a theoretical challenge to an ecofeminist framework because she demands that we evaluate how race exclusively impacts natural environments. However, for the sake of research, we will briefly evaluate ecofeminist theory.

Having an understanding of ecofeminism is likewise crucial to evaluating Ward's works. Also diverging from the boom of the feminism's second wave, ecofeminism examines the complicated intersections of feminist research alongside a variety of sub-movements advocating against social injustice and environmental health inequities. Ecofeminism combines the experiences of feminists and environmentalists in order to fully realize the unique relationship between women and nature. Like womanists, ecofeminists celebrate the relationship between women and the natural world; ecofeminism chronicles how women interact with, and against, their natural surroundings. According to Bronwyn James, Ecofeminists theory insists that there is an intuitive relationship between women and nature. women and nature have been mutually degraded and overlooked in western culture and society and furthering the belief that women are closer to nature than men are (James 8). However, a lot of scholars working within this frame work fear the charges of "gender essentialism," that neglects important intersections of feminism and environmental thought.

However, ecofeminism fails to address racial inequities and has been critiqued by scholars for only prioritizing gender. However, at the foundation of Southern ecological representation is pain; the racialized legacy of the American south defends an exploitative social and economic system that alters the ecological appeal of neutrality that Ward yearns for. Though she organizes her writing around nature, Ward's contribution in both *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, her images help to illuminate the shortcomings of ecofeminist theory that emerge when we consider southern landscapes. In the case of the South, ecofeminism only accounts for gendered experiences and it would be a disservice to evaluate Ward's novels from such a limited perspective. To be

simply put, it matters what harm was inflicted against marginalized communities because of the permissiveness of southern culture that downplays and invalidates the historical violations and injustices perpetrated against Black communities on southern soil (Deming and Savoy 5).

Instead of viewing the American South as an ecological hell ensconced in violence and mistreatment, Ward reverses the influence of southern cultural myths, which alternatively inspires marginalized voices to use the hateful paradigms of southern writing to reclaim a sense of self and connection to the landscape. Ward's works dream of reclamation for this reason; instead of brutalization, there can be abundance; instead of pain, there can be healing.

Ward's novels not only challenge the exclusion of Black women from the Southern environmental canon, but her works also signify how the Mississippian landscape is an opportune space for theoretical experimentation. Within her images of natural spaces, Ward creates an amalgamated 'subgenre' of womanism and ecofeminism—something that I call “eco-womanism”—that relies on the author's individual connection to setting in order to decipher, distinguish, and celebrate the 'crossing points' of her Black, female protagonists. The landscape of Bois Savage, Mississippi, (where most of Ward's novels are set,) is characterized by its wildness and unruliness that ironically provides a unique, neutral space resurrected and reconstructed from the historical suffering of Black bodies on southern land. This is an important fact in Ward's works because according to hooks, the ancestral legacy of what is considered “backwoods” (like Bois Savage), is rooted in the land itself, and in order to be truly free from historical legacy and habitual oppression one must embrace their organic rights to

the earth (Dunning 68).

Understanding Womanism and the Natural World

In my research, I found many scholars hesitant to acknowledge Ward's works as a womanist text; many were aware of her ecocritical interests, but failed to consider the facets of her work that address environmental and social racism through means of ecological representation. Womanism is crucial to understanding Ward's works because it is precisely that- representation. It is a theoretical framework dedicated to empowering Black women and their voices by empathizing with their stories, and depends on representation to evaluate this subject. To me, it felt obvious to address Ward in such a way; her Black, female protagonists challenge our isolating perceptions of race, and our stigmatized association of Black mothers. Nature, though crucial to both texts, is only a setting without womanism; Ward's expression of womanist thinking suggests that nature acts as a device to help articulate and celebrate the story of two Black female protagonists.

Womanism diverged as a form of activism following the construction of the second-wave feminist movement from the latter half of the 1970s, persisting into the 1980s. Though womanism follows a vein of feminism (sharing some similar ideologies), womanism is unique because of its center on Black women. Dr. Janette Taylor defines womanism as the ability to interpret how the identifiers of race, class, and gender intersect and blend, creating material, socioeconomic, and cultural consequences for Black women living in America (Taylor 55). Womanism considers the cross-sections of race, class, and gender to unveil how ecological environments respond to, or reject these intersections, and how this can positively impact the ecological presence of Black women in natural spaces.

Ward's novels establish intersectionality as the unique access point to natural spaces, suggesting that Black women are actually elevated by the aspects of their identity that are otherwise oppressed by America's southern regions.

Ward's understanding of race, ethnicity, and gender subvert harmful social assumptions that bar a Black woman's admission into southern landscapes, and argues that intersectionality elevates her position and validity among nature. Acknowledging intersectionality is important to forming a sense of self, and womanism values and prioritizes Black women's experiences by encouraging their ability to interpret their own realities and objectives (Taylor 54). The targeted history of American racial injustice on southern soil accounts for feelings of alienation from the natural world among its Black populations. In her essay "Earthbound: On Solid Ground," bell hooks understands the post-reconstruction era migration of Black citizens to urban spaces as severing the innate, humanizing connection to nature, demonstrating the strength of canonized southern ecological oppression that forces our associations of Black people in nature further into obscurity (Dunning 69). Ward relies on a 'kincentric' interpretation of nature that views individuals as part of an ecological family-meaning that our surroundings are extensions of our own selves and vice versa-promotes an empathetic awareness toward existing life in our environments, and furthers that life is most viable when we view all the natural elements of ecosystems as one unit (Dunning 73).

Ward reconstructs a positive, mutually affirming relationship between Black women and the natural world through motherhood by suggesting that reclamation and self-identification amongst nature is an intrinsic right shared amongst Black mothers. Motherhood inspires an introspective transcendence within Black women to reclaim their

place within natural spaces because the biological process of giving birth provides a direct portal, a concrete link between mothers, women, and nature. However, Ward's creative expression of womanism carves out a unique and distinct relationship between Black motherhood and nature because she uses nature to personify marginalization, not just as a general connection to mothers and nature. Motherhood also reiterates that reclaiming space in nature promotes ecological healing by validating Black communities in southern landscapes because motherhood translates the maternal, empathetic obligations felt towards one's child into similar compassion and zeal toward one's community.

III. CONSTRUCTING ECO-WOMANIST NARRATIVES IN WARD'S WORKS

Motherhood and Salvage the Bones

Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* is a fierce portrayal of community, family, and survival. She chronicles the story of fifteen year old Esch, who has discovered that this she is pregnant. Esch learns to navigate the changing space of her body, and relies on the natural world to make important discoveries about pain, loss, and the unpredictability of motherhood. Featuring Esch as the protagonist challenges the exclusionary space of the South because Ward dictates a story of a young, Black women who's condition makes her a vulnerable target to social and racial discrimination. Although there are many aspects of nature that can be evaluated in this text, most notably the impending hurricane and its feminized nature, I do not have enough space to address everything. Therefore, I turn my attention to Esch's developing role as a mother as it takes place in the natural world, but one could easily apply eco-womanist thought to other elements of the novel. In fact, Ward goes so far to present Esch's pregnancy in a positive light, and uses

motherhood as a thematic device to illustrate her connection to nature and the Mississippian landscape. However, Ward does not rely on sentimental representations of motherhood and nature to do so. Rather, Ward uses ecological representation to depict how struggle and oppression is integral to understanding Black motherhood.

Ward's bleak characterization of the Pit is ironic because the American south is associated with agricultural abundance and economic profits acquired from the landscape.

The physical landscape surrounding the Pit personifies the cultural and biological impact that historical ecological brutalization has had on southern Black communities. Opposed to abundance, the Pit's ecological makeup provides an image that backs the cultural deprivation of low-income, Black Americans. The Pit is described as an excavated cliff "overlook[ing] a dry lake...and stream that had run around and down the hill...making it into a pond" (Ward 14). The Pit's depleted characterization suggests that the biological inhabitants of the manufactured space have to combat not only the manmade forces working against the landscape, but the environmental forces as well that are conscious of the relationships between the residents and their surroundings surrounding natural landscapes.

The Pit's ecological make-up reflects the interior and exterior conditions of Esch, and the landscape itself becomes immersed with her internal struggle to accept her unexpected pregnancy. Esch's physical reaction the land is described as an uncomfortable one. The feeling of the hot, thick, pervasive air on the Pit suggests a heightened awareness to the unnatural and oppressive quality of the landscape. Esch describes populations of trees so dense that there remains "only a little undergrowth, and the bushes

fight for their bright spots on the hard-packed, shadow earth” (Ward 66). Ward transforms the Pit’s landscape into an obstacle reflecting Esch’s hesitancy in identifying with her unplanned, unwanted pregnancy.

Ward uses Esch’s unwanted pregnancy to combat the suffocation from both the social and ecological discourses of her community. Ward inadvertently reverses the power that the landscape holds over Esch by using her role as a mother to strengthen herself against her encroaching environment. Ward chronicles Esch’s fluid physical movement within the landscape pre and post pregnancy to demonstrate how motherhood arranges a rite of passage to nature. When Esch and her brother Skeetah are running through the woods, Ward provides an exhilarating and very physical account of Esch’s experience. Esch comments that her face “feels tight and hot, and the air coming into my nose feels like water. I am swimming through the air. My body does what it was made to do: it moves. Skeetah cannot leave me. I am his equal” (Ward 67). As per ecofeminism, Esch’s fluidity and confidence in navigating the unpredictable terrain of the Pit is attributed to the baseline connection between women and nature.

However, Esch’s pregnancy and role as a mother actually frustrate her abilities to move within the space, suggesting that Esch’s pregnancy is aware of how unwed, adolescent Black mothers are disproportionately targeted for social intervention to remedy the “threat” or burden associated with their unpredictable status as a mother. Throughout the novel, Ward suggests that bodies tell stories; as Esch’s body changes it reveals the truth of her situation, and her ability to navigate the space is first to change, too. Skeetah observes this change in Esch’s physicality that is attributed to her pregnancy; he calls her out, saying “you ran slower yesterday,” indicating the first time

that someone is aware of Esch's changing body (Ward 82). The difference in Esch's ability to navigate the environment suggests that she is weighed down by the change occurring inside her; opposed to freeing her, her pregnancy stunts her ability to confidently move through nature. Therefore, *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates how Ward thematically uses ecological influences in her writing to illuminate how social prejudices create unsafe, unpredictable terrains, and suggests that Esch fumbles through them as she becomes more conscious of her pregnancy.

Motherhood is a transcendent state that admits Black women into nature through their connection to biological processes; Ward is especially attentive to the emerging strengths and traumas that are gained from being a Black mother. In Ward's fiction, Black women that give birth align themselves with their surroundings even more. Their connection to place considers how Southern associations of Black motherhood is molded by a surrounding cultural and institutional perception of Blackness motherhood, creating a detrimental racial division within the experience of mothering. Deming and Savoy argue that the complexities of the United States' "multicultural past and present," and the ways in which southern societies have impacted our Earth cannot be separated from underlying values that allow racism and inequities in political and economic power" (Deming and Savoy 10). When Black mothers learn to nurture within oppressive environments, where she is the object of both alienation and discrimination, the base connection to motherhood does not bring forth obvious images of empowerment that support an uplifting connotation of motherhood. Ward constructs grotesque narratives of birth that reinforce using ecological reexamines the exclusionary treatment of southern spaces. Ward severs the ecofeminist's overly sentimental connection between women and

nature to instead supplement images of survival and strength associated with Black motherhood.

Ward eloquently articulates the trauma of birth through China, Skeetah's dog. China is analogous to Esch's aspirations and uncertainties of fulfilling her role as a mother. Esch's reaction to China's birth suggests that animalistic connections to nature informs Esch's own sense of motherhood. China's hostility during her own birth suggests that she is, too, acting against the confines of her inherent nature and environment. While watching China give birth, Esch describes China as "fighting like she was born to do. Fight our shoes, fight other dogs, fights these puppies that are reaching for the outside" (2). By portraying China as an aggressor, Ward identifies that giving birth ensues a struggle that relying on our most shared, base animal instinct: ensuring the survival of the offspring at the cost of your own. Ward also indicates that China's physical body rages against the process occurring within her. As the puppies push forth, China "snarls, her mouth a black line. Her eyes are red; the mucus runs pink. Everything about [her] tenses and there are a million marbles under her skin, and then she seems to be turning herself inside out. At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming" (Ward 4). China's physical reaction demonstrates how birth is gruesome; the puppies moving within n China her are described as making war, and in order to birth them, China turns herself "insight out; , Ward and suggests that the mothers are is left the most vulnerable after delivering. China's natural proclivity to fight, and the sacrifices she makes on behalf of her physical body, imagines how Black women mothers living in the south are expected to fight harder and be more aggressive in their roles as mothers.

The threat of impending mortality during childbirth weighs heavily on Esch's

mind, as her own mother died during delivery. While watching China, Esch associates the experience of losing her mother, and observing the damage that was done to her body during her last birth, to the process of giving birth. The “tearing” and “straining” to “push...and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try to stay inside her, but instead, he pulled it out with him when he was born” illustrates the trauma that Esch’s mother experienced (4). In both descriptions, birth is likened to a ruinous process; to give birth is no easy feat, it isn’t even always safe. Ward offers a unique criticism of the self-sacrificial maternal ideology that views this sacrifice as an important step in owning one’s female subjectivity and maternal agency. Since birth is presented as a personal cost to the mother, and the mother is expected to bear the pain, Wards argues that black women are uniquely able to harness this biological and ecological connection to womanhood. According to Layli Maparyan in her book *The Womanist Reader*, motherly power is tethered to a sense of unbreakable ties that bind black women to their community because motherhood serves as a trope of the eco-womanist social and ecological formulation. This is what distinguishes [womanism] from other forms of social or environmental activism. Ward’s descriptions of birth demonstrate how the tethers of womanism work; Black women develop a connection to nature, their interior body, and to their contributions and allegiances to their community.

Motherhood and Sing, Unburied, Sing

Leonie’s portrait of motherhood is troubled, even frustrated, by her surroundings. Rather than feeling validated by the landscape through this role (as seen with Esch), Leonie is aware of her failures and short comings as a mother. Throughout the novel, Ward compares Leonie to her mother, Mam, and offers a sympathetic representation of

mothers who struggle to fulfill their maternal roles, thereby stunting their prospects of natural reclamation. Whereas Mam reaches a state of reclamation in the natural world, her daughter Leonie, struggles with a drug addiction that stunts her ability to enter natural space. Ward's awareness of ecological representation is sympathetic, rather than critical, of Black women who fall victim to drug use. Leonie represents the perpetuated stereotype of Black mothers; that they are incapable and unfit. Therefore, instead of leaving Leonie's characterization as ineffective, Ward uses an expression of eco-womanism to detail how and why outside influences have affected Leonie's ability to mother.

Leonie's style of mothering is juxtaposed against Mam's because Mam is figurative of the tranquility and purpose found between motherhood, bodies, and natural spaces. There is a supernatural quality underscoring Mam's presence that connects her to surrounding landscape.

Mam's personal devotion to her role as a mother and her maternal instincts propels her influence within natural spaces, because Mam holds the belief that "if [you] look carefully enough, [you] can find what [you] need in the world" (Ward 102). Mam has harnessed the profits of the landscape by using its resources to care for those around her. Mam's role as a midwife also advances her role in nature because it also verifies her role as a healer for women. Leonie is in awe of her mother's talents. When she finds out that her mother delivered babies for a living, she expresses "Mama became more than my mother, that half smile hinted at the secrets of her life, 8all those things she'd learned and said and seen and lived" (Ward 42)⁹According to Dunning, placing black women in nature "provokes a deep sense of natural connectedness and wonder, which invites us to rethink the cultural dismissal of Black women. In this way nature functions

cooperatively... as an interlocutor to stage questions of comfort, love, and place in relation to Black womanhood” (Dunning 35). Ward’s characterization of Mam intentionally associates her with natural settings, conflating motherhood and nature as the major components of her identity, on par with the importance of her Blackness. Mam is representative of the transformative tenet of eco-womanism that supports the idea that nature becomes an important player of self-acceptance and affirmation in the Black, female identity.

Ward suggests that the reality of a hereditary maternal instinct is unrealistic at best. Even though Leonie is tethered to a maternal legacy, Ward suggests that Mam’s ability to work with, not against, the unpredictable terrain of Bois Savage is because she has embraced motherhood as a part of her identity rather than a performative obligation. Therefore, Leonie’s struggle to find comfort within her position basically serves this connection. Even when Mam lures Leonie into the woods, pointing out “plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt,” these lessons do not strengthen Leonie’s connection to the earth (Ward 102). Leonie describes her juvenile resistance towards her mother’s instruction: “I’d...roll my eyes to the pines, wishing I were in front of the TV, not out trudging through the woods with my mama talking about periods” (Ward 103). However, Leonie’s childish frustration with her mother manifests into an adult neurosis where she blames her incapacity to mother on the high expectations that Mam has set. She states, “I felt myself wrestle with wanting to be a mother, with wanting to bear a baby into the world, to carry it throughout life. How I wanted to be a different kind of woman, how I’d wanted to move somewhere far away, go west to California” (Ward 158). Leonie experiences of motherhood offer

different reality than her mother's; she is a single parent, raising two children in a single-income home. In fact, it can be argued that because of her mother, Leonie has experiences guilt because she has inherited expectations that she feels she cannot achieve. Many social scientists have emphasized the negative facets that familial or communal support can have on low-income black mothers, including internal harm, such as stress, depression, unmet expectation, and hard feelings (Garrett-Peters and Burton, 5). The argument can be made that part of Leonie's neurosis is that she has failed to meet either the expectations that her mother has for her, or the expectations that Leonie has for herself.

Ward creates a portrait of motherhood that has suffered under the harmful stereotypes associated with Black mothers. According to authors Linda M. Blum and Theresa Deussen, "when Black mothers are referred to in the public discourse, they are portrayed stereotypically... as weak and irresponsible mothers. Such treatments obscure the structural causes of poverty and ignore women's interests" (200). Therefore, Leonie's drug usage should be evaluated in a more empathetic light, opposed to branding it as racialized, motherly incapability. Ward asks us to reconsider our cultural dismissal of Black mothers who are drug addicts. Ward suggests that the pressures associated with Black motherhood are an extension of social discrimination. When Leonie speaks of her addiction, her condition suggests that the risk and deterioration that she put her body through is more palpable than accepting that her social environment wants, if not entirely demands her, to fail. There is a dissociative quality in Leonie's language when she talks about taking drugs. Unlike Esch, who's whose pregnancy advanced her connection to nature and allowed her to supersede the social stigmas dealt to her, Leonie's addiction

persists even when she is pregnant. Leonie reluctantly contends that even though she was pregnant, she “couldn’t help wanting to feel the coke go up my nose, shoot straight to my brain, and burn up all the sorrow and despair I felt” (Ward 51). Drugs, though retroactively harming her physical and mental body, are the way that Leonie suppresses the major aspects of her identity that cause her pain- her blackness, her womanhood, and her own failing stability in her ability to mother. The relief she feels from drugs numbs the realities of her identity and position within her environment, and Ward suggests that Leonie’s addiction supplements the healing sedative that comes from ecological reclamation.

The emerging tension between Mam and Leonie’s ecological environment reveals that, unlike her mother’s, the terrain that Leonie finds herself in is anything less than orderly and easy to navigate. Leonie laments that “[Mam] thought that if she taught me as much herbal healing as she could, if she gave me a map to the world as she knew it, a world plotted orderly by divine order, spirit in everything, I could navigate it” (Ward 105). Whereas Mam relishes in the abundances of the earth and what it provides, Leonie’s environment is a reflection of the barren and sickly. Leonie’s ecological orientation allows her to conclude that “sometimes the world don’t give you what you need, no matter how hard look. Sometimes it withholds” (Ward 104). Leonie’s cynicism understands that the world is not so easily navigated, and that by denying her maternal attachments, Leonie fails to harness the maternal legacy of her mother. Ward suggests that when Black women find themselves on the outskirts of society, or on the outskirts of nature, rejecting their connection to nature becomes a misguided and destructive way of obtaining and reclaiming autonomy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Evaluating Jesmyn Ward's works from an eco-womanist lens is fruitful because she validates the cross-sections of Black female identities on southern soil. Ward is weary of the racism that permeates within southern geography, producing within its communities prejudice, and instead uses it to create a reinvention of narratives for those that are underrepresented in the American South's literary cannon. By placing Black women in natural spaces of the south, Ward allows her protagonists to achieve ecological healing from the landscape that has perpetuated violence, abuse, and discrimination against Black bodies. By employing a creative expression of eco-womanism, Ward suggests that in order to achieve an ecological whole, we must be attentive to intersectional identities and the material, political, and social consequences that arise from them.

Future critical work would benefit from employing an eco-womanist lens when studying Black, Southern authors. From legacy writers such as Alice Walker and Zora Neal Hurston, to contemporary authors like Ward, eco-womanist thinking will challenge our perceptions of environmental writing by using it as a framework to address the intersections of race, class, and gender in the American South.

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