

MEMORY, MEMOIR, & MISSISSIPPI: A DECOLONIAL APPROACH
TO SOUTHERN IDENTITY IN JESMYN WARD,
NATASHA TRETHEWEY,
AND KIESE LAYMON

by

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DEDICATION

For Emerson Gray Lehenbauer,
for showing me how to be
mama, wife, friend, writer, student,
professional, and ultimately human
— all at once.

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I have always loved reading and writing so I chose to major in English, but as an undergraduate, I was unsure what to pursue as a minor. I met with my advisor in the basement of 200-year-old building at The University of Mississippi and asked her “What can I minor in to help me get a job?” She briefly replied, “Southern Studies.” She may have been wrong about it being a tangible degree for finding a job, but she did launch me into a passion for understanding what it means to be a Southerner and how the contradictions of the South are full of pain and beauty. This thesis is a product of that passion that started in that basement in 2012. It could not have happened without a community of Southerners (and some non-Southerners) that supported and encouraged me. Those listed below are just a few of the most important people who make up my village during the time of the thesis writing process, but I owe many thanks to past professors, teachers, family members, co-workers, friends, and more.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Why Mississippi?	2
Challenging the Southern Tradition	8
Decolonialism in the American South	13
Decolonial Feminism	20
Black Literary Tradition	23
Finding Memory & Truth in Black Abundance	32
II. NATASHA TRETHEWEY AND THE GRIEF OF THE SOUTH	39
Coming of Age in Tragedy	40
History and Memory in Natasha Trethewey's Poetry	53
III. JESMYN WARD'S DECOLONIAL FEMINIST SOUTH	61
Jesmyn Ward's Empathetic South	61
The Journey to 'Mother' in <i>Salvage the Bones</i>	75
IV. KIESE LAYMON AND THE SEARCH FOR BLACK ABUNDANCE	89
Kiese Laymon's Trauma and Black Abundance	91
<i>Long Division</i> : A Protest Novel	108
BIBLIOGRAPHY	120

I. INTRODUCTION

Natasha Trethewey, Jesmyn Ward, and Kiese Laymon showcase a progressive South in their writings: one that is decolonial and feminist but maybe not as *new* as we think. These writers employ decolonial thought and strategies by deconstructing the influence of oppression through their stories of being Black in Mississippi. While the term decolonial often references Native American work, it also applies to the work of these three authors as they deconstruct the impact of slavery, the need for reparations and progress, and the authentic experience of being Black in the American South today. They write in ways that connect them to their ancestors and reveal the widely suppressed, unwelcome truths of American colonial history while also telling the story of hope and love for a place that has not always loved them back. They intervene in the long-commandeered premises of Southern literature by being politically progressive, engaging with the true dark histories through their own experiences, and uplifting Black Southern women and their stories.

Ted Ownby, who analyzes what New Southern Studies means, comes to the conclusion that a more progressive and evolving South is often political. He writes, “Within the works of the New Southern Studies, it is clear that the writing itself is politically inspired. Challenging past questions and assumptions, exploring through multiple perspectives, and taking seriously global interconnectedness all have political meanings” (876). To the average white reader, Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward may seem to be redefining the South and engaging in continuous political conversations, but they are writing about the South they have always known: a South that has deep roots in colonialism, classism, sexism, racism, capitalism, and still operates in a system of

oppression. The challenge of this oppression is neither new to them and their communities nor new to Black writers. This does not make these writers more global. Rather, it highlights a South that has always existed but which, due to social hierarchies and systems of racism, capitalism, colonialism, and sexism, has largely ignored the authentic narratives of Black folks by focusing on whitewashed culture and literature.

Why Mississippi?

While studying as an English major at the University of Mississippi, I minored in Southern Studies. Southern Studies exposed me to the sociology, history, anthropology, and literature of the South. Going to college down the street from William Faulkner's house exposed me to Mississippi writers early in my college career and led me to writers like Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward. I was also struck by the shelves at Square Books, the local bookstore, that were filled with Mississippians and Southern writers. Mississippi charmed me in unexpected ways while I lived there for undergraduate and graduate school. On a random Saturday morning, my friend and I chatted up with a local baker, who immigrated from Spain, and learned how he molded and fired his own pottery out of clay he pulled from a nearby river. My husband taught high school in the Mississippi Delta in Marks, where Martin Luther King Jr began his March on Washington. On Friday nights, we would attend high school football games, enjoy Kool-Aid pickles, and admire the bright purples, reds, and blues of the night sky. One of my closest friends worked with Bill Luckett, democrat and co-owner of the Blues club Ground Zero with Morgan Freeman, during his gubernatorial campaign in Clarksdale, Mississippi. During a trip to

drop off his office keys after the election, we all had lunch together at his club ('a meat and three with sweet tea' was on the menu) and talked about the wonders of Mississippi: blues music, art, Southern hospitality, and hope for progress. On my shoulder, I have a tattoo of a Magnolia flower (the state flower). My husband proposed to me at a famous bookstore in Oxford called Square Books, and we later got married just down the street. After living there and no longer being students, we became "townies" of sorts, and there was a rumor that people that were not invited to our wedding were going to come anyway. We asked for the rumor to be spread around town so that they could come after dinner was served. The stories of friendship, kindness, and empathy made me fall in love with the place. W. Ralph Eubanks writes, "When a place is experienced through the lens of the real and the imagined, whether through our own eyes or those of a writer, it takes on a heightened sense of reality. This heightened sense of reality prompts us to think about how a place can exist that is both charming and oppressive, both racist and hospitable, and both beautiful and painful." I experienced a heightened sense of this charm and beauty through its sunsets, drinking coffee on bookstore porches, tailgating in the Grove, and driving along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. But, even through all the beauty, I could still see the oppression, racism, and pain that existed around me.

While I was in undergraduate college at The University of Mississippi in 2010—six years before President Trump was elected—the KKK held a rally during the tailgate at a football game. There ended up being more protesters than KKK members at the rally and a student wrote to the Huffington Post: "The real story of the day was the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who gathered peacefully and read the University's creed in unison repeatedly a few hundred feet from where the Klan had gathered." I was not at

this game, but I knew many students that were. The fact that the KKK still existed was shocking to me at a time when some believed we were in a post-racial society now that the United States elected a Black president, but I was proud to go to a university that was willing to stand up to this kind of hate. As a young white woman, I learned this was not the first encounter that I would face with the darker side of Mississippi. I was a bystander when the KKK came to campus, but during the remainder of my time at the University, I would be a reporter. When President Obama was reelected in 2012, I watched the results roll in with my best friend at my house. I woke up the next morning to reports of a “riot” on campus where students had gathered to light Obama campaign posters on fire. I worked for the school paper at the time, and our reporting showed that it was not as much a riot, but a handful of white students who had been drinking. Three years later, I stood at the center of our campus while in graduate school and watched as a reinvigorated NAACP chapter fought to stop flying the Mississippi state flag on our campus because it had within it an emblem of the Confederate flag. The flag was indeed changed, years after I left. In 2001, The University of Mississippi discontinued the mascot, Colonel Reb, who was a clear caricature of a white plantation owner. For ten years, there was no mascot, but they still played the song “Dixie” at the end of every game while most white students and alumni chanted “The South will Rise Again.” Finally, in 2011, the students voted to have a black bear as their mascot. Then in 2020, those students voted to replace the bear with a Landshark, which represented a nickname regarding the football team’s defense. To this day, many people wear a sticker to almost every football game that reads, “Colonel Reb is my mascot,” even though it has been over 20 years since he was on the field. A few years after the University recognized its 50-year anniversary of racial

integration as James Meredith became the first Black student, white students hung a noose on the statue of Meredith overnight. In my last year of graduate school in journalism, my letter from the editor for The Ole Miss yearbook outlined these experiences and others. When I presented it to my advisor, Pat, for final edits, she told me that it was ready to publish but to prepare myself for hate mail for pointing out that students still experienced racism on campus. She was right. Coming from Florida to Mississippi highlighted for me that America was still reeling with oppression and exposed the ramifications of a racist American society. Even though I know now that for Black folks what I was experiencing was not new, it showed me why Mississippi highlighted the systems of oppression Americans faced.

James Meredith, who was the first Black student to attend the University of Mississippi, is often honored on campus for his continued activism in Mississippi. At a book reading in the early 2010s, he said:

“Mississippi is the center of the universe,” he said. “The two biggest issues in western Christian civilization are the white-black race issue and the rich-and-poor issue. Mississippi is at the apex of both. And if anybody in the world can solve the problem, it’s Mississippi.” (qtd. in Grant 101)

What makes it significant is that Mississippi, like America, has a long history of systemic racism, classism, gender roles, crime, and poverty (to name a few), but it seems to amplify these issues and systems of oppression as a place full of contradictions. In Mississippi, Emmett Till was violently killed essentially because of his Blackness, and freedom Riders were murdered while trying to register Black voters. In contrast, where music began with Black folks and Blues music in the Mississippi Delta, Mississippi has

more Grammy winners than any other state. According to Bob Santelli, the Music Historian and Founding Executive Director at the Grammy museum, “Without Mississippi, there would be no American music.”

In the book *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*, Imani Perry writes about how the South and its significance on a national scale. She writes, “Paying attention to the South—its past, its dance, its present, its threatening future, and most of all how it moves the rest of the country about — allows us to understand much more about our nation, and about how our people, land, and commerce work in relation to one another, often cruelly, and about how our tastes and ways flow from our habits” (Perry xix). Perry is pointing to the ways that the South often falls under a particular lens when it comes to the social issues of the United States. She continues to say in her book:

When it comes to choreography, most folks are lost. They think they know the South’s moves. They believe the region is out of step, off rhythm, lagging behind, and stumbling. It is a convenient misunderstanding. This country was made with the shame of slavery, poverty, and White supremacy blazoned across it as a badge of dishonor. To sustain a heroic self concept, it has inevitably been deemed necessary to distance ‘America’ from the embarrassment over this truth. And so the South, the seat of race in the United States, was turned on, out and into the country’s gully. (Perry xvi)

In other words, the deep South often takes the heat for these issues. The contradictions that represent the best and worst parts of Mississippi are hard to put into words after discussing all of the ways that the state represents hate. In the book *Dispatches from*

Pluto, British journalist Richard Grant decides to move to a small Delta town in Mississippi. He spent much of his career traveling and writing about his explorations but decided that he and his partner would settle down in Pluto, Mississippi. This memoir narrates his experiences, and he writes often about the contradictions and complexities of racism in the Mississippi Delta. He writes about Mississippi:

Nowhere else is so poorly understood by outsiders, so unfairly maligned, so surreal and peculiar, so charming and maddening. Individually, collectively, and above all politically, Mississippians have a kind of genius for charging after phantoms and lost causes. Nowhere else in the world have I met so many fine, generous, honorable people, but if you look at the statistics, and read the news stories coming out of Mississippi, the state gives every appearance of being a redneck disaster zone. (2)

As William Faulkner famously once said, “To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.” (You can now buy that quote on a t-shirt or print on Etsy for under twenty dollars). When you experience a place like Mississippi it brings up its history and memory, and in order to better understand it through literature, I wanted to explore it through a decolonial lens. Reading Mississippi writing through such a lens gives the reader a heightened sense of reality and allows them to evaluate how and why these contradictions exist. Eubanks explains:

When Nina Simone sings ‘Everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam,’ images of the violent, turbulent civil rights era come to mind, and those scenes from the past become vividly real. Natasha Trethewey evokes a different image in ‘Theories of Time and Space’ when she implores you, her reader, to head south

on U.S. Route 49 until it dead-ends in the coastal town of Gulfport, asks you to walk on its artificial beach, and then reminds you to ‘Bring only what you must carry—tome of memory, its random blank pages.’ These two impressions of Mississippi—one forged in anger and the other in a mixture of love, memory, loss and recovery—have much in common. What each writer reveals are the complex emotions that a place so beautiful yet so confounding can bring about. (13)

Mississippi carries a specific tension because it can be a beautiful, welcoming, and warm place while also being a place filled with hate and a dark history that it continually wrestles with when it comes to understanding race, sexism, and classism. The writing and experience coming from the South is unique because “[a]lthough the South was not unique in generating attachment to a place, southern writers and others have long seen that quality as an identifiable one in understanding the region as a particular construct” (Wilson 85). This particular construct is one that faces an oppressive system while also ignoring the very system it created. Writing in and about the South as someone who is drawn to the place while also being burned continually by the place as it reveals the ways that it harms women and people of color creates experiences of racism, sexism, and classism that lead me to discover and explore them through a decolonial feminist lens.

Challenging the Southern Tradition

Mississippi is important to me and I wanted to understand how I could take the root of my research project and transform it to my scholarly interest in literature. I began my research reading the essay, “Postsouthern Literature,” by the novelist George Hovis.

There, he writes that, “‘Postsouthern’ is a term that has been widely used in recent years to describe literature recently produced in and about the American South, as well as a way of reading southern literature and talking about the ‘South’ in general” (126). He expands on this definition to say, “if we accept the broadest definition of ‘postsouthern literature’ mean[s] work that (1) describes a place and culture that is no longer distinctively southern (or that calls into question traditional assumptions about southern culture) and/or (2) exhibits a sensibility fundamentally different from the preceding literature of the Southern Literary Renaissance” (Hovis 127). Hovis’s conceptualization of postsouthern literature is important to acknowledge because it refers to writers and thinkers who contribute to a more global understanding of the South. However, I disagree with Hovis that postsouthern literature no longer describes a place and culture that is distinctively Southern. His implication is that the South is no longer unique and that its history has no effect on the outcome of the art and literature coming from the region. This idea is similar to an idea that became popular during Obama’s presidency: the idea of a post-racial society, which implied that we no longer saw race in America (Grover).

Postcolonial theorist Ania Loomba writes, “Today, we live in a world that is sometimes described as ‘post racial’—one in which older ideas of racial differences are supposed to have all but vanished” (113). As she notes, a “post-racial” society is not realistic and does not really exist. American culture and society still oppress any person identified as non-white. A postsouth would imply that racism and racial tensions have diminished after the civil rights movement. This is simply not true. Arguably, a postsouth will never exist in a world where the systems of oppression in the South remain socially, economically, and governmentally.

The work coming from the contemporary South counteracts these systems on a large scale—pushing beyond the “traditional” Faulknerian lens of white writers and showcasing marginalized modern writers and their Southern identity as a priority. Black writers have been doing this work for centuries, but I wanted to consider in this thesis—Natasha Trethewey, Jesmyn Ward, and Kiese Laymon—as they align with a long line of tradition of decolonial writing in the “Southern” because they represent the voices of the South that have long been silenced politically and traditionally. While white culture and white supremacy in America attempt to erase the memory and history, Natasha Trethewey, Jesmyn Ward, and Kiese Laymon work to recover these histories, memories, and ideas by putting them at the center of Southern literature. They do not gloss over them but instead speak about their experiences as Black Mississippians. Scholars like Jay Watson argue that the South is becoming more global, which he believes reflects less on distinctly Southern culture. He writes, “a postmodern South might appear considerably less southern, in any fundamental or distinctive sense, than the South of even a few generations before. It might not appear southern at all” (146). This perspective is arguably whitewashed and lacks the understanding of racial oppression today. The South has not changed and people of color are still experiencing systems of oppression in daily life. This, I think, represents a shift of perspective on how Southern thinkers and writers are perceived. Mississippi is a place that deeply reflects colonial and patriarchal systems, and long has done so.

The South is not the only place in America where systems of oppression are evident as it is an American problem as much as a Southern problem. Perry in *South to America* challenges the ideas of Postsouthern by addressing the role race plays

specifically in the South head on. She writes:

Yet “racism” despite all evidence of ubiquity, is still commonly described as ‘belonging’ to the South. I don’t just mean that other regions ignore their racism and poverty and project them onto the South, although that is certainly true. I also mean that the cruelest labor of sustaining the racial-class order was historically placed upon the South. Its legacy of racism then is of course bloodier than most. But other regions are bloody in deed. Discrimination is everywhere, but collectively the country has leeched off the racialized exploitation of the South while also denying it... Remember the Deep South was made at a crossroads between the lust for cotton and the theft of Indigenous land” (Perry xxvii - xxviii)

Race and the lingering effects of a colonial system are still very much at play in the South and influencing every Southerner. So, even though the South is not the only place experiencing racism and discrimination, it is specifically being exploited and carries a specific history that amplifies racial segregation and hierarchies.

In an effort to better research and understand the true history of America, Nikole Hannah-Jones started *The 1619 Project*. She deconstructs and reconstructs the perspective of history that Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward share: they are all contributors to *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, the book that was published after the podcast won a Pulitzer Prize. Jones’ original 1619 podcast created a mass reaction politically in America because it outlined a reality about slavery and oppression many had never heard of or accepted before. In the preface to the book, Hannah-Jones describes how few Americans have actually studied slavery and its roots in American history. She writes, “A 2018 Report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) called Teaching Hard History

found that in 2017 just 8 percent of U.S. high school seniors named slavery as the central cause of the Civil War, and less than one-third knew that it had taken a constitutional amendment to abolish it” (xx). This particular aspect of American history is neither taught to, nor understood by, Americans. She continues to explain how the “American public has an outdated and vague sense of the past” (xxi). Even with these academic failings, “the 2019 *Washington Post* poll found that despite their meager knowledge of slavery, two-thirds of Americans believe that the legacy of slavery still affects our society today. They can see and feel the truth of this fact—they just haven’t learned a history that helps them understand how and why” (xxi). Ward, Trethewey, and Laymon understand this and demonstrate the ways that even though the true and lived experiences of the history of the South may not be acknowledged by all, its effects are widely evident. Once we establish that white supremacy and patriarchy shape the American South, we can begin analyzing these texts through a decolonial lens, one that can analyze and inspect how the lasting systems of colonialism affected the formerly enslaved populations of the South, particularly Black people. Slavery is a core part of the colonial process, which makes decolonial thought explicitly antislavery thought.

I focus here on the memoirs written by Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon, but I also consider selections from their primary work as novelists or poets. Their memoirs offer insights into how their own personal experiences influenced them and their work; this personal focus led me to analyze their texts through the lens of decolonial theory. A theme I found was that these writers show how they and their characters navigated through deeply colonial and patriarchal systems, ultimately finding their identities as powerful thinkers in Mississippi. In this thesis, I aim to further explore how this

contemporary writing contributes to an overall exploration of what it means to be a contemporary Southern writer in a way that is decolonial.

Decolonialism in the American South

The American South is known for various famous Southern Renaissance writers like William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Carson McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty. Their writing is full of “themes of agrarian life, the memory of the Old South and the Civil War, religious values, the tension of the biracial society, and the modernization of society connected their literary achievements with southern life itself” (Wilson 84). Their writing has been identified as being very distinctly southern, primarily because it is set in and about the struggles of the South. Their writing influences contemporary Southern literature but often writes to and for a white audience and continues to feed into traditional white narratives of the South.

In order to understand how contemporary writers like Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward employ decolonial thoughts and strategies, we must first define the ways colonialism reveals itself in both the past and the present of the American South. According to Ania Loomba, colonization is a movement that disrupts not only the people that live on specific land but also the economy by controlling the lands and goods. (20). In the essay, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang define two forms of colonialism. First is external colonialism which “denotes the expropriation of fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings, extracting them in order to transport them to - and build the wealth, the privilege, or feed the appetites of -

the colonizers, who get marked as the first world” (4). The second form of colonialism is internal colonialism, which is “the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the ‘domestic’ borders of imperial nation” (4). This type of colonialism is used for “modes of control - prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing - to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite” (5). Both internal and external colonialism are apparent in the United States and the Southern region of the United States.

These forms of colonialism have developed and evolved over centuries. They overlap and build on one another, further defining the settler colonialism and planter colonialism and influencing the nation-state that we know today. Settler colonialism is defined as “large numbers of settlers claim land and become the majority” (Shoemaker). Settler colonialism is crucial to understanding how slavery and Native American displacement shaped the south (E. Tuck & K.W. Yang 6). Planter colonialism is defined as when “colonizers institute mass production of a single crop, such as sugar, coffee, cotton, or rubber. This was especially a unique case in the American South, though a minority, members of the ruling class might belong to an empire that enables their political, legal, and administrative control” (Shoemaker). This is integral at defining slavery and its role in Southern history. And although Shoemaker is referring to the past, it's important to acknowledge that the consequences have carried to today. Loomba defines colonialism as economic, but it is also important to note its cultural effects. Slavery was absolutely economic, but it was also “far more than a business. It became the basis for a particular outlook, with norms of behavior, expectations, and relationships defining planter family lives of privilege and shaping their culture” (Wilson 25). Their

labor demands cannot be satisfied by the native population, so they stole African people or indentured laborers, as with the ‘coolie’ and ‘blackbirding’ trades” (Shoemaker).

Planter and settler colonization heavily influenced the American South: it is crucial to understand that white settlers first stole land from Native Americans and then employed chattel slavery, or slave ownership by individuals, “as a basis of a productive economic system” (Wilson 25). Tuck and Yang write more about how settler and planter colonization can be connected:

Settler colonization involves the subjugation of and forced labor of chattel slaves, whose bodies and lives become property, and who are kept landless. Slavery in settler colonial contexts is distinct from other forms of indenture whereby excess labor is extracted from persons. First, chattels are commodities of labor and therefore it is the slave’s *person* that is the excess. Second, unlike workers who may aspire to own land, the slaves very presence on the land is already an excess that must be dis-located. Thus, the slave is a desirable commodity but the person underneath is imprisonable, punishable and murderable. The violence of keeping/killing the chattel slave makes them deathlike monsters in the settler imagination; they are reconfigured/disfigured as the threat, the razor’s edge of safety and terror. (6)

Chattel slavery caused by planter colonization directly links to settler colonization because when settlers arrived in America, they decided that they did not have enough paid labor to produce the specific crops necessary for economic growth in the aggressively capitalist system. To make the system work under cheaper labor, the American South invented the slave system to create large profits (Wilson). The slave

system was essential to white wealthy planters and their scheme for economic control and success.

Although slavery in this context no longer exists, the implications of slavery and the control of land by white wealthy settlers still affects American Southern culture. White wealthy settlers influenced and wrote Southern history, eliding the unpalatable and dishonorable truths about the colonial slave system. In the essay, “Ethnic Studies can’t Make up for the Whitewashed History in Classrooms,” Jonathan Zimmerman writes, “According to a CBS investigation this year, seven states do not mention slavery in their state history standards. Should we be surprised then that 44 percent of high school students in a recent survey did not know that slavery was legal in all of the colonies before the American Revolution? Or that only 8 percent of students can identify slavery as the cause of the Civil War? That’s a central fact of American history.” The authors I chose to analyze in this paper prod at this kind of whitewashed history of Mississippi by foregrounding personal and community memory as a counterpoint to a “history” that would not recognize the truths they knew and through which their lives have been shaped. As the writers unpack, dismantle, and disrupt the whitewashed history of the United States, they rely on some postcolonial strategies to address and influence their work.

Postcolonialism is connected to colonialism. Arguably, there is no such thing as postcolonialism because in American culture we still live in a society deeply affected by colonialism, as noted earlier. Loomba writes about this: “It is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of

colonialism” (32-33). Loomba also notes, postcolonial is a general term that notes the influence of colonialism, like white supremacy. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note how postcolonial theory is thought to focus on the “political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century” (Oxford Bibliographies). Postcolonial critique asserts that we are no longer “colonial” because we are no longer legally controlled by European empires, but the implications of being colonized are still present. I find this to be true, especially in the American South as colonialism and the way of life it created heavily influenced our society. As Tuck and Yang write, “Not unique, the United States, as a settler colonial nation-state, also operates as an empire — utilizing external forms and internal forms of colonization simultaneous to the settler colonial project. This means, and this is perplexing to some, that dispossessed people are brought onto seized Indigenous land through other colonial projects” (Tuck and Yang 7). Heavily influenced by settler colonialism and planter colonialism, the American South still wrestles with the implications of the economic success for white Southerners and then the demise of slavery while also holding onto the whitewashed historical narrative of the Old South and white supremacy.

If colonization is the control of goods and services in a place (Loomba), what does this mean for a society where people were made to be the goods and services? How does this affect what reparations look like to Black Americans? Decolonization implies the creation of reparations for the land that white settlers stole and filled with stolen people. Black folks must then reclaim the land that was never theirs within the United States’ legal system, but also never truly belonged to the white families that claimed it.

Critically, decolonization can go beyond only land reparations and can be extended through initially theoretical approaches. Alana Lentin said, “Decolonizing approaches are useful because they focus not only on theoretical deconstructions of the colonial structures which many critics argue continue to shape relationships between states and peoples across the globe, but also on the proposition of alternatives to them, sometimes through an appeal to the precolonial” (Lentin). It is important to understand that decolonization is different than postcolonialism (although they are connected). Lentin dissects what postcolonialism means in a theoretical way and says, “the postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an — after being worked over by colonialism.’ So postcolonial criticism is neither inside nor outside of colonialism, rather it is in tangential relation to it, occupying an in-between position, as Homi Bhabha puts it.” But are we postcolonial if the effects of colonialism are a part of everyday life in places like Mississippi that Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon, describe?

Theorist María Lugones writes, “Postcolonialism, then, is a word that is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications... it can be compared to the concept of ‘patriarchy’ in feminist thought” (38). The texts I will analyze refer most directly to the repercussions of a planter colonial system while taking a decolonial stance to the still ongoing effects of the system. These authors work to delink themselves from ideas of colonialism: “This process of delinking doesn’t mean attempting to exist outside of modernity or indeed Christian, liberal, capitalist or marxist hegemony. Rather, the aim is to reject the naturalising assumptions made by these four macro-narratives (in this sense, the aim is similar to postcolonialism’s repudiation of master narratives)” (Lentin). The writers are decolonial because they combat the systems of oppression for generations by

taking back the narrative and directly confronting and resisting the master Southern narratives. They unapologetically write about their lived experiences as being Black or mixed-race in the American South. Tuck and Yang write, “in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically” (7). Even though it is not a major aspect of the texts, there is land to reclaim for these authors, specifically for Ward who writes about the inheritance of her family’s land. However, the understanding of this stolen land is complicated due to the settler status of the planters. Could Land reparations could be more about memory and how it is marked on the land? In a colonialist land, the marking of the land would not ever acknowledge the violence, horror, and pain of slavery in any official or sufficient capacity (i.e., a glamorously restored plantation used for weddings with maybe a hidden plaque that alludes vaguely to the number of enslaved people once living there). In the decolonial landscape of the South, we would see lynchings marked and publicly mourned. As Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative is currently doing throughout the South and across the nation — as they fight for racial and economic justice in the present.

The strategies of decolonial writing have been happening in Black literary tradition long before Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey. Decolonization did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century as a theory, but writers have been utilizing decolonial strategies in the South long before then. In this thesis, I highlight several aspects of decolonial strategies, especially those that point to a decolonial South. First, these writers use expository and didactic voices when narrating both in fiction and in their memoirs.

Second, they approach history in a way that intervenes. They work to expose a South in a way that challenges or rewrites the white-dominated history of the South. Third, many of these writers disrupt the colonial imposed linear timeline to history. Their fiction, poetry, and memoirs do not abide by a specific timeline. This is also distinctly Southern. Imani Perry writes in her book about the way the South fails to follow a linear timeline, “And we teachers, historians, and patriots all have inherited a British inclination to tell history in a linear forward sequence. But that just won't work for the story of the South. Or the nation” (Perry xvi). This is a distinctly decolonial idea and is common in Black Southern writing and storytelling. Fourth, these writers, especially Trethewey, deconstructs monumentalism by invoking state-sponsored monuments and challenging them in order to offer her rebuttal to their importance. Fifth, these authors prioritize the use of their memories as a tool for decolonial deconstruction. The form of self-writing steps away from standard white narrative and allows the focus to be on the true experiences over the traditional sense of history. And, lastly, these writers employ a decolonial strategy of emphasizing the importance and significance of community. The care and love of their communities trumps the individual, always. This is an important decolonial tool because it widens the scope of what defines these writers and the communities that they are writing to and about.

Decolonial Feminism

The effects of colonialism and white supremacy still exist and actively affect our society. They influence how society treats and understands people based on race,

sexuality, gender, and class. It is necessary that decolonialism include a feminist perspective. María Lugones writes:

I am proposing in working toward a decolonial feminism is to learn about each other as resisters to the colonality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the colonality arises. That is, the decolonial feminist's tasks begin by seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it. Seeing it, she sees the world anew, and then she requires herself to drop her enchantment with "woman," the universal, and begins to learn about other resisters of the colonial difference. (753)

The repercussions of colonization are apparent in the modern day. Lugones continues, "the colonality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power" (746). The intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class illustrates the necessity of progress against the systems of colonialism that are still apparent today. We can not talk about any without the others.

The implications of colonization affect people in everyday life in America. This is where the theories of decolonialism and feminism work together: the repercussions of settler colonialism still impact the access that marginalized people and communities have to basic needs. We are not a postcolonial or post-racial society. In her contemporary text *Hood Feminism*, Mikki Kendall discusses how Black women have been forgotten:

We rarely talk about basic needs as a feminist issue. Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all

feminist issues. Instead of a framework that focuses on helping women get basic needs met, all too often the focus is not on survival but on increasing privilege. For a movement that is meant to represent all women, it often centers on those who already have most of their needs met. (xv)

I wanted to include *Hood Feminism* because it represents the ways that Ward and Trethewey address their role in society as Black women. Jennifer Manning writes, “Decolonial feminist theory engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and Global South indigenous identity and gender while providing a space for the voices and experiences of silenced, ‘othered’ women” (1204). Trethewey and Ward have been ‘othered’ by white institutions, and much of their work is a response to this. This is especially true as Southern women, “The images of women, particularly southern women, were both marginalized and distorted” (Smith 77). In the Laymon chapter, I discuss further why I chose to include a man in my analysis of decolonial feminist texts, but he, Ward, and Trethewey recognize the ways that women, especially women of color, have been oppressed and they counter that with their personal memory and narratives of women in the South.

Decolonial feminism requires intersectionality; it is important when talking about Black feminism. Zeng and Sarwar write about this in their essay, “Semiotics of Exile in Photography, Intersectional Racism and Epistemic Violence in Natasha Trethewey”:

Intersectionality is a term coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberle Williams Crenshaw in 1989, as an exploration of the intersecting layers of oppression black women suffer within society that is not determined by either race or gender separately, but by the overlapping of both. Today the analysis has expanded to

include many more aspects of social identity. Intersectionality originated from critical race studies and entails the interconnection of gender and race, and demonstrates a multifaced connection between race, gender, and other systems, such as class, economic status, geographical region and sexual orientation that work together to oppress some while allowing privilege to others. (Zeng and Sarwar 775)

Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon understand the layers of the need for intersectionality and how it applies to them and their communities. Intersectionality in feminism and beyond is important when discussing decolonialism because decolonialism and its theories are clear that a narrative that is often overlooked or disregarded is now being reclaimed and validated. This is true of decolonial feminism and represented in these writers.

Black Literary Tradition

One of the challenges in thinking through a deeply Southern setting is deciphering the effect of various influences while considering the colonial plantation context of the deep South, particularly in Mississippi. It is challenging to think and write in a way that exclusively carves out a decolonial space because a decolonial space cannot exist without colonization. This thesis focuses on the influences of colonialism and the ways that Black writers in Mississippi add to this space using decolonial tools. Ward, Trethewey, and Laymon write in a way that identifies the impact of a plantation colonial society and imagines a decolonial South despite the consequences of slavery in Mississippi. This is a goal of decolonization: to first understand the complexity of the American South through the ideology and practice of decolonial writing and then to decolonize the economic, psychic, and social systems. Decolonial practices have an effect on colonization in the

American South and beyond. Trethewey speaks to this idea in an interview. She says, “I’ve never wanted to erase history. What I’ve wanted to do is tell a fuller version and show how our shared histories as Americans overlap and intersect. Not two trains running on separate tracks but woven together.” Trethewey is referring to herself and the creators of the state sanctioned history as Americans. She is implying that their version of history is not incorrect, but incomplete. Her decolonial work or weaving these two histories together allows for her to reveal the version of history that represents herself and her community.

Ward, Laymon, and Trethewey exhibit decolonial theory and writing in ways that I find meaningful and significant, but it is not new to Black Southern writers. Black writers, not just Southern ones, have been employing what we might today recognize as deeply decolonial writing strategies for centuries. In this thesis, I chose to emphasize Ward, Laymon, and Trethewey as contemporary authors who write in a distinctly decolonial way, but they follow in the path of Black writers who utilized the same decolonial ideas and strategies of writing about Black abundance, Black joy, history, and memory. The truth that arises from the ancestry and generations of storytelling aligns with the decolonial theory outlined above. The decolonial writing strategies emphasize the significance of memory over history and empowerment over acceptance that Black Southern writers like Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, and Charles Waddell Chesnutt have deployed in their writing and thinking. For the sake of time, this thesis does not cover the extent that the decolonial Black literary tradition deserves. With my time and space constraints, I am unable to offer a full review of the impact and importance of Black literary tradition, but I draw on this

tradition as I explore the ways that Ward, Laymon, and Trethewey employ theories of decolonization in the South. I am drawing on this tradition by highlighting decolonial writing strategies that have long been part of Black literary tools. The authors I chose to analyze are not the first Black writers to utilize decolonial ideas, but they are doing so in a way that often challenges the status quo of the South and the United States. The work of Ward, Laymon, and Trethewey emerges from a Black literary tradition where decolonial theories and ideas emerged. An understanding of black literary traditions in the US allows one to see and understand a number of the writerly strategies that we can later identify as decolonial. These writers, who came after slavery and through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement, have responded to these social and economic conditions through their writing. Decolonial theory illuminates some of the strategies that the Black literary tradition has been implementing while pushing back against the system of patriarchy and white supremacy.

A flaw within this thesis that I want to address directly is how connected the ideas of Black history present as tied to the Confederacy and slavery. My lack of knowledge and expertise on the Black literary tradition unintentionally neglected 150 years of Black literary writers who set the stage for decolonial theory. In Southern Studies and even American studies, there is often an extensive focus on slavery and its ramifications that create a huge jump that skips over 150 years of struggle and innovation to modern history, and because of this, many Black writers (and much of Black history) from the time period after slavery are silenced, repressed, and erased. If I was to continue this work, I would hope to fully flush out Southern black literary tradition, its impact on Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon, and its significance in the discussion of Black writers in

the South. I would specifically address the ideas of Black literary tradition and research the influence of history on the Black literary tradition. I would also seek to understand the ways they are neglected in the white-washed mainstream. I recognize that there is a danger of me not addressing it explicitly because it contributes to reproducing the repression which is why this brief section is significant and important.

In much of Laymon's work, he highlights the ways in which Black literary tradition influences his work alongside the influence of the literary canon. In an interview for *The Rumpus*, Laymon is asked about the "canon" of literature and what we should do with it. He replies that the canon is not worth throwing in the trash, but that is exclusive. He continues:

When the word "canon" is used we're supposed to have this referential appreciation. And I love Eudora Welty but she's an artist and I think she'd want us to get up in there and mess around with her stuff. Tinker with it. Tell the world where it goes wrong. And because I'm not a literary critic, I critique the work by creating alternative work. So my book is absolutely a critique of *Black Boy*, absolutely a critique of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* or *Go Down, Moses* or *Absalom, Absalom!*. I'm thankful for that work and because of that love it means I'm going to get down and do something they didn't do. (Thomas)

Laymon makes many references to the Black literary tradition by mentioning and acknowledging significant Black writers like Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, bell hooks, Toni Morrison and many more. If I had more time, capacity, and expertise I would love to dig into Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey and explore the ways that they utilize the Black literary tradition that came before them. The literary history of Mississippi and the

South has precedence of influential writers like Ernest J. Gaines, George W. Henderson, and Etheridge Knight—to name a few. I think it would be important to bring them into the conversation in order to understand the ways that they have already done the decolonial work. My intention is not to say that Ward, Laymon, and Trethewey invented the decolonial ideas in Southern literature, but instead, they are building on existing ideas and narratives. This short section serves to emphasize the importance and significance of the more than 150 years of Black writers, after slavery but still in resistance to its ongoing effects, that came before and greatly influence Ward, Trethewey, and Laymon.

A key component of Decolonial Black Southern writing is joy, both living in joy and writing in joy. This kind of joy should be first acknowledged as an expression of Black emotion that goes beyond a white dominated system. Black abundance can just be and does not have to respond to anything. But, this type of joy in writing can be seen as a type of resistance to the white patriarchal systems at play because it goes against the white-dominated literary canon and establishment. Black joy can be, but doesn't have to be, defiant of the ramifications of slavery, Jim Crow, and general anti-blackness. This decolonial idea of Black joy is well-known in Black literary tradition as an authentic emotion and experience that is directly in contrast to injustice and suffering. Imani Perry often writes about the idea of being Black and finding joy. In the essay, "Racism is Terrible, Blackness is Not," Perry writes about her experience as a Black Southerner navigating this very world today. She writes:

Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and

with the new creative tides of anti-blackness directed toward us and our children.

We know the wail of a dying man calling for his mama, and it echoes into the distant past and cuts into our deepest wounds. The injustice is inescapable. So yes, I want the world to recognize our suffering. But I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy. (Perry, “Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not”)

This idea of joy and the immenseness of Blackness is essential to decolonial strategy because it rejects the continued efforts of repression that remains from the plantation colonial legacy. It is based on the tradition of the Black Southern writers that came before Perry, Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey. These writers are explicitly contrasting the consequences of a white patriarchal system that is based in colonization and began with slavery. It is not a new idea to these writers, but one that has been developed and studied for centuries, especially in the context of white Southern Studies. Although Southern Studies is inclusive of Black history and literature, it often passes over and does not deeply consider the Black literary history that has happened between slavery and present day — which makes the ways that Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey employ decolonial strategies feel new, when it is not. In the essay, “Whose Mississippi is it?” by Neely Tucker, he points to many of these writers while he simultaneously writes about the same new generation of Black Mississippian writers that are attempting to reclaim the state. He points to how Mississippi has been a stand-in for the South and its wrestling with the Confederacy:

But Mississippi’s bipolar nature has always had another reality, the opposite of the former. This is its status as the most predominantly black state in America.

This has been so for the past 180 years, and it was majority black for nearly a century. This side of the state is the gutbucket heart of the American narrative arts, of Charley Patton and Robert Johnson, of B.B. King and Muddy Waters, of Ida B. Wells and Richard Wright and Margaret Walker, of Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers, of Leontyne Price and James Earl Jones. Mississippi's "black abundance," in the words of writer Kiese Laymon, has always been what its white power structure has most sought to mute, exile, or diminish. (Tucker)

In this thesis, I point to the ways that Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey use decolonial theories that break through the white-washed Southern Studies narrative, but as Tucker points out there are many Mississippi writers and creatives that have already done this work. As Tucker lists above, these artists show us that they have often been overlooked by the white-dominated canon. They have long been creating and speaking out against the white power structure.

Zora Neale Hurston is arguably one of the most influential Southern writers. She not only wrote about the Black experience but wrote about the experience of living in the South and in America in a decolonial way. She is doing so before decolonial thought formally emerged as such. Strategies like this gave rise to decolonial theory and practice. In Hurston's classic essay, "How it Feels to be a Colored Me," she writes:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a

little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Hurston writes about the experience of living in Florida while Black, while also being very clear about her own dignity and self-worth. In the same essay, she writes, “Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.” Hurston is showing how powerful she feels and this type of power is built on her identity. By displaying this kind of power she is articulating decolonial ideas and sentiments. Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey often exhibit this same kind of power in their writing and directly pull from influences like Hurston, instead of decolonial theorists. They acknowledge the often white-dominant world that they live in while also recognizing that their personal power is more significant and essential to them. Like Hurston, Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward exhibit their personal Black power, and the power of their community.

The memoir, specifically, serves as a powerful decolonial tool because it allows writers to speak directly to their truth based on their memories, the memories of their ancestors, and the influence of their community. In the book *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow* Jennifer Jensen Wallach writes, “It becomes clear that sweeping historical narratives that claim to tell a history that is true for everyone may very well get the names and dates right but they gloss over the complexity of individualized and often contrary responses to a social world” (Wallach 136). Black memoirs and autobiographies have been doing this decolonial work for centuries and continue to do the work, just as Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon do.

Memoirs can serve as decolonial tools in a unique way because they allow for free-form writing, for memory to take precedence over history, and for the freedom to speak their own truth. This is especially crucial for Southern Black writers, who write within a white-dominated literary tradition and intervene in white-dominated historical narratives. In the *Library of Southern Literature*, Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris write about the significant influence of Black writers on the American South. They write:

For more than a century southern blacks wrote numerous prose narratives, which in their variety conformed to the autobiographical mode. There have been the fugitive-slave narratives and the ex-slave narratives; the spiritual, social, political, and personal autobiographies; the confessionals, exemplary lives, the diary-type and journal-type autobiographies; as well as the autobiographical novel. At times, real-life experiences and incidents were the backdrop for fictional characters; at other times real-life characters become the nucleus around which true-to-life (fictional) experiences and incidents are presented. Southern black prose writers were so attracted to the autobiographical mode that in numerous prose narratives they drew a very thin line between fiction and fact. (Wilson, Ferris)

One aspect that Wilson and Ferris highlight is the use of autobiographical elements that are prominent in Black literary writings. Although on the surface this feels true, there is a significant difference between autobiography, biography, and memoir. I highlight the Black autobiographical slave narratives in this Introduction, but the Black autobiography is not the same thing as a memoir. Wilson and Ferris are correct in noting that a tradition of Southern Black writing utilizes real-life experiences, which can be a decolonial literary

tool, but they only name autobiography mode and fail to include the term “memoir.” The idea of writing about the true experiences of Black folk in the South began with the slave narrative to express to white Americans the inhumanity of slavery. This version of the autobiography was highly censored and still conditioned Black voices by being filtered for a white audience. The idea expanded to the Black autobiographical mode which includes so much more than writing about the horrors and racism experienced by this community and began to no longer cater to white audiences. The idea of telling the truth through memoir evolved in the Black literary tradition to stop writing for the white audience (convincing them of the inhumanity). Black writers began to simply write about the true experiences of the Black community in a way that was empowering.

This short section is just a taste of the significance of the writers that wrote in the South within the last 150 years. In an absence of time, capacity, space, and lack of expertise, I am unable to expand on their significant and prominent contributions to Black southern literary tradition, but I wanted to address this gaping hole and emphasize the influence and importance of the decolonial work that writers before Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey did.

Finding Memory & Truth in Black Abundance

A shift of the understanding of whitewashed history occurs because “the memories and perspectives of Black Americans have so often been marginalized and erased from the larger narrative of this nation” (Hannah-Jones xxxi). Hannah-Jones says this is because “we are stark reminders of some of its most damning truths. Eight in ten Black people would not be in the United States were it not for the institution of slavery in

a society founded on ideals of freedom” (xxx). The lack of understanding of American history is because of the colonial attempt to erase the histories, memories, and ideas of colonized peoples. In the South, and for our authors, decolonization is about recovering these histories, memories, and ideas and putting them at the center of Southern literature. Ward, Trethewey, and Laymon make a critical intervention in Southern Literature by simply writing about their experiences with memory and history without apology. All of these writers trace their own stories through generations of Black Mississippians. They understand their past through the stories and memories of their family and community along with their lived experience in land formerly dominated by plantations, but now heavily influenced by Black culture. The focus of their works, both fiction and nonfiction, center on their personal experiences growing up Black in the state of Mississippi—taking their marginalized voice and amplifying the experiences of their families, communities, and themselves. They challenge the ideas of history in the South with their own memories, grief, and experiences.

Memoir is an important decolonial tool because it gives a personal narrative to politics, emotions, and place. This is crucial in the South, where officially sanctioned history suppresses the stories that challenge it, and memoir offers a way into a brutal and horrific history of slavery and settler colonialism that is often not reflected in history books or a general understanding of the South. Black autobiographies and Black memoirs have long been powerful decolonial tools to display humanity, express empathy, and allow the authors to connect to their roots or ancestors. In Toni Morrison’s essay, “The Site of Memory,” she discusses the “print origins of black literature” (85) and how the

narratives of Black people in America originated as slave narratives. They were written to try and show the inhumanity of slavery to its white readers. Morrison writes:

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things, One: “This is my historical life — my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.” Two: “I write this text to persuade other people — you, the reader, who is probably not black — that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery.” With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed.

(86)

The slave narratives that Morrison writes about by Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, and Harriet Jacob are all doing both of the things she mentions, but they also fight oppression and demand action by telling not just their own stories, but contestatory stories and humanizing Black people generally. These slave narratives were written for the white audience to read, empathize with and act upon. For these writers, the use of the memoir vitally bends the genre of literature and also shows a South that demonstrates the way that Black people navigate the United States, particularly the South. Writers during slavery wrote autobiographies “to expose the horrors of slavery, they had a companion motive for their efforts. The prohibition against teaching a slave to read and write” (Morrison 89). Morrison not only references the inhumanity of slavery that Black writers wrote about, but she also expresses how by actually writing and publishing their stories, they also showed resistance by reading and writing, something that white plantation owners often prohibited their slaves from doing. They not only advocated for physical freedom, but for literacy. These authors’ autobiographies expose the way their family and

the community of Black people in Mississippi have experienced racism, sexism, and poverty as active components of the potent and ongoing legacy of slavery.

Morrison goes on to explain how Black writers have changed in the twentieth century and that greatly differs from the slave narratives she mentions. She writes:

For me — a writer in the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman — the exercise is different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. (91)

The memoirs from Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey radically speak for and to their Black Southern communities without this “veil” that Morrison mentions. They may have the expectation that white people may read them, but they no longer have the filters once needed to publish. And like many of the Black writers before them, they have been able to share their experience about the South in a confident way. This is reminiscent of what Langston Hughes said in his well-known essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow,

strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Als)

Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon do not write in a way that a white audience can always relate or connect to, because they are not writing for that audience. Morrison writes about how this means moving the veil to the side meaning that as a writer she must trust her own recollections and the recollection of others (91). She says, “These ‘memories within’ are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me” (92). It is a decolonial strategy to speak to the same audience to which the author is connected. But, like Morrison mentions, the writings of Laymon, Trethewey, and Ward talk back to the whitewashed history and assert a truth of memory. Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon do this in their memoirs by not only sharing their points of view but also by compiling other types of evidence to narrate their experiences.

In 1931, Langston Hughes claimed that Black people’s “most valuable contribution to American literature” is in the form of personal memoirs (Varlack 237). These narratives have served to disrupt or resist the whitewashed messaging and perspective of the South. Christopher Varlack writes, “The slave narratives of the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, sought to challenge the widespread romanticized depictions of American chattel slavery that infiltrated the US cultural imagination by way of pro-slavery literature and to assert the voice of people far too often silenced” (237). This resistance remains in memoirs by Black Southern Americans, but instead of writing to appeal to the white audience and to convince them of the horrors and injustices of slavery, authors have transformed to write about empowerment, truth, and speak directly

to their community. Laymon refers to this as the search and journey for Black abundance. The use of memoir allows for a single voice to speak about and against whole systems of injustice. In a memoir, one person can effectively intervene with history, and Laymon, Ward, and Trethewey do just that. The aim of decolonial work emphasizes memory, unofficial American history, and whitewashed history because the memoir intervenes directly in these narratives. They are not necessarily rewriting history but creating a venue for understanding multiple perspectives through unofficial routes to recovery of historical memory. Fiction writing can also do this, but the truth value of the memoir is different than it is for creative works. The memoir depends on truthtelling and telling the author's truth. Ultimately it carries that promise: to tell the truth. These writers showcase personal testimonies they bear witness to in truth that makes us suspicious of the history we have been taught.

Although Ward, Trethewey, and Laymon have all written memoirs, they consider themselves writers of fiction and poetry first. They were all compelled to write memoirs as a way to speak to their own memories, truth, and experiences in a decolonial way. Morrison writes about the need for fiction and how it differs from fact. She says, "it claims the freedom to dispense with 'what really happened,' or where it really happened, or when it really happened, and nothing in it needs to be publicly verifiable, although much in it can be verified" (93). Ultimately, their memoirs explicitly show where each of these writers comes from while also utilizing their fiction and poetry to serve decolonial ends. These ends are a way for the authors to tell stories about the place and space of the South in a way that expresses their own truth in fiction. Morrison continues, "the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction

between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (93). Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon understand this idea of truth and use it in their poetry and fiction as a tool for expressing their lived experiences as marginalized and silenced members of Southern society. They use the truth to tell stories of reclamation, protest, and hope.

Their memoirs, novels, and poetry work together because “the trend in literary culture is to witness a collapsing of these distinctions in favour of hybrid works which sit on a spectrum of perceived truth claims” (Gislason, Holland-Batt 140). Choosing three writers who write fiction and poetry, but who also wrote memoirs, offers a unique perspective on cultural memory, “a constitutive of racial identity... cultural memory can be understood as a repertoire of symbolic forms and stories through which communities advance and edit competing identities. Underlying cultural memory is the social construction of memory as well as its concomitant impact on individual and collective identities” (Quan). The intentions behind these writers are to help tear down the colonialism that exists today through storytelling. They all do this outside of their memoirs by using their cultural and personal experiences to tell stories about Mississippi. These authors have a different kind power as writers to make statements of resistance, history, and memory through characters and symbolism.

II. NATASHA TRETHEWEY AND THE GRIEF OF THE SOUTH

Natasha Trethewey is a mixed-race Mississippian who was appointed the United States Poet Laureate in 2012, 2013, and 2014. She won a Pulitzer Prize for the poetry collection, *Native Guard*, and her memoir, *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*, and she was a Poet Laureate of Mississippi (Poetry Foundation). In both Trethewey's memoir and her poetry, she confronts memory, Southern history, and the systems of oppression she faces as a mixed-race woman by writing about her own experiences and truth, connecting them to the history of the South and her family. By writing about the grief of losing her mother, racism and sexism, memory, history, and the South, Trethewey challenges the oppressor and the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy that Southerners face on a daily basis. She does this by using her own narrative woven in with historical symbolism, materials, and facts. Trethewey's work, especially her memoir, relies heavily on her narration demonstrating empathy for herself and eliciting empathy from the reader. She also uses the truth by collecting evidence and facts to process her own grief, illustrate the abuse of women, and the hardship of being mixed-race or Black in America. Ideas of the South in Trethewey's writing do not fit Watson or Hovis's definition of postsouthern, exactly. It is distinctly southern to talk about the past, race, and the implications of living in a society that values both history and racial identity, but Trethewey does this in a different way than most modernist southern poets by connecting her personal identity to history and memory.

Coming of Age in Tragedy

Natasha Trethewey's memoir *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir* was impossible not to mention when I began to think about Southern writers today. A central theme to all of Trethewey's work is history and memory. Trethewey writes in the prologue, "I need now to make sense of our history, to understand the tragic course upon which my mother's life was set and the way my own life has been shaped by that legacy" (11). Trethewey connects her tragedy, the legacy of her life, and her own memories to the true history of the South. These memories are either hers or have been passed down from her family. Trethewey employs decolonial tools of reclaiming her truth in her memoir to navigate her own identity while also showing the humanity of herself and her mother. Memory enables her to uncover her own truth. The memoir shows all of the ways that Trethewey searches for her identity and copes with grief and loss. *Memorial Drive* tells a kind of the coming-of-age story of Trethewey centered around the tragic and horrific murder of her mother by her former stepfather. As a poet and lyrical writer, Trethewey uses her own narration of the past, evidence that her mother left behind, and diary-like entries to tell the story of how her life was affected by her mother's death. In the text, place, symbolism, and history play vital roles in telling this story. Even the title *Memorial Drive* is the name of the street where her mother lived when she died in Atlanta. Trethewey must return to Atlanta after her mother's death, and this forces her to confront her grief in a tangible way. On the page before that she writes about how returning to the place her mother was murdered thirty years later led her to Memorial Drive in Atlanta:

It originates in the middle of the city, Memorial, and it winds east from downtown ending in Stone Mountain, the nation's largest monument to the Confederacy. A

lasting metaphor for the white mind of the South, Stone Mountain rises out of the ground like the head of a submerged giant—the nostalgic dream of Southern heroism and gallantry emblazoned on its brow: in bas-relief, the enormous figures of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis. (9-10)

The history of the Confederacy and the ramifications of the South haunt Trethewey because they not only refer to the Confederacy and its legacy but also her recent personal history of the death of her mother. The image of the “head of a submerged giant” is a metaphor for white supremacy and its latch on the South and on Trethewey. White Supremacy is a giant presence that Trethewey and Black folks are forced to navigate daily. She feels and knows this deeply and, by using this symbolism, communicates the daily struggle to combat something so tantalizing. Trethewey feels the urge to unpack her own history. This means that she also must unpack and navigate the patriarchal and white supremacist history of the South.

It is important to note that the specific statue that Trethewey references at the end of Memorial Drive was not created immediately following the Civil War. White women who were a part of groups like Daughters of the Confederacy were often known for funding these types of statues. Becky Little writes, “In fact, the group was responsible for creating what is basically the Mount Rushmore of the Confederacy: a gigantic stone carving of Davis, Lee and Jackson in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Its production began in the 1910s, and it was completed in the 1960s.” This late construction of this monument shows that the statue was not really built to commemorate the soldiers but instead was built to intimidate and send a message as the Civil Rights Movement mounds in Georgia. It was a tool for white supremacists to say that they are still there. The idea of connecting

and clarifying history employs decolonial ideas by taking the past and identifying what is true. Trethewey does this when she talks about Memorial Drive and contextualizes its meaning to the Old South and its meaning to her.

At the beginning of her memoir, Trethewey aligns herself and her mother's story with the history and memory of the South. She talks about how on April 26, 1966, the day Trethewey was born, her mother traveled to Gulfport, Mississippi alone to give birth in the hospital. She writes:

On her way to the segregated ward she could not help but take in the tenor of the day, witnessing the barrage of rebel flags lining the streets: private citizens, lawmakers, Klansman (often one in the same) raising them in Gulfport and small towns all across Mississippi. The twenty-sixth of April that year marked the hundredth anniversary of Mississippi's celebration of Confederate Memorial Day—a holiday glorifying the old South, the Lost Cause, and white supremacy—and much of the fervor was a display, too, in opposition to recent advancements in the civil rights movement. She could not have missed the paradox of my birth on that particular day; a child of miscegenation, an interracial marriage still illegal in Mississippi and in as many as twenty other states. (16-17)

Trethewey, early in the text, aligns her personal journey with history. She also identifies herself as a paradox full of contradictions—much like Mississippi and the South. She calls out that much of this parading of the rebel flag and white supremacy was in reaction to the civil rights movement taking shape. In an interview with Trethewey, the interviewer Pearl Amelia McHaney writes:

Natasha Trethewey's subject is history: hers; her mother's—Gwendolyn Ann

Turnbough; her mother's tragic death at the hands of a divorced second husband; the Louisiana Native Guards—freed slaves serving the Union by guarding Confederate soldiers imprisoned at Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island in the Gulf of Mexico; the Fugitive Poets and the canon of Southern poetry; and the South—its continuing struggle to accept its story. In poems both elegiac and elegant, Trethewey tells these stories and writes the forgotten into history. (45)

Being born on a day that celebrates the Confederacy to interracial parents creates a paradox for Trethewey, but also allows her to weave her story in with the way that history and memory overlap. She experiences paradox because she feels like she is neither Black nor white, while also being treated differently for being mixed-race. Trethewey weaves her story with history and memory by connecting her story to the narrative of her mother.

In the essay, "Site of Memory," Toni Morrison writes about how past Black writers have connected with their family members and how she also deploys this idea in her writing. "Like Frederick Douglass talking about his grandmother, and James Baldwin talking about his father, and Simone de Beauvoir talking about her mother, these people [family and ancestors] are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life," explains Morrison (95). Morrison is writing about connecting to herself through the people she loves, Trethewey is doing exactly this when she writes about her mother as a way to process her own grief. Trethewey writes about the bond and closeness that she felt with her mother after they left Mississippi and moved to Atlanta. She writes, "My mother could not have known the imprint our few months alone together in a new place would make on me or how fiercely I would cling to the two-ness of us, the dyad of mother and

daughter” (Trethewey, *Memorial Drive*, 68). Trethewey shows how close she felt to her mother before she lost her. Just a few pages later, she writes in a diary-like entry about what it felt like to begin writing about her mother and the grief she was living through. She writes, “When I begin to say out loud that I am going to write about my mother, to tell the story of those years I’ve tried to forget, I have more dreams about her in a span of weeks than in all the years she’s been gone. She comes back to me, first in the house of my early childhood, my grandmother’s house” (73). These two excerpts help connect how Trethewey ties herself to her mother. This closeness and connection then allow her to explore her own internal world after the passing of her mother. In a later chapter, Trethewey writes to herself, “Look at you. Even now you think you can write yourself away from that girl you were, distance yourself in the second person as if you weren’t the one to whom any of this happened” (104). These three passages connect to each other because they show Trethewey’s tie to her mother. They show the loss and depth of that loss that she felt when she began to write about her mother. And lastly, Trethewey experiences how her mother became access to herself. This is not an easy or painless process for Trethewey and requires that she unpack and relive her own memories.

One of those memories is a time in fifth grade when she heard her stepdad (who would later murder her mother), Joel, hit her mother. She tells someone at school, and they do not do anything about it. Once at home again, she makes it clear to her mother that she knows what happened. She overhears her mother tell Joel that her daughter knows what happened. She responds by writing more about her own reflection into herself via her mother, using second-person point of view, “You are ashamed and you don’t know why. The need in the voice of your powerful, lovely mother is teaching you

something about the world of men and women, of dominance and submission” (104).

This moment deeply affected Trethewey and caused distance between her and her mother. By showing these moments of pain between a mother and daughter while her mother was still alive, she is showing the reality of their relationship. Instead of writing about all of the wonderful things her mother did, she is revealing some of the hard and painful truths about them and their relationship Trethewey shows both herself as the writer and her mother's empathy and humanity. She is self-reflective and probing at the same time.

Morrison in “Site of Memory” also writes about how Frederick Douglass spent half a page writing about the death of his grandmother. Douglass apologizes by saying that it was important to him, but maybe boring to the reader. Morrison goes on to say, “He makes no attempt to explore that death: its images or its meaning. His narrative is as close to factual as he can make it, which leaves no room for subjective speculation.” (94) Morrison is saying that Douglass is trying to be objective while searching for his own truth. Trethewey uses a similar strategy by showing factual aspects of her life inside the memoir; Like Douglass, she utilizes it when she writes about the death of her mother. It feels most evident when she uses the transcript of her mother talking to Joel over the phone while being recorded by the police. This shows the exact words that were used, rather than Trethewey paraphrasing. This recording took place on June 4, 1985, and following the phone conversation that was the last time that Trethewey spoke to her mother before she died. This physical evidence is an interesting piece to add to the memoir because it says more clearly than what Trethewey could say herself. It shows the real threat that Trethewey’s mother experiences, but it also shows Trethewey’s use of

historical evidence. This transcript serves as not only a memory for Trethewey but as a tangible piece of evidence that shows what happened to her mother. We see Trethewey use symbolism and historical facts about the South often in her poetry and work, but she also uses her own more personal evidence to make clear points on how history happened.

Trethewey writes regarding writing her memoir and why she wrote it, “To survive trauma, one must be able to tell a story about it” (*Memorial Drive*, 208). By writing this memoir Trethewey is able to explore her own grief and how it affected her. She combines aspects of her life, her mother’s life, and history to discover her own narrative. She explains this in an interview, “I really can’t distance myself from my mother’s life growing up in the 1950s and 1960s or my grandmother’s life growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. They feel like part of my life. It’s all in there now with me growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, and it all makes that a part of who I am” (qt. in Petty 5). *Memorial Drive* navigates through Trethewey’s memories and stories, the history of Mississippi and Atlanta, and facts and evidence she collected from her mother. Trethewey “tells a story about trauma in a way that neither exploits it nor tidies up its irresolvable questions. One way Trethewey answers this is by allowing her mother’s words to speak for themselves—resurrected, tangible and immortal on the page” (Sanders). In an interview with Trethewey, Joshunda Sanders asks if it was cathartic to put her mother’s words directly into the book. Trethewey replies: “I worried about it, because to some readers it might look as if I wasn’t telling the story.” The idea that some readers may not want Trethewey to use her mother’s real words and evidence is interesting to note because arguably her mother’s words can serve to validate her experience and testimonies. They are more than personal relief for Trethewey but offer a kind of historical evidence and lens. Trethewey

continues:

But what was more important to me was to present that documentary evidence in her own voice and words. You hear how resilient she was. You can witness it for yourself. That was really more important to me than whether someone felt like I should have narrated. I thought her own words could do better than anything that I might say. It was hardest of all to go back and read the documentary evidence. Like the document they found in her briefcase, where you can see her thinking that she has gotten away [from Joel] and that this [document] is just part of an ongoing story she's going to tell about her life before and after that escape. A story that I imagine her telling because it might help other women and support the work of shelters like the one she found herself in. (*Sanders*)

The use of her mother's phone calls and notes allows for the story to be more than just Trethewey's memory expanding her memoir. It shows in a clear way how society failed her even when you could see the abuse she experienced. The documentary evidence stands in contrast to the poetic language that Trethewey usually writes in. It allows the reader to see that contrast and read about the true experience, showing how memory, history, and tangible evidence work together to compile Trethewey's memoir.

One of the larger themes that Trethewey does not explicitly point out, but that is communicated clearly, is the lack of preventative action and protection given to her mother even though she had been a victim of domestic violence and continued to be. Society did not intervene when she needed rescuing and support. In the interview with Sanders, Trethewey says, "I wanted people to know that if a woman as successful, connected, and smart as my mother could still be the victim of an abuser, it's not a fatal

character flaw of hers, but it is a fatal flaw of a society that doesn't understand that.”

Trethewey explains that her mother is not a victim of society, but rather that the society itself is a victim to its flaw— its unwillingness to protect her. After her mother divorced Joel, who would later murder her, he showed up at their house and forced her into his car. When Trethewey realized this had happened, she called the battered women’s shelter. They replied that maybe her mother and he had just gone to talk. Trethewey responds, “I was not happy with that response. I knew that the people at the shelter should know better and, this time, I wanted someone to respond in the right way to what I was saying, to do something” (148-149). Trethewey’s mother could not prevent her own death, but this shows ways that Trethewey knew how to care for herself. As Maria Lugones writes, “Feminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it” (Lugones 747). This is evident in Trethewey’s reaction to the shelter. She understood the situation and did not succumb to it.

Memorial Drive is a personal narrative of Trethewey and how her grief and loss controlled her and taught her about herself, but it also documents and showcases the ways that society has failed women. Sanders writes:

With conviction, Trethewey represents not only the stories of the women of her family, denied dignity or agency by the cultures in which they lived, but also the stories of Black Americans who have been deliberately omitted from the larger cultural consciousness. When I spoke to her by phone from her home in Chicago, where she moved in 2017, Trethewey described the necessity of remembering through our personal recollection. (“A Poetics of Resilience”)

Remembering through a personal experience is a key use of feminist decolonial tools. These tools rely on the memory of our narrator and their understanding of what happened. This understanding differentiates from the whitewashed white supremacist narrative of the South. As noted previously, Trethewey ties in her own experiences with the South she lives in. She contrasts her experiences with the reality of living in the South down the street from monuments of the Confederacy.

Trethewey tells her personal story and the loss of her mother, but she also intertwines their narratives with the narrative of the South. Mississippi is her first home, but she and her mother move to Atlanta when she is a young girl. She begins a small chapter with the sentence, “Here is a phrase you don’t overhear: White Flight” (91). She then tells a story of three girls, Jody, Lisa, and Wendy, who she met in her neighborhood. She never explicitly says it, but it becomes clear these girls are white. One day, the girls are looking through magazines like *Hustler*, *Penthouse* and *Swank*. The white girls push Trethewey to read captions under certain cartoons. Trethewey begins to regret showing them these magazines, she writes:

You wish you’d never brought them here, and you feel the emotion that stays with you the most, shame. Like you, the characters in the cartoons are black.

Jody is smiling broadly now, as if already beginning to laugh at the next cartoon on a page you haven’t yet reached. “Do you know what MARTA stands for?” she says. You answer quickly, relieved to not be reading the captions and excited because you know this. You have ridden MARTA. “Of course,” you say, rolling your eyes. “It stands for Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority.” Jody shakes her blond head. “Nope,” she says, leaning toward you. “It means ‘Moving

Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.” Wendy and Lisa are laughing before she even finishes the whole thing. You offer a wan smile, imagining their invisible wings: the three of them poised to fly away instead of riding the bus. (93)

This racist statement by Jody is not new or original to the memoir. The MARTA in Atlanta is deeply rooted in with racial and segregation issues in the large, mostly Black, city. In the article “What does a traffic jam in Atlanta have to do with segregation? Quite a lot” by Kevin M. Kruse he writes about how the segregation and city planning of Atlanta is rooted in racism and the cause of its current traffic problems. He writes about the planning of MARTA, “David Chesnut, the white chairman of MARTA, insisted in 1987 that suburban opposition to mass transit had been ‘90 percent a racial issue.’ Because of that resistance, MARTA became a city-only service that did little to relieve commuter traffic. By the mid-1980s, white racists were joking that MARTA, with its heavily black ridership, stood for ‘Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.’” In referencing MARTA, Trethewey is referencing pieces of history. She is also calling to attention that these issues and systems of oppression are still happening today. MARTA is a vivid example and imagery of how the systems of oppression of affected Black and brown people in Atlanta. The comment by her friend shows the ways that these systems affect the way people think about the city of Atlanta and the South.

Beyond this example that Trethewey experienced history as a child through memory is a more tangible way. Trethewey writes about her return to Atlanta:

I think often of Ralph Ellison’s revision of Heraclitus’s axiom about the role of character in one’s destiny to one about the role of place: ‘Geography is fate.’ I had willingly come back to this place, put myself in the proximity of the events of my

past. I'd even bought a house in walking distance of the courthouse, not far from the police station, and but a few miles from the place my mother was murdered in the shadow of Stone Mountain, the symbol of the Confederacy and a monument to white supremacy that joins in my psyche the geography and history—both public and private, national and personal—of my deepest wounds. (203-204)

Place, or geography, becomes a trigger for Trethewey's memories. Not only is she haunted by the murder of her mother, but she is haunted by the place where it happened. A place that is full of the monuments and visuals to remind her of the white supremacist system that failed her mother. The monument of white supremacy represents the ways that the system failed her family. Trethewey writes about the experience of discovering how the system failed her mother in a diary-like chapter. She writes:

Why I finally sit down to write the part of our story I've most needed to avoid, when I force myself at last to read the evidence, all of it—the transcripts, witness accounts, the autopsy and official reports, the ADA's statement, indications of police indifference—I collapse on the floor, keening as though I had just learned of my mother's death. What comes out is uncontrollable: the long, unbroken primal wailing I never allowed myself back then. So I live it again in real time, only what I am reliving now is my own feeling of sudden loss, but rather the terror of her last moments.

They could have saved her. (205)

This moment is so painful for Trethewey because not only is she reliving her trauma, but she realizes that her death could have been prevented if the system had listened to her and stepped in to protect her. She knows that this system is not made for Black or mixed-race

people, but it still creates pain for her. The legacy of racism directly affects Trethewey's life and remains with her.

At the end of the memoir, when writing about the time Trethewey almost drowned and her mother saved her, she realizes that memory can teach her about herself and the world around her. She writes, "What has changed is how I've understood what I saw, How I've come to interpret the metaphors inherent in my way of recalling the events. Scientists tell us there are different ways that the brain records and stores memory, that trauma is inscribed different than other types of events. To survive trauma, one must be able to tell a story about it. (208) Trethewey is telling her truth and writing her story of what happened. This is altering and connected to history because it allows her to alter the history of her own narrative. She writes her truth, and her truth is able to give her a sense of belonging and hope. She writes:

In the narrative of my life, which is the look backward rather than forward into the unknown and unstoried future, I emerged from the pool as from a baptismal font—changed, reborn—as if I had been shown what would be my calling even then. This is how the past fits into the narrative of our lives, gives meaning and purpose. Even my mother's death is redeemed in the story my calling, made meaningful rather than merely senseless. It is the story I tell myself to survive. (211)

By narrating her life and weaving it in with history, the past of her story, and her mother's story— Trethewey is using decolonial tools to reframe and reclaim the narrative. Her memories serve as a guide to understand who she is and where she comes from.

History and Memory in Natasha Trethewey's Poetry

We know that Trethewey must use history in order to write a truthful narrative of her life. In her book *Domestic Work*, a poetry collection that commemorates the lives of working-class Southern Black people during the first half of the twentieth century, Trethewey uses her “collective memories” to recall a time when both de facto and de jure Jim Crow rule left its unique mark of trauma on the collective memory of Black people in the region. However, as she does this, the poet also illustrates how memories are often the vehicles for something else: cultural trauma, which happens when “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that. . . chang[es] their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1).

Trethewey utilizes many decolonial tools in her poetry by invoking memory and history. For instance, she registers the emotional memory that Morrison writes about:

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory — what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (99)

Even if humans try to redirect the river and the water, it will always find its way back. The river, like the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, will find its way. Writers and poets will find their way through and correct history with their memories, because they are the river that snakes its way back to where it belongs. Trethewey, like all three of the writers in this thesis, returns to where she is from and is forced to wrestle with her

memories to cope and understand who she is. Trethewey pulls back the “veil” that she speaks about and allows for her story of a mixed-race woman in Southern America to share her truth without the filter of whiteness. Her memories guide her, but her use of history allows for a decolonial lens to reclaim her identity.

In her poem, “South” she explores the history of the place she is from, Mississippi. First, she expresses the return to a place she has left, “I returned to a stand of pine, / bone-thin phalanx” (lines 1-2). The poem is filled with images of the beauty that Trethewey witnesses. She continues to write:

flanking the roadside, tangle
of understory—a dialectic of dark
and light—and magnolias blossoming
like afterthought: each flower
a surrender, white flags draped
among the branches. I returned (lines 3-8)

Here she is outlining the imagery of the contradictions of the South. The direct comparison of the light and the dark can hold multiple meanings but draws directly to how a place can be so beautiful but hold such dark histories of racism and systems of oppression. It also directly connects to Trethewey’s identity as biracial. She is both “light” and “dark” and wrestles with this and where she belongs. In the essay, “Natasha Trethewey Wants America to Have a Personal Reckoning.” Hanif Abdurraqib quotes Jericho Brown. Brown says, “I think one of the hallmarks of Trethewey’s work is its ability to re-inscribe the fact of the black body, a fact American and Southern literary histories need to erase in order to seem much less viciously biased than they have

actually been” The magnolia blossoming as a white flag creates an image of forgiveness and hope. The Mississippi state flag is a magnolia flower, and even though the white people of Mississippi offer no reparations, the beauty of Mississippi might. Richard Rankin Russell writes in the essay “The Black and Green Atlantic: Violence, History, and Memory in Natasha Trethewey’s ‘South’ and Seamus Heaney’s ‘North’” about how Trethewey is using distinct language to write about returning to the South and the ways that history contributes to her poetry. He says:

Trethewey is attempting to write herself into this landscape of exile as a biracial woman whose history has been often elided in narratives about the South until recent years. At the beginning of the poem, she is returning to the area near her birthplace, Gulfport, Mississippi, from where she could see Ship Island, where seven companies of the all-black 2nd Louisiana Native Guard were stationed at Fort Massachusetts during the Civil War to guard Confederate prisoners. (163)

Trethewey is not only writing about the history of the South, but she is writing herself into the history by including her experience of Mississippi in the narrative. These experiences can be contradictory and make her question her identity — but they are hers. After including more imagery of the landscape and beauty that Trethewey returns to, her words bring the reader back to the images of horror. She writes, “symbols of victor / or defiance,” (lines 14-15) referring to both the symbols of the Confederacy and the symbols of defiance from Black people. She continues:

I returned
to a field of cotton, hallowed ground—”
as slave legend goes —each boll

holding the ghosts of generations:
those who measured their days
by heft of sacks and lengths
of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
still sewn into our clothes.

I returned to a country battlefield
where colored troops fought and died— (lines 16-25)

Trethewey is speaking directly about how the land is connected to history. The cotton fields that still exist once held slaves and lacked humanity.

In the poem, Trethewey uses the line “I return” four times. The use of this line means that she is coming back to something that she left behind — but it also alludes to the idea that she is returning with a more solidified identity and understanding of Mississippi. She is naming the history, like the all Black Louisiana Native Guard, which is a piece of information about the Civil War not often talked about in white-centric history.

She ends the poem with lines that are distinctly about the history and identity of a place rooted in Southern heritage:

Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
are named to honor the Confederacy,
where that old flag still hangs, I return
to Mississippi, state that made a crime
of me—mulatto, half-breed—native
in my native land, this place they’ll bury me. (lines 29-34)

Trethewey's style of poetry frequently reverts to history by using historical aspects of the South and her own life to communicate her ideas about the world around her. In this poem, she clearly references the Confederate monuments that can be found all over the country. As discussed previously in this chapter, many of these monuments were not erected until the civil rights movement as a backlash. She ties this history of the South and the Confederacy with her own narrative and life experiences.

In the essay, "Contemporary Black Chroniclers of the Imagined South," William Ramsey writes about history in Trethewey's poetry. They write, "History is not merely an objectivistic enterprise of collecting facts— one's assumptions predispose and actively enable one's social constructions" (Ramsey, 130). As someone who must navigate the world and its social constructs as mixed race, this complicated her identity in a place where her parents' marriage was illegal. Ramsey writes, "Because her biracial identity links her to both the white and black groups, she has felt quite personally the unnatural, alienating exclusion of the black narrative by the white" (130). The flag that Trethewey mentions is the Mississippi state flag that still includes the Confederate flag within it. These symbols of the past, paired with Trethewey's experiences of the South, depict a distinct South full of pain and suffering.

Discussing Trethewey's work, Abdurraqib writes, "Her use of history as a driving force behind her poetry and as a nudge toward enlightenment — for herself and others — feels rooted in a type of empathy. Throughout this vast catalog of work, teeming with references to specific dates or old photos, Trethewey doesn't shame readers for what they don't know. Instead, she invites them to learn alongside her." Even if Trethewey is arguably postsouthern, she has flipped the narrative by engaging with history in direct

ways. She uses tangible examples and ties them to her own memories. I would argue this structure is based on memory and the idea that history is not cement. History is changing and evolving as memories are shared and the narrative changes. Ramsey writes, “In time’s relentless flow, history cannot be cemented in objectivistic, static totality.” The history that Trethewey writes about is infused with memory and informal elements of her memory. She uses her own experiences and the experiences of her family to create her writing.

This idea of creating a new South in our imaginary or in our collective memory is perfectly illustrated in her poem “History Lesson.” This poem is a story of segregation told through the lens of her personal experience at the beach. It begins by illustrating young Trethewey on the beach:

It is 1970, two years after they opened
the rest of this beach to us,
forty years since the photograph
where she stood on a narrow plot
of sand marked colored, smiling, (Trethewey, lines 11-15)

This poem shows the contrast from Trethewey to her grandmother, who once stood on the “colored” beach—where she now stands on the recently desegregated beach as a mixed woman. This lends back to her identity she mentions in “South” as being of a “mulatto, half-breed—native.” (line 33) As most white Southern poets do, Trethewey focuses much of her writing on her identity and on the history of the South—but instead of glorifying the Old South or the more antebellum Confederate characterizations of the South, she writes to her intersection of identity and history as a mixed-race woman raised

as both white and Black.

The form that Trethewey brings to Southern poetry is significant because it allows for a more authentic narrative of Southern identity to come forward. Hovis states in his essay:

how the idea of the ‘South’ was a narrative creation of both northerners and southerners and how invented southern character *types* persist and evolve to help southerners explain their lives, despite changes in southern society. Other postmodern and poststructuralist scholars have similarly emphasized that the ‘South’ and southernness are and have always been narrative creations, rather than an actual entity and a fixed set of characteristics rooted in southern soil and culture. (130)

Trethewey names her true experiences of living in the South and tells the authentic experience of being mixed-race. This shows the lines of social standards and injustices as she aims to illustrate different southern character types by writing about her deeply personal experiences as a mixed woman living in the American South. In the essay “Natasha Trethewey Wants America to Have a Personal Reckoning”, Trethewey says:

It’s not simply about correction, sometimes it’s simply about truth-telling around it. In my home state, you hear a lot about other places that can do truth and reconciliation commissions. In the state of Mississippi, there’s a truth commission, just truth because we can’t even get to reconciliation yet. To inscribe what has been erased or left out is a correction. I think about Seamus Heaney’s idea of redress in a poem that poets don’t have to be aiming at social justice when they sit down to write, but it can be an outcome. I certainly don’t sit down with

this idea like I'm going to write for social justice. I hope that sometimes it can be an outcome. (Abdurraqib)

Her work exemplifies the truth-telling she mentions. It is her version of her Southern experience, making her work an encounter that can be classified as postsouthern and decolonial for its focus on personal narrative. It is not about being southern or writing to southern tropes, it is about telling a story that has historically not been told. Telling a story that goes against white supremacy is a form of resistance and utilizes decolonial tools. Trethewey uses personal narrative as a decolonial tool by allowing it to compare and contrast whitewashed history with her lived experiences and memories. She offers an alternative to the ideas of the Old South.

III. JESMYN WARD'S DECOLONIAL FEMINIST SOUTH

Jesmyn Ward is a Black Southern writer, and her memoir and fiction writing deeply reflect these components of her identity. She explores ideas of Black motherhood, matriarchal community, and survival from poverty by employing decolonial feminist tools and focusing on issues of race, sex, gender, community, and death in the South. As a contemporary Black Southern writer, she is a part of changing the landscape of Southern writers. She writes pieces that contribute to a postcolonial American South by addressing modern-day social issues with narratives focusing on and speaking directly to and about marginalized voices. By writing a memoir about her own experience as a Black American woman growing up on the coast of Mississippi and experiencing the loss of the men in her life, poverty, and violence, Ward challenges the nature of Southern writing, which has traditionally promoted white voices. She writes about her experiences as part of the decolonial feminist South. Ward writes in a traditionally Southern way while exploring the ramifications of poverty and motherhood. In both Ward's fiction, *Salvage the Bones*, and her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, she unveils and showcases decolonial Southern feminist theory through the examination of place, space, and identity.

Jesmyn Ward's Empathetic South

The memoir, *Men We Reaped*, alters the traditionally whitewashed Southern narrative by writing a style influenced by Southern writers while writing in and about her own lived experiences. She narrates her own personal story with the stories of Roger Eric Daniels III, Demond Cook, Charles Joseph Martin, Ronald Wayne Lizana, and Joshua

Adam Dedeaux. Not only does she deal with the grief, and trauma of the loss of these Black men, but throughout the text, Ward confronts the realities of mental health, referring to the lack of knowledge, care, and understanding of mental health, for herself and her community. She concludes her memoir with facts and statistics that describe Black men living in the American South and Mississippi. She shares the impact that her family and friends are these statistics and that the grief and trauma weigh on her and the people she loves. Ward writes, “Because this is my story just as it is the story of those lost young men, and because this is my family’s story just as it is my community’s story” (*Men We Reaped*, 8). Memoirs are often about a single person, but Ward weaves her personal narrative in with the loss of Black men whom she loved and who have died in order to show the truth about living in America while Black. She not only shows how the loss affects her but how it affected the Black community as a whole. Her memoir is community-centric, which is inherently anti-capitalist and decolonial. Her life is so deeply affected by this loss that she feels compelled to not only share her personal story but the story of these men. Ward’s writing pushes back against the systems of oppression by exposing them and ultimately creating a decolonial feminist narrative of truth in the shape of a coastal Mississippi memoir about loss. She does this by highlighting the importance of humanity and empathy by showing the truth of the experiences of living in Mississippi.

She did not structure the memoir in chronological order of their deaths, but instead, they all lead to the death of her brother, the first and most impactful loss to her. In these chapters about the men she has lost, she intertwines her own specific experiences and how they relate to the person she’s lost. She says she does this as a way to better

understand not only herself but the world around her. She wants to understand “how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread here” (Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 8). This memoir bursts with Ward’s version of hard truths, meaning she takes ideas of racism, gender, and poverty and showcases how they have directly affected her, her family, and her community. Ward refers to the epidemic of Black men dying in America, “My hope is that learning something about our lives and the lives of the people in my community will mean that when I get to the heart, when my marches forward through the past and backward from the present meet in the middle with my brother’s death, I’ll understand a bit better why this epidemic happened” (*Men We Reaped*, 8). Ward refers to the fact that “since 1980, more than 260,000 black men have been killed in America” (Goldberg). Her memoir brings this statistic to life by showing how it affects real people, especially in her community. By weaving her story in with the story of her community, she takes the personal narrative and relates it to the systems of oppression that she and her family face daily. She relates her life and their lives to present-day history.

Ward uses her narrative of telling her own story, intertwined with the men she lost, to address the inequities of Mississippi, which is decolonial because it allows her to write about how Mississippi is seen through her eyes and not the eyes of the oppressor. Ward exposes the truth of what poverty and racism mean for her, her family, and her community, allowing for a Southern Black perspective to be prominent. Ward’s memoir bends toward a Black South, unlike traditionally white Southern writing. She writes from the “other side” of the colonial divide and in turn, recreates what it means to be writing in and about the South. The memoir, as art and literature, functions to tell the story of the

South for Ward. Although the memoir is specific to Ward's personal narrative and how it relates to the people she loved—the pivotal structure of the narrative centers around her brother and his death. She writes, “This is the last summer that I will spend with my brother. This is the heart. This is. Every day, this is” (Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 213). The repetition of the phrase “this is” illustrates how Ward's story leads the reader to this moment in particular. The moment when she lost her brother. Although this statement is sandwiched between much of the narrative we've read, the use of her language and short sentences in this paragraph show the impact and importance of forcing the reader to pause between short sentences. Her use of choppy language in contrast to her longer, more lyrical sentences show the role Joshua has in shaping Ward and allowing her to grieve. This allows her to realize the importance of her community and home. The story that Ward narrates puts Joshua at the center of shaping Ward and shaping this memoir. He clearly shows how the systems of racism punish Black bodies. The issues of race and oppression shape the type of writers and the type of work they produce, ultimately showing the significance of their stories to shape a decolonial South through the vessel of a memoir.

As discussed in the introduction, planter and settler colonialism influenced Southern society and operated on the drive of economic success that directly correlated with the forced displacement of African slaves and the desire for cheap labor in the South at the expense of humanity. Forced labor directly causes forced displacement. Without the white colonizers desire for free labor in the American colonies, particularly in the South, there would be no need to transport and kidnap West Africans and force them into slavery. The ramifications of slavery are still present in American culture and the

narratives of white Southerner writers like Faulkner who have dominated the fictional narrative of the American South. Ward is not obviously writing about slavery and the implications, but the capitalist colonial system that the American South operates in today was founded on the inhumane system of slavery. Ashley Bohrer writes:

The feminist strand of the decolonial tradition proposes one of the most compelling historical and theoretical conceptions of capitalism. Rather than take capitalism as a singular and hermetically sealed system, decolonial feminist thinkers of capitalism render how deeply imbricated capitalism as an integrated whole has always been, not only in colonization, but in heteropatriarchy, cissexism, and racism.” Ward and her community have been deeply harmed by the consequences of slavery, which makes Ward’s writing even more crucial to developing a “postsouth” or a new South. (Bohrer)

Unlike her mother, who was forced to return to Mississippi, Ward chose to return to Mississippi. This decision to come back creates a different narrative for Ward than for her mother who had no choice but to continue living there. Coming back to Mississippi is important because it allows Ward to directly face the oppression, she and the generations before she faced. Williams writes about why Ward said she chose to return,

In 2018, she wrote that she understands the confusion about why she would choose Mississippi, of all places, with its history of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, fire hoses, and guns, and its present-day racism and systemic inequality. But Mississippi for Ward is also seafood boils on the Fourth of July, and her sister swaying to Al Green on a hot summer night, and her grandmother on a porch swing, telling stories to the children (Williams 118).

Returning to Mississippi allows her to rewrite what Mississippi means to her. She writes in the chapter about Roger that he also moves away from and comes back to Mississippi, “I’ve heard others who’ve moved away from Mississippi, worked for five, ten years of their adult lives somewhere else, and then moved back to Mississippi say” ‘You always come back. You always come back home” (Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 28). Ward is not the first Southern woman to do so. As Williams writes, “In the wake of the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation Movements, many Southern women writers left the South to escape its intersectional injuries, and even more recently, some writers have returned. These literal and literary migrations have enabled women writers to address regional inequities in their texts and, for those who return, in their Southern communities” (Williams 105). Ward is one of these writers who has returned. She writes at the end of her memoir:

Yet I’ve returned home, to this place that birthed me and kills me at once. I’ve turned down more-lucrative jobs, with more potential for advancement, to move back to Mississippi. I wake up every morning hoping to have dreamed of my brother. I carry the weight of grief even as I struggle to live. I understand what it feels like to be under siege.” (*Men We Reaped*, 240)

Returning to Mississippi requires an acceptance of the contradictions the place holds, while also the work of sharing the stories of her community.

She acknowledges these systems and tells her personal story along with the story of her communities as a way to deconstruct the colonial systems that have shaped them. Ward when asked about her writing, specifically her fiction, she says:

I knew they were failing as characters because I wasn’t pushing them to assume

the reality that my real-life boys, Demond among them, experienced every day. I loved them too much: as an author, I was a benevolent God. I protected them from death, from drug addiction, from needlessly harsh sentences in jail for doings stupid, juvenile things like stealing four-wheel ATVs. All of the young Black men in my life, in my community, had been prey to these things in real life, and yet in the lives I imagined for them, I avoided the truth. I couldn't figure out how to love my characters less. (*Men We Reaped*, 70)

Even though this quote is about her fiction, it's clear that it relates to the men in her memoir. In this excerpt, Ward speaks about the conflict between being a writer and writing about the world around her. She notes that the boys in her life made decisions that young people often make as boys or children, but then follows it with the imagery of the young Black men in her life as “prey.” The use of prey is significant because it paints them as victims of the system and not people seeking the life that they found themselves in. The use of prey is also connected to the epidemic mentioned earlier. These negative analogies assert that Black men in Mississippi are truly victims to a present-day violent racist system.

Ward is an accomplished academic and writer, yet she still bears the scars—and continuing wounds—of capitalist colonial society, particularly as it affects her through the loss of these young men. Ward cannot escape the consequences of a broken system and she experiences white supremacy within her community through the loss of the young Black men in her life. In her introduction to *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, Roxane Gay writes about how Black women are often the sole representative of their community “having to use their intellectual and emotional labor to address oppression”

(xii). This is true for Ward who tells the stories of these men. Gay continues:

This is a reality we often lose sight of when we surrender to assimilationist ideas about social change. There is, for example, a strain of feminism that believes if only women act like men, we will achieve the equality we seek. Lorde asks us to do the more difficult and radical work of imagining what our realities might look like if masculinity were not the ideal to which we aspire, if heterosexuality were not the ideal to which we aspire, if whiteness were not the ideal to which we aspire.” (xii)

Ward’s work does what Lorde asks. She is asking what our realities would look like if we did not assimilate into white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies – but, instead leaned into our communities and tore down broken systems of oppression.

At the very end of the memoir, Ward writes:

This is how transplanted people survived a holocaust and slavery. This is how Black people in the South organized to vote under the shadow of terrorism and the noose. This is how human beings sleep and wake and fight and survive. In the end, this is how a mother teaches her daughter to have courage, to have strength, to be resilient, to open her eyes to what is, and to make something of it. (*Men We Reaped*, 250-251)

One cannot escape Mississippi, poverty, racism, or sexism, but Ward does the more difficult work of imagining a world without them. She understands that this can only be done through understanding her legacy and leaving a legacy behind her. Ward tells a story of her own survival, but she also tells the story of those who didn’t survive.

Ward is deeply connected to her brother, and it is entangled with many of the

other traumas in her life. He is a victim of the broken system and Ward must wrestle with this every day. It is important to note how Ward contextualizes the timing of the death of Joshua, her brother. She first writes what happened before his death:

This is after the pit bull attack, after my father left, and after my mother's heart broke. This is after my father had six more children with four different women, which meant he had ten children total. This is after my mother stopped working for one White family who lived in a mansion on the beach and began working for another White family who lived in a large house on the bayou. This is after I'd earned two degrees, a crippling case of homesickness, and a lukewarm boyfriend at Stanford. (Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 213)

Her repetition of starting each sentence with “this is after” forcefully communicates to the reader when in her life “this” is taking place. Her repetitive use of the word “after” emphasizes the trauma that she has already experienced. The word repeating showcases how the hardship kept coming one thing after another. It is also meaningful and powerful because it summarizes many of the life experiences that Ward shared in previous chapters that were not just about the men she lost, but that focused on her own life experiences with home, family, and race. Her family was dysfunctional and suffered under entrenched systems of oppression; even though she was able to earn degrees and temporarily leave Mississippi, the consequences of these systems still found her. Loss, for Ward, is bigger than just her — it deeply affects the community around her as well.

Ward records the variation of racism and how it differentially affected her and her brother. This demonstrates the decolonial lens she uses in her writing by relaying how the systems she was born into affect her and her community. She showcases how although

everyone in her community experiences racism and poverty, they are not all experiencing it in the same way. By showing these systems, simply writing about them and revealing what they are is a decolonial act. For example, Ward capitalizes on the word “White” and the mention of their race when she describes the families her mother worked for, which is important to note because it highlights not only the economic differences between her family and theirs but also the way that race played into these differences. This is especially important because, in the previous chapter, she notes the ways that her brother faced systemic racism while she faced a more “blatant racism:” Ward writes,

I worried about my brother. While I faced a kind of blatant, overt, individualized racism at my school that had everything to do with attending school with kids who were White, rich, and privileged in the American South, Joshua faced a different kind of racism, a systemic kind, the kind that made it hard for school administrators and teachers to see past his easygoing charm and lackluster grades and disdain for rigid learning to the person underneath. Why figure out what will motivate this kid to learn if, statistically, he’s just another young Black male destined to drop out anyway? (*Men We Reaped*, 208)

By clearly naming and defining how the system of racism affected her brother and her differently, she attempts to dismantle the system through her writing by calling attention to it.

This identification of the type of racism that Joshua experienced in school also foreshadows the type of racism he will experience in his death. After Joshua was killed by a white drunk driver, the driver was only sentenced to five years in prison. This felt incredibly unjust and wrong to Ward, her family, and her community. By saying that his

life is only worth five years in Mississippi, she directly calls out the court system that only punished the white man who murdered her brother with five years in prison. Ward writes at the end of the chapter, “*Five fucking years*, I thought. *This is what my brother’s life is worth in Mississippi. Five years*” (*Men We Reaped*, 235). Joshua’s death had a massive impact on Ward, but a minimal impact on the world that he lived in: one that doesn’t value Black lives. The loss Ward and her community experienced was not recognized by the systems in society because the man that killed her brother in a drunk driving accident was not held accountable for the car wreck. Again, by demonstrating and describing the reality and systems of racism, Ward showcases the system’s refusal to recognize the humanity of her brother and the other young Black men in her community.

In the chapter focused on Joshua, Ward switches from contextualizing what happened before Joshua’s death to framing what happened after his death. She writes, “This is before Ronald, before C.J. This is before Demond, before Rog. This is where my two stories come together. This is the summer of the year 2000” (Ward, *Men We Reaped*, 213). The previous sentences point to what happened before his death and contextualize for the reader what had happened in Ward’s life before his death. In contrast, these short sentences contextualize that Joshua was one of the first men in her life to pass away. This is interesting to note because Ward explains the deaths of Ronald, C.J., and Demond before she tells us the story of Joshua. This notes the importance of his relationship with her and their family while showing how his death demonstrated the injustice, they experienced in losing him in a state that didn’t value his life. By mentioning all of the men that also faced violent deaths, she clearly suggests that their deaths are no coincidence but endemic to a broken system and society. She intentionally shows that the

story is bigger than just her. She is not the only person to experience loss because of the system in place in the United States. By tying her narrative to the ways that white supremacy and colonialism are still prevalent today, Ward employs decolonial narrative strategies. She demonstrates in a personal way how a system of oppression has changed her life and how it could change others' lives. Ward shows that the community is more important than the individual. By writing a narrative about not just her, but for and to her community, she shows how to prioritize the people she loves.

Joshua's death becomes a pivotal moment in Ward's own personal journey with home and family. The chapter about Joshua is crucial for Ward. The structure of the memoir places an inevitability of his death, which also shows the inevitability that Ward will return home to Mississippi. Clearly, Joshua's death has an enormous impact on Ward, but this small section also alludes to later in this chapter where her homesickness for Mississippi comes to a head. When she first learns of Joshua's death, she writes:

What am I doing here? I thought. Why am I here and they are there? Where is my brother? Where is he? But my daddy said, my daddy said, he just said he didn't make it he's gone he's gone. He's dead. What? He's dead he's dead he's dead. And then: My brother is dead. (Ward, Men We Reaped, 229)

She fled Mississippi but realizes after his loss that she must return to the place that made and shaped her while also harming her. His death made her homesick and grief-stricken. It compels her to come home and care for her family and community. She understands that her life is not just about her, but largely about the community that raised her and to which she still belongs. Ward has always felt this pull to return home, but the death of her brother makes her realize she has no other choice. At the beginning of the Joshua chapter,

Ward writes, “This is where the past and future meet” (*Men We Reaped*, 213). Coming home meant coming to terms with her story in Mississippi and deciding that there is a future there. While she understands the systems that are playing against her and the people she loves, her questioning of why she is not there shows the connection she still has despite the distance. She is still deeply tied to her family and community in Mississippi, but after her brother dies, Ward shifts her understanding of the importance of community over individuality and success. This is an intersectional feminist decolonial idea that becomes apparent to Ward.

Besides pointing to her longing to be home, this excerpt’s use of repetition illustrates the impact of Joshua’s death on Ward. Repeating “he’s gone” and “he’s dead” shows how hard it was for Ward to comprehend the reality of his death and the ways that it was preventable. It also shows how the way his death was treated is vastly different than if he was a white man. There was little concern from the larger community of the Gulf Coast when her brother died because of his race.

These excerpts from *Men We Reaped* showcase the systems of oppression that Ward faces and allows Ward to give a defiant perspective to those experiences. The tone of defiance helps Ward to demonstrate a decolonial feminist perspective. Even by leaving Mississippi and her community, she was not able to escape the ramifications of oppression and racism that her community and family faced and continue to face. By telling the stories of loss and combining them with her own narrative of life in the South, Ward writes a text that begins to deconstruct systems and narratives that have trapped her community. She changes how readers think about traditional Southern writing by expanding what it means to be a Southern writer as a Black woman writing

about her experiences. This is particularly evident in the chapter about her brother and his death where she not only describes how the loss affected her but also is a product of the system that deeply affects her community.

Ward doesn't tell her own story without telling her family's story and her community's story. She is not only tied to her brother but her mother and her mother's experience leaving and returning to Mississippi. In "'Saving the Life That is Your Own': Southern Women Writers' Great Migrations", Keira V. Williams writes about how Ward and her mother's stories were linked: "Her narrative, her mother's narrative, is both personal and historical; their individual stories reflect the broader intersectional contexts of women's experiences in the region. They are the stories of women's moves to and from the South, riven with hopes and tensions and loves and traumas" (Williams 120). Ward writes in reference to her mother and the struggles she faces, "she felt the confines of gender and the rural South and the seventies stalking her, felt that specter of DeLisle out in the darkness, the wolf cornering her" (*Men We Reaped*, 19). It reflects feminist theory in the ways that feminism and decolonialism link to a system of oppression and place. Ward's mother felt like escaping to Mississippi would release her from the reality of being a Black woman in Mississippi—and maybe it did, temporarily. Her mother loved living in California but was forced to return to Mississippi. She felt like she was trapped and longed for California. Mississippi felt like a trap to her mother, and DeLisle was the "wolf" hunting her. She left to pursue Ward's father and try to escape the confines of Mississippi and the oppression she experienced there.

Although Ward focuses on all five men in this memoir, she begins and ends with her brother. When describing her brother Joshua Adam Dedeaux, she begins making

explicit connections for the reader that she has made in her own life. I think this is notable because although her memoir addresses many larger ideas on race, gender, and death, it ultimately addresses Ward's personal journey with loss and grief: the greatest of these being her relationship with her brother. Ward never directly mentions capitalism or the systems that created much of her loss, but the memoir centers around the loss of Black men in her life that have been deeply affected by racism and systems of oppression. The themes of loss, trauma, and motherhood are a part of Ward's memoir, but they are also apparent in her fiction. *Salvage the Bones* shifts and shows how Ward sees motherhood in a new South.

The Journey to 'Mother' in *Salvage the Bones*

In Ward's heartbreaking novel, *Salvage the Bones*, the pending hurricane brings to the surface the important role and symbol of the mother. This story is written over the 12 days leading up to and after Hurricane Katrina hits a small gulf coast Mississippi town. Ward, herself, was a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, and although this is not about her experience, her writing shows that she understands the vastness of an impending hurricane. *Salvage the Bones* centers Esch while telling the story of the impending Hurricane Katrina in a Mississippi Gulf Coast town called Bois Sauvage. The entirety of the novel takes place over the 12 days leading up to and during the storm. In those twelve days, Skeetah's (Esch's brother) dog, China, is pregnant and gives birth to puppies. The puppies begin slowly dying and Skeetah is primarily focused on China and the puppies instead of his family prepping for the storm. Esch has a relationship with her brother's

friend, Manny, and finds herself pregnant. She hides this news from her family for most of the novel and feels unsure about what to do. After an intense dog fight where China wins, the storm finally hits their small town in coastal Mississippi. The pit where the family lives floods, and the family must leave the home and find refuge. In a moment of panic, China is lost to the flooding, and it is revealed that Esch is pregnant. Everyone survives, but China is missing and Skeetah is still hopeful China will return home. The novel ends in a hopeful manner that this family will continue to survive. When you read this novel initially, there is a clear absence of the stereotypical characteristics of a mother, especially because the protagonist's mother has died before the book even begins. The idea of motherhood is negotiated throughout the novel, pushing the boundaries of what truly defines motherhood and what defines a woman. Ward centers a Black girl in poverty, showcasing how the role and character of the mother reveals a decolonial feminist approach to the novel.

A young Black woman, Esch, becomes the most obvious mother in this text which nods to the high teen pregnancy rate in Mississippi without disempowering the character. Ward's protagonist, Esch, becomes a mother within the novel, but her characterization is important, "Esch Batiste is a quintessential black girl-woman. Poverty, loss, neglect, and lack of female companionship plague Esch, who is pregnant and devoid of support. These misfortunes render her voiceless, impotent, and drifting in a world filled with boys and men" (Washington 87). Her brothers, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior, have also lost their mother, but there is not an absence of motherhood in this novel. China, the figure of Medea, Esch, and even Hurricane Katrina play the role of the mother because they are some of the only females mentioned in the book. However, none of

these fulfill a typically nurturing ‘mothering’ role and instead exhibit the reality of motherhood both as uniquely complicated and necessarily painful. Their symbolic occupation of the role of ‘mother’ simply means that they possess some kind of power in the white patriarchal system. China, the figure of Medea, Esch, and even Hurricane Katrina contrast with the idea of Black motherhood, which is what Esch’s character represents. China, Hurricane Katrina, and Medea play a role in the novel, ultimately leading Esch to understand her role as a powerful mother in a society that does not value her body or her mind. Esch finds her own power in a feminist, heroic way and demonstrates how Black motherhood can differ.

Black motherhood is an essential element to this text. In the essay, “From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*” Sinead Moynihan compares William Faulkner’s writing to Jesmyn Ward’s. He writes about how she takes the Southern, white-focused narratives that Faulkner wrote and uses them to flip the politics and write different narratives. This idea is apparent for Moynihan in the way that Ward writes about Esch, “She wishes to acknowledge the terrible conditions under which Esch lives without completely divesting her of her agency” (*Salvage the Bones*, 561). Ward is challenging “conservative assaults on the African American family (and, in particular, on the African American single mother) and asserts the resistance of this particular African American family to neoliberal discourses” (Moynihan 551). This conservative idea that Ward is up against is the idea that “throughout generations, society has rendered Black mothers dangerous” (Rigueur). In the article, “The Persistent Joys of Black Mothers,” Leah Wright Rigueur talks about women who reject these narratives. She writes, “in

classifying Black mothers as symbols of crisis, trauma, and grief, society robs them of their agency, flattening their complex identities.” By making Esch a Black teenage mother, Ward pushes against the negative narratives of Black teen pregnancy and in turn gives Esch agency and complexity.

To understand the role and dynamics of motherhood in this novel, we must first look at the absence and death of the biological mother. Esch explains their family and the land they live on:

My mama’s mother, Mother Lizbeth, and her daddy, Papa Joseph, originally owned all this land...She always talked to us like grown-ups, cussed us like grown-ups. She died in her sleep after praying the rosary, when she was in her seventies, and two years later, Mama, the only baby still living out of the eight that Mother Lizbeth had borne, died when having Junior.” (*Salvage the Bones*, 14)

Now on the land is “just us and Daddy here now with China, the chickens, and a pig when Daddy can afford one” (14). Esch is now the only woman in the family and the lack of a mother is felt by the characters, “The loss of their mother affects all of the Batiste children, but the boys in the family seem to cope with her death more successfully” (Washington 87). She is left in the Pit with her brothers and father —and she blends right in with their way of life until she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant. This was a devastating blow to their family. Throughout the novel, Esch remembers her mother and the ways in which she provided and took care of not just the children, but their father as well. She tries to embody and replicate the ways in which her mother cared for them. The children learned to search for eggs from their mother before she died. They look for

eggs at the beginning of the novel and later as they prepare for Hurricane Katrina to make landfall. Esch narrates how she learned to find eggs, “I followed her around the yard. It was never clean. Even when she was alive... I can’t remember exactly how I followed Mama because her skirt was dark as the reaching oak trees, and she never wore bright colors: no fingernail pink, no forsythia blue, no banana yellow” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 22). Esch was guided intuitively by her mother instead of being able to see her. She experiences the most loss of losing her mother and “Further distinguishing her situation from that of her brothers, Esch’s mothering extends to caring for the rest of the family” (Washington 88). The way that she taught them to find eggs is a metaphor for the way that the children live now that she is dead, “So I followed behind her by touch, not by sight, my hand tugging at her pants, her skirt, and that’s how we walked in the room made by the oaks, looking for eggs” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 22).

Now that Esch’s mother is gone, she must remember the ways that her mother taught her without her physically being there. She becomes a mother figure to her entire family. Her presence is felt all over the Pit and amongst her siblings, but the absence is noticeable to everyone but Junior, who was born at the same time that Mama died. The pain that the siblings experience never expires. They carry this loss with them:

After Mama died, Daddy said *What are you crying for? Stop crying. Crying ain’t going to change anything.* We never stopped crying. We just did it quieter. We hid it. I learned how to cry so almost no tears leaked out of my eyes, so that I swallowed the hot salty water of them and felt them running down my throat. This was the only thing that we could do. (206)

The death of Mama meant that all of the siblings became a parent to Junior. “When he

was a baby, Randall held him the most, and I did the rest of the time. Daddy fed him until he figured out me and Randall could do it. He taught Randall the right ratio for the formula, how to heat the bottle up in a pan of water so that the milk didn't get too hot, and then he went back out in his pickup, trying to find yard work and other jobs" (91). Randall and Esch replace Mama in many aspects of their lives: "Now washing and hanging clothes is me and Randall's job" (179). Esch first starts to see herself as a mother as she parents and cares for Junior, but perhaps the biggest responsibility they take on is preparing for the impending hurricane throughout the novel.

Ward challenges the narrative of teen pregnancy and Black girls in poverty by placing Esch at the center of this novel. In *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall, she dedicates an entire chapter to writing about Black women. In that chapter, she writes "What started as an internal philosophy post-slavery to 'uplift the race' by correcting the 'bad' traits of poor and working-class Black people has now evolved into one the hallmarks of what is expected of Black American women" (87). The idea of writing characters that fit the mold of whiteness or lack flaws is a product of colonial and patriarchal society. Ward refuses that narrative and instead writes about a powerful Black girl who also fits into societal stereotypes, like teen pregnancy. This shift in Esch becoming a mother figure shows how Ward works to dismantle the idea of women and mothers in Southern writing, "Indeed, in creating Esch and her mother, Ward must contend with the historic portrayals of African American women and girls, the objectification of African American characters by white authors, and the responses from African American authors to such stereotypical portrayals" (Fine 52). She writes a character that comes into her power throughout the novel and in a way that is not typical

since Black girls are rarely the main character in books, “The portrayals are rare and the few examples often stereotypical” (Fine 52).

This contrasts Skeetah, who takes on a different role after the death of his mother. While Randall and Esch become caretakers for Junior, Daddy, and the Pit—Skeetah focuses all of his energy on China, his beloved Pitbull. China’s role in this novel quickly becomes representative of ‘mother’ as the opening scene is her giving birth to puppies. Skeetah, in preparation for the hurricane, strives to provide for China and her remaining puppies instead of helping Randall and Esch, but China ultimately cares for Skeetah, giving him a purpose and something to love after the loss of his own mother.

One of the most impactful scenes of China as a mother is when Skeetah perceives her power and takes her to fight even after she has given birth. He views China as more powerful now than she was before she became a mother. This paints motherhood as a strong and unstoppable characterization. He starts by explaining her strength:

“Any dog give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don’t think it. Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female.”

Finally Manny glances at me. It slides over me like I’m glass.

Skeetah laughs. It sounds as if it’s hacking its way out of him.

“You serious? That’s when they come into they strength. They got something to protect.” He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away. “That’s power.” (Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 96)

This moment carries many of the decolonial themes within the lines. Ward implies that a mother gets her power by having something to protect. A mother does not gain her power until the things she loves are at risk. Esch does not realize she is capable until she accepts

that she will have a child. Power does not always come from within but instead from the circumstances. By showing this Ward first shows the power of community over individuality — a decolonial tool. She then shows the impact that women as leaders can have — counteracting the patriarchal system of the South.

China is more than just Skeetah's purpose—she is also the physical embodiment and the symbol for Greek mythology's Medea, whose story Esch reads and refers to throughout the novel. The character of Medea represents a mother's power. Esch, as she recounts the story of Medea, keeps trying to place herself inside the story of a “Greek sorceress who slaughters her children to punish her husband for taking a new bride” (264), but here, China is Medea. This is most clear when China attacks her puppy for threatening her food during the same scene where Daddy loses his fingers in the accident. This intense scene foreshadows the “perfect storm” of chaos that still looms in the Gulf of Mexico:

The red puppy creeps forward, rounds China's bowl, noses her tit. China is rolling, rising. The rumble of the tractor is her growl. Her toes are pointed, her head raised. Skeetah falls back. The red puppy undulates toward her; a fat mite. China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy's neck as she does when she carries him, but there is no gentleness in it. She is all white eyes. She is chewing. She is whipping him through the air like a tire eaten too short for Skeetah to grab.” (129)

This scene occurs in parallel to Daddy losing his finger that catches in the tractor, “The blood on Daddy's shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China's mouth. China flings it away from her. It thuds on the tin and slides” (129). As they realize Daddy's

fingers are missing, Skeetah instead focuses on what just happened with China. Again, Skeetah finds his purpose in China. She is the mother of her puppies and Skeetah feels responsible as her caretaker. This focus on a mother figure is significant because it represents a woman as the center. Ultimately, he cannot control what has already taken place: “China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: *is this what motherhood is?*” (130). China survives, and her instincts are all she can rely on—she killed her own puppy. This terrified Esch as she asks herself, “is this what motherhood is?” while knowing that she herself will one day soon be a mother. Narratively this runs in parallel to the importance and symbolism of Medea in the novel. As she watches China act as Medea, Esch is simultaneously afraid of becoming her while hoping to gain her same power. Ward gives Esch agency and breaks down systems that label a teen mother as “dangerous” (Rigueur) by allowing her to become a mother with minimal judgement. The image of a Black teen mother owning the idea of motherhood while also questioning and hoping gives the character complexity and empathy imploring decolonial feminist tools.

China gives birth to puppies at the start of the novel, but readers also learn that Esch experiences motherhood in more ways than just giving birth. With her brother Randall, she takes on the role of parent to the family after their mother’s death. For Esch, the reality and responsibility of motherhood is closer now. This is Esch’s secret for most of the book, other than the brief moment that Manny figures it out in the bathroom at the basketball game, but she first says it out loud when she confronts Manny in the yard (Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 202), she says out loud, “I’m pregnant.” Manny denies it is his child and Esch reacts by physically hitting him:

“I loved you!” This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, filled with blood.

“Stupid bitch! What is wrong with you?”

“You!” (204)

China is not the only mother that represents Medea. This excerpt from Esch and how we have seen China shows that every mother, in reality, has some characteristics of Medea. Motherhood is complicated. It is even more so when it involves loss, poverty, an unexpected pregnancy, and a category-five hurricane.

This brings us to the final embodiment of “mother” in the novel, Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane is simply an idea until just before it makes landfall and Esch answers the phone to a message about mandatory evacuation, “There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die*. This is when the hurricane becomes real” (217). As the hurricane continues to beat down—quite literally—on this family, Esch says, “The snake has come to eat and play” (227). Later as she looks around, she notes, “The snake has swallowed the whole yard and is opening its jaw under the house” (227). This snake is Medea alive in Hurricane Katrina: the final symbol of the woman who came and killed her very own children. The symbolism of the snake represents Medea because in certain stories of Medea she was known as a snake charmer.

Just as Hurricane Katrina bears down on this family that has already lost their mother, all they have is each other. This tells us that a mother is important but nurturing and care can be done by a family or a community. Mothering can be expansive and flexible. They cling to one another for life when they flee to higher ground, when Skeetah

loses the thing, he loves most to save his family. As they attempt to swim to safety in the middle of the storm, Esch slips under water—she thinks,

Who will deliver me? And the hurricane says sssssshhhhhh. It shushes me through the water, with a voice muffled and deep, but then I feel a real hand, a human hand, cold and hard as barbed wire on my leg, pulling me back, and then I am being pushed up and out of the water, held by Skeet who is barely treading, barely keeping me and him afloat. China is a white head, spinning away in the relentless water, barking, and Skeetah is looking from her to me, screaming, Hurry up! Hurry up! at Randall. (235)

China and her puppies are gone because Skeetah sacrificed them for his sister. He jumps into the crucial role of protector when crisis strikes. The storm consumed them, just as Medea killed her children.

In a Q&A section at the back of the paperback version of *Salvage the Bones*, Ward explains that Katrina, China, and Esch are connected to Medea:

Medea is in China most directly. China is brutal and magical and loyal, Medea is in Hurricane Katrina because her power to unmake worlds, to manipulate the elements, closely aligns with the storm. And she's in Esch, too, because Esch understands her vulnerability, Medea's tender heart, and responds to it. (264)

This depiction of the three women in this text as Medea reflects decolonial thought because it allows the reader to imagine these women as mothers in various ways. Ward gives depth and concern for each character while writing against how Black characters are normally written about. She continues in the interview:

It infuriates me that the work of white American writers can be universal and lay

claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as “other.” I wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage. The stories I write are particular to my community and my people, which means the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the savage, is essentially a universal, human one. (264- 265)

By humanizing and giving her Black characters a different narrative than the whitewashed, Southern Faulknerian one that influenced Ward, Ward uses the symbolism of Medea to tell her story. She pairs her community and her experiences with that of a traditional literary character. She takes classic mythology and allows it to become triumphant and feminist for her characters. Esch is no longer isolated; she is instead celebrated and loved for who she becomes.

This novel tells a story of an extended family and a community, who, together, take on the role of mothering because they desperately need one another. They ultimately work together to overcome the death of their mother and wife, a devastating hurricane, the loss of everything they own, including a beloved dog. The idea of community takes the pressure off of needing a single hero or one character to save them all. This story of survival paints a picture of decolonization by showing how despite poverty and the systems against them, they survive. Their survival shows how community over individualization is valued. It allows for a narrative of helping and supporting one another without resenting or harming each other. The last lines of the novel perfectly encapsulate the meaning of mother when it comes to defining Esch. Together as a family, they wait for China to return:

She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, 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. (258)

Esch has lost her mother, but she herself came into her own motherly power. Esch realizes that she can be powerful and has maybe always been. In “‘Who Will Deliver Me?’: Black Girlhood in a Man’s World in *Salvage the Bones*,” Sondra Washington writes about how Black female characters are often used to give context to more centralized white characters. She writes about Esch:

For years, her family has been scavenging her grandparents’ home for survival, but the only way to improve their lives and remedy the damage caused by Esch’s lost childhood is to revisit the past and have the difficult discussions which should have occurred after her mother’s death. Though the journey back is traumatic, Esch seems to begin the process of valuing herself, locating her voice, and reclaiming her agency after the storm, and her future seems a bit brighter than her past. (92-93)

Even as a teenager, Esch realizes that she herself is Medea, Hurricane Katrina, China, and her own Mama. Esch is not only a mother, but she is a survivor, which is the true story of becoming ‘mother’ and being human. By becoming a mother and showing her humanity, Esch, as a character, breaks down barriers set by society. This is significant because she is not only a woman but a Black woman surviving poverty. Her survival is one of triumph and hope.

Throughout the journey to the end of the novel, Ward challenges ideas of

Southern literature, traditional storytelling, and the experience of being a Black girl in Mississippi. Laura Fine in the essay, “‘Make Them Know’: Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*,” writes about the ways that Ward challenges traditional tropes:

Ward’s novel invokes and examines canonical literature, locating truths applicable to Esch’s experience, using, discarding, and refining Greek mythology, Faulkner, and literary representations of teenage African American girls. At the same time, in writing about Hurricane Katrina and an unwed, pregnant African American teenager, Ward also demythologizes contemporary cultural constructions of the impoverished African American Gulf Coast community she portrays. (48)

By combining the influences of traditional literature with experiences in her community, Ward employs decolonial tools and thoughts that allow her to write from a place that pushes back against the patriarchy and the colonial systems of capitalism in the South. *Men We Reaped* and *Salvage the Bones* allow women to reclaim their identities as powerful leaders in a nation that often discounts them. Ward, herself, and her character Esch combat racism, sexism, and their own identity as Southern Black women and—despite their challenges and their drive for survival—they find their power amidst grief, trauma, and loss.

IV. KIESE LAYMON AND THE SEARCH FOR BLACK ABUNDANCE

In Kiese Laymon's memoir, *Heavy*, and his novel, *Long Division*, he explores what it means to have a Black body and a Black family in a world that is not hospitable to Black lives. In both his memoir and his fiction, Laymon writes two different types of protest literature. Through his fictional and autobiographical narratives, he dissects the systems of oppression caused by racism, capitalism, and sexism and counters them. Gloria Anzaldúa, a pioneer in decolonial feminist theories, writes that she fuses "personal narratives with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose. I create a hybrid genre, a new discursive mode" (6). Laymon utilizes similar decolonial tools by weaving narratives (fiction and personal) with his political views regarding injustice. In *Heavy*, he does so by exploring how his body functions in the world. In his memoir, he protests oppression with characters facing it directly and choosing themselves. Though a male writer, Laymon's work reflects ideas that align with a decolonial feminist lens in ways that are unique to his expository and didactic voice.

In another of Laymon's works, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, he explicitly presents the South in a decolonial description. Laymon writes:

We black Southerners, through life, love, and labor, are the generators and architects of American music, narrative, language, capital, and morality. That belongs to us. Take away all those stolen West African girls and boys forced to find an oral culture to express, resist, and signify in the South, and we have no rich American idiom. Erase Nigger Jim from our literary imagination and we have no American story of conflicted movement, place, and moral conundrum. Eliminate the Great Migration of Southern black girls and boys, and you have no

Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, or New York City.

Expunge the sorrow songs, gospel, and blues of the Deep South and we have no rock and roll, rhythm and blues, funk, or hip-hop. I am a black Southern artist.

Our tradition is responsible for me, and I am responsible for it. (71)

Laymon points out that much of American culture can be attributed to Black culture, specifically Black Southern culture; however, wider recognition of this does not exist. He is pointing to the idea that Black Southerners constructed, created, and own many aspects of not only what is considered Southern but what is considered quintessentially American. In both his memoir and his novel, Laymon claims this idea repeatedly. He constructs a decolonial world characterized by regaining power and control in which Black women and men reclaim the origins of being a Black Southerner, specifically in Mississippi.

For this thesis, I chose to analyze two women who represent decolonial feminist ideologies in their memoirs, poetry, and fiction so it may seem counterintuitive to choose a male author in a paper about decolonial feminism. However, Laymon narratively constructs women in a way that employs decolonial tools, especially in the genre of Southern literature, where white men are often writing the narratives of the women. In the essay “Rethinking the ‘Southern Lady,’” Sara Smith discusses her own frustration as a white woman of not finding accurate depictions of Southern women. She writes:

I had to understand and interpret the myths of womanhood and, most particularly, the myths of the southern woman almost solely from a male point of view. Most readers, I imagine, could without hesitation call up in rich, descriptive detail an image of a southern woman. I am not that mythical woman, nor am I acquainted

with anyone who is. How much more distressing it is to consider what the southern woman of color must encounter in the canon. If she is not a ‘mammy’ or a ‘whore,’ she is invisible. (78)

All of the authors in this thesis use narratives to make women of color visible. Ward and Trethewey share their experiences of being mixed race or Black and being Southern, but Laymon offers a perspective of someone raised by Black women. He is worth including because he writes about women in a way that feels empowering, authentic, and representative of their role in his community. He clearly idolizes his mother and grandmother in his memoir, and when he mentions women in his fiction, they are full and whole people rather than representative of women.

Kiese Laymon’s Trauma and Black Abundance

Heavy begins in Laymon’s hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, where, as a child, he encounters violence from his mother’s boyfriend and an abusive babysitter. As a way to cope, Laymon turns to food to soothe his pain. Laymon is sensitive to his own feelings while also greatly empathizing with the women and world around him. In his childhood, he becomes aware of oppression and internalizes what it means for him and the people around him. He eventually leaves Mississippi to pursue a career in academia but finds the systems of oppression he knew in Mississippi are still prevalent outside of Mississippi state lines. Even though he has a clear position on politics, progress, and the systems of oppression, Laymon still struggles with his own identity as an academic and as a Black man in and out of the South. Exploring his own Blackness and body in this memoir, he

“tr[ies] to intervene, disrupt, challenge and transform the existing power structures” (Anzaldúa 7). In other words, Laymon utilizes decolonial narrative strategies to break down the system of whiteness while writing what is true to him and his memory.

The opening paragraph of the memoir addresses his mother in the second person as “you” as he addresses the contradiction of being Black and excellent:

I did not want to write to you. I wanted to write a lie. I did not want to write honestly about black lies, black thighs, black loves, black laughs, black foods, black abuses, black blues, black belly buttons, black wins, black beens, black bends, black consent, black parents, or black children. I did not want to write about us. I wanted to write an American memoir.

I wanted to write a lie. (Laymon, *Heavy*, 1)

This opening is important because we immediately learn that this entire memoir is addressed to his mother. As Saeed Jones observes, “By directly addressing his mother and by portraying her as a nuanced and complicated character, Laymon illuminates the fierce love and deception that define his relationship to the woman who made him.” And even though the “you” is directed at her; he also addresses what Americans expect in an American memoir. They expect a memoir written through a white lens, the audience toward which literature has been targeted for centuries. They expect an American story of success. He implies that an “American memoir” would not be about the true Black experience living in Mississippi or America. The list of specifics that Laymon lists stand in opposition to white America and the lies of the American dream as a white person in the United States. “They” refers to an American culture focused on whiteness. Instead, Laymon’s memoir focuses on the reality and rawness of being Black in America while

pursuing excellence. Stephen Bijan writes, “The barrage of trauma in *Heavy* is unrelenting: Laymon has to witness and survive countless incidents of violence and abuse—above all, the toxic vapors of white supremacy, which permeate the events in the book like mustard gas does in a battlefield” (37). This is important to note because Laymon makes an explicit point of not writing to the whiteness. He says that he wanted to write a lie: “I wanted to do that old black work of pandering and lying to folk who pay us to pander and lie to them every day” (1). The work of writing to a white audience often feels easier to Laymon because there is no push-back, but he chose to do the difficult work of writing his story and the story of his community.

According to decolonial theorist Maria Lugones, writing against the societal norm of whiteness is a decolonial act. In the essay, “Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” Yomaira Figueroa writes, “Lugones further argues that faithful witnessing challenges singular narratives or dominant perspectives and in doing so takes one away from singular interpretations of truth, knowledge, and rights and toward a polysensical approach: one that understands that there are many worlds, that sees/reads many perspectives, particularly the perspectives of those who are dehumanized or rendered invisible” (Figueroa 3). By taking away the singular narrative of the experience of a Southerner, that is often narrated by and for of a white man, Laymon intends to break this pattern and explore ideas of Blackness, space, and memory in the South in a way that differs from other Southern contemporary writers.

Laymon successfully deconstructs colonialism in his memoir by using personal storytelling to confront racial and gender injustices straight on. Lisa Guerrero analyzes

both Ta-Nehisi Coates and Laymon's work in her essay, "New Native Sons: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kiese Laymon, and The Phenomenology of Blackness in the Post-Racial Age."

In the Post-Racial Age, she argues,

Coates and Laymon reimagine the work of Black racial salvation as a kind of intimate historiography that maps the interrelationship between individual and communal journeys, as well as links the temporal sites of past, present, and future blacknesses together in such a way that the personal histories they share demonstrate that the struggle for black racial salvation does not move through history. (415)

Laymon begins to suggest this in the opening paragraph quoted earlier, but continues the idea later on the page, "I wanted to center a something, a someone who wants us dead and dishonest. I wanted white Americans, who have proven themselves even more unwilling to confront their lies, to reconsider how their lies limit our access to good love, healthy choices, and second chances" (*Heavy*, 1-2). By pointing directly to the ways that white Americans are unwilling to "confront" the lies of what America is, Laymon amplifies the marginalized perspective: a decolonial narrative strategy. This framing of the text demonstrates deconstructs and reconstructs ideas of Blackness and the true experiences of a Black man. Laymon works to reframe and speak directly to the Black community in his memoir.

Lisa Guerrero explains how Laymon does this in a different way, "In creative and affective ways, Coates and Laymon invest in reclaiming different definitions of people, places, and moments that are bound to particular meanings of blackness in America" (421). Guerrero points out how Laymon elevates his experiences and the experiences of

his community in a way that speaks directly to them.

By showing and naming the systems of racism, sexism and capitalism, Laymon then deconstructs and rebuilds a future of “black abundance” (*Heavy*, 63). This reconstruction is something Laymon does throughout: “Coates’s and Laymon’s meditations on black subject formation serve as vital scaffolding for building a new vocabulary for how we talk about blackness, whiteness, and race in “post-race” America” (Guerrero 421). Despite “white folks and white power” making Laymon feel less-than, he still searches for excellence over perfection in a way that builds and names what it means to be Black in America and Mississippi. He writes, “I cared about the way you’d grit your teeth when you beat me for not being perfect” (Laymon, *Heavy*, 5). This idea for perfection is something his mother expects and teaches him is essential for succeeding as a Black man in America. Laymon explores this throughout the text and reaches for excellence and abundance over perfection. Excellence and abundance are more capacious and flexible, like his wordplay. Throughout the memoir, Laymon works through what this means and what the expectations of Blackness mean for him and his community. He ultimately decides that there is an opportunity for Black abundance (a word he learned from a childhood friend) that does not always equal Black perfection.

Laymon turns to Black abundance over perfection because it offers a type of freedom. He writes about his experiences in eighth grade outside of his white-dominated Catholic school where a classmate described how gross meant someone who wasn’t Black. He writes:

Worse than any cuss word we could imagine, “gross” existed on the other side of what we considered abundant. And in the world we lived in and loved, everyone

black was in some way abundant... And every Sunday, we hoped to watch some older black folk fan that black heathen in tennis shoes who caught the Holy Spirit. But outside of stadiums and churches, and outside of weekends, we were most abundant. While that abundance dictated the shape and movement of bodies, the taste and texture of our food, it was most apparent in the way we dissembled and assembled words, word sounds, and sentences. (76)

This experience of Black abundance shows the beauty of being Black to Laymon. He expresses the places that being Black is safe and that Black folks were allowed and felt free to be themselves. He references the food, the way they moved, but most apparent and important to him is the words that Black abundance represents. The Black-centric notion of Black abundance places it in direct opposition to the White-centric notion of Black perfection. Black perfection requires flawlessness through the lens of white Americans and Black abundance requires freedom to simply be Black and excellent. Laymon begins to understand this through the use of “dissembled and assembled words, word sounds, and sentences” (76). Laymon uses wordplay and writing to show his own Black abundance.

Laymon experiences Black abundance as a child in a wholesome and wonderful way, but during his time at Millsaps that changes. He writes:

Ray Gunn introduced me to the word “antiblack” two weeks before I got kicked out of school. I was talking to him about patriarchy and he nodded and said patriarchy was like antiblackness. He said the problem with fighting white folk was even the most committed of black folk had to deal with their own relationship to “antiblackness.” I told him how LaThon and I used to say and believe black

abundance. He said I should have learned a lot more about black abundances before I got kicked out of school for making educated white folks at Millsaps do my homework. (155)

This contrast of Black abundance, now that Laymon is at a majority white university, shows how as a Black man, Laymon understands and experiences antiblackness.

Although Laymon's time at Millsaps and his experience with Black abundance feels like he no longer believes in it, by the end of his memoir, he comes to this conclusion, "we are worthy of sharing the most abundant, patient, responsible kind of love and liberation with every vulnerable child on this planet" (240).

This exploration of what Black abundance means to Laymon throughout the text represents a freedom to explore what it means to be Black. Crucially, it enables Laymon to decide that being Black in America and Mississippi can one day be redemptive. Laymon's writing does not cater to whiteness but instead caters to himself and his Blackness while exposing the repercussions of living in a white supremacist society. Laymon can still identify Black power. He writes:

I will understand that I am a heavy black boy from Mississippi, which means that I am vulnerable. But, unlike most heavy black boys from Mississippi, I have a solid check coming in every month for the rest of my life. I have "professor" associated with my name. I have a mother and a father with almost powerful friends who could help defend me if I needed it. I will understand that I am vulnerable but I am not powerless. I am not powerless because, though we have no wealth, we have peculiar access to something resembling black power. (201)

It is significant that Laymon notes what Black power is while also framing how it still

leaves him vulnerable. This shines through in the way he writes this section. He does not say that he definitively understands that he is a “heavy black boy from Mississippi,” but he uses the future tense and says that he “will understand.” The intentionality in the language he chooses implies that as a Black man living in America, he may not always be safe or have power. This is evident later in the chapter when he writes, “I am supposed to be happy because I am free, because I am not in handcuffs, because I have a peculiar access to something resembling Black power. I will know that I am not free precisely because I am happy that my wrists are free of handcuffs the month I earn tenure with distinction from Vassar College (211). Laymon points out the vast contrast between earning tenure and being a Black man in handcuffs. Both are viable narratives for a “Black boy from Mississippi,” and this contrast is unique to the Black experience. Again, Laymon’s intentional use of language shows the intentionality of placing the Black experience in white America.

Although Laymon specifically writes about the Black experience in his memoir, it is important to note that he did not want to write the story that was true to him and his experience as a Black man, instead, he wanted to write the lie and cater to whiteness. He writes:

I didn’t understand the difference between “writing to” and “writing for” anyone. No one ever taught me to write to and for my people. They taught me how to imitate Faulkner and how to write to and for my teachers. And all of my teachers were white. When writing to you, I wrote in the hopes that what I wrote was good enough for me to not get beaten. (106)

Laymon addresses his mother directly in his writing when referring to how he learned to

write. He learned through reading and being taught by white people, but in this excerpt, he is clearly writing directly to his Black mother. Writing well and white has always meant safety for Laymon. It means that he caters to the white experience. By writing in a way that showcases his Blackness, he is challenging the societal standard and risking his safety and the acceptance of his mother. Choosing to write to his Blackness aligns with decolonialism because he intentionally addresses the society of white supremacy he lives in while centering his Blackness. This decolonial tool reframes his perspective while directly stating how whiteness and white supremacy causes harm and injustice. Writing to whiteness may be an easier and less threatening project, but Laymon's memoir courageously poses urgent questions of Blackness, whiteness, and belonging. As Guerrero notes, Laymon is "grappling to unbind these meanings as a way to redeem not only themselves but also those that they could not save and those they may yet save" (421). In so doing, "Laymon lay[s] bare the emotional and psychic intricacies of the flaws in America's racial covenant and the extent of its casualties."

Laymon not only unpacks white supremacy, space, and memory for his audience, but his writing shows that he is processing the trauma and grief himself by showcasing his personal experiences and writing to his mother. This is most evident when Laymon writes an essay for the newspaper at Millsaps, and the editor has him change the ending so that his "primary audience" would be white students (142). The editor "said [he] would lose readers if [he] kept the focus of the essay on what black students at Millsaps could do to organize, love each other, and navigate institutional racism" (142). After the essay is published, Laymon reaches out to his mother, and she immediately criticizes the essay for having four errors (143). She lectures him on how to treat "liberal or

enlightened white” people in Mississippi and what she thinks he should be doing. Not only does this interaction show the ways that Laymon has been forced to write and cater to white audiences, but it becomes obvious that Laymon no longer caters to white audiences. It also shows his constant pursuit of excellence in a world that does not believe he can be excellent because of the way he looks.

Heavy uses Laymon’s personal experiences to showcase national, systemic failures. This makes his memoir a work of protest literature. In the book, *American Protest Literature*, Zoe Trodd compiles documentary work dating back to the American Revolution, showing how writers, poets, and journalists protested their reality and created a movement. In the introduction, she writes:

The protest literature they create provides a revolutionary language and a renewed vision of the possible. It gives distinctive shape to long-accumulating grievances, claims old rights, and demands new ones. It creates space for argument, introduces doubt, deepens perception, and shatters the accepted limits of belief. American protest writers recognize the failed promises of the democratic experiment and redraw its blueprints. (xix)

Laymon’s memoir writes a blueprint for American democracy and how it treats people of color, specifically Black people. *Heavy* gives shape and narrative to the consequences of a system that does not value Black lives by using the voice of one person and their experience to intervene.

At the end of the memoir the idea of the blueprint is the most distinct. Laymon writes:

We will find churches, synagogues, mosques, and porches committed to the love,

liberation, memories, and imagination of black children. We will share. We will find psychologists committed to the love, liberation, memories, and imagination of black children. We will share. We will find teachers committed to the love, liberation, memories and imagination of black children. We will share. We will find healers committed to the love, liberation, memories, and imagination of black children. We will share. We will find art communities, co-operatives, curriculums, justice, and labor organizations committed to the love, memories, and imagination of black children. We will share. We will remember, imagine, and help create what we cannot find. (240)

The repetition of the phrase “We will share” is significant because it implies the community that Laymon wishes for. By repeating the words “liberation, memories, and imagination,” Laymon is directly communicating the “blueprint,” or tools, needed to deconstruct and create a society where Black children can have the Black abundance he often speaks about. Although Laymon writes this paragraph that feels hopeful, he follows it with a paragraph that recognizes all the ways that the system can fail and not “remember” (240-241). He writes:

We will not imagine.

We will not share.

We will not swing back.

We will not organize.

We will not be honest.

We will not be tender.

We will not be generous.

We will do what Americans do.

We will abuse like Americans abuse.

We will forget like Americans forget.

We will hunt like Americans hunt.

We will hide like Americans hide.

We will love like Americans love.

We will lie like Americans lie.

We will die like Americans die.

We did not ever have to be this way.

We will not ever have to be this way. (240-241)

Laymon writes a type of protest literature that contrasts the blueprint for what America can be to Black children with all the ways that America can fail. The “we” in this excerpt represents the Black community and shows all the ways that they can succumb to the system of patriarchy and white supremacy in America. The last two sentences carry the most impact by stating that the systems of oppression never had to exist, and that the Black community can change the narrative. This is the hope and space that Laymon creates in order to rebuild a society and find a different experience for Black Americans and Black Southerners.

The idea of reconstructing a community is decolonial because Laymon no longer writes to the societal standard of the white audience as discussed earlier, but he now writes about himself, his mother, and his community. Protest literature writes against the systems at play, which Laymon does. But he also writes in a way that highlights his experiences and the experiences of his community. This does not mean that white people

will not read or empathize with *Heavy*, but that Laymon no longer concerns himself with the reaction of white people to his writing — a decolonial idea.

Toward the end of the memoir, Laymon writes:

I did not write this book to you simply because you are a black woman, or deeply southern, or because you taught me how to read and write. I wrote this book to you because, even though we harmed each other as American parents and children tend to do, you did everything you could to make sure the nation and our state did not harm their most vulnerable children. I will tell you that white folk and white power often helped make me feel gross, criminal, angry, and scared as a child, but they could never make me feel intellectually incapable because I was your child. (238)

Laymon shows the depth and layers of his memoir by writing about the ways that oppressed parents must protect their children in a society that does not foster their success. In a book review about *Heavy*, Saeed Jones writes, “I don’t know what to make of an America in which we feel compelled to hurt the people we love in order to keep them alive. That Laymon does keep living and even thriving doesn’t mean he and his mother are ever fully free of all they endured along the way.” This idea of thriving despite the systems working against them presents the idea of Black abundance that Laymon mentions.

In order to truly have the Black abundance he speaks about, you must first understand how the systems of slavery and oppression are relevant and active today. Throughout the text Laymon is reclaiming his Blackness and finding his own version of Black abundance, but he is also working through ideas of shame. Shame develops as a

major theme in *Heavy* through the way that Laymon experiences shame with his body. By expressing shame and showing it in this memoir, Laymon does two things. First, he breaks down the idea that Black writers only show perfection— or must show perfection— in order to succeed in white America. Second, he explores the idea that men do not feel body shame and dysmorphia. Body shame is often considered a problem that girls and women experience. Illustrating it in his memoir breaks down barriers of gender, contributing to him being a decolonial *feminist* writer. This contributes to the idea that there can be shame around Black writers and how they fit into a white American society.

To begin with the latter, Laymon's work is heavily influenced by James Baldwin, which he mentions several times in his work and in interviews. James Baldwin writes in *Notes of a Native Son* in "Autobiographical Notes":

One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading since I don't mean to suggest that he has it worse than anybody else) is that Negro problem is written about so widely. The bookshelves groan under the weight of information, and everyone therefore considers himself informed. And this information, furthermore, operates usually (generally, popularly) to reinforce traditional attitudes. Of traditional attitudes there are only two — For or Against — .(5)

The idea of either being "For or Against" (Baldwin 5) references the idea that there is a barrier to Black abundance; as indicated above, Black abundance is a concept that pushes beyond this limited binary. Laymon confronts this barrier and tries to change the narrative of what it means to be a Black writer. Baldwin also writes that the Black experience is written about often, but that it is "written about so badly" (6). He continues,

“It is quite possible to say that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about” (Baldwin 6). Arguably, Baldwin claims that once a Black person reaches Black excellence or perfection, they no longer have anything to talk about because they have performed as far as they can in a white America.

Baldwin’s articulation of the challenges to addressing the so-called “Negro problem” are interesting to compare to what Laymon expresses: that the only thing white people cannot take away from him is the articulation that his mother gave him. Laymon stops pursuing perfection and, instead, pursues abundance, which means he has a sense of power over his intellect and identity. Laymon wrote in his memoir when he talks about pursuing writing as a college student at a mostly white university:

It required loads of unsentimental explorations of black love. It required an acceptance of our strange. And mostly, it required a commitment to new structures, not reformation. I’d spent eighteen years reading the work of supposed excellent sentence-writers who did not love, or really see us. Many wrote for us, without writing to us. (*Heavy*, 131)

This excerpt confronts shame directly. Laymon expresses that he is not writing from a place of shame, but a place of love. Writing to the white audience, as Baldwin indicates, requires Black excellence writing to himself and his community requires Black abundance. His skills in writing and articulation have created a better structure for Black writers.

Baldwin would probably approve of Laymon’s style and directness. Laymon is undoubtedly influenced by Baldwin by no longer just writing “For or Against” Black

readers: he writes from a place of love and that can encompass an expansive space that is no longer limited to either/or. Laymon says in an interview, “We deserve the most abundant, messy, thorough love ever created from the people close to us and policies that shape the lives of those people. We get the opposite under the belief that Black children will recover. We might keep going but we don’t recover. We take all that shit with us. Black children deserve the greatest, most abundant love ever created. That should be where our imaginations of what’s possible start” (Taylor).

Laymon successfully creates this abundance in his writing by being honest and vulnerable about the oppression Black men and women face. He also creates Black abundance by using hope and love to create and construct a new version of what it means to be Black and resist in America. For example, writing about Hurricane Katrina, Laymon states, “When the levees broke and Katrina obliterated the coast of Mississippi, and President Bush neglected our folks because they were black, poor, and southern” (*Heavy*, 208). This excerpt shows vulnerability and honesty by naming exactly and bluntly how Black Americans were abandoned after the hurricane. His writing style stings and his mentioning the president by name is a direct, honest response to the oppression faced by the people of the Gulf Coast. He also shows his emotion and empathy in a vulnerable way. About leaving Mississippi, he writes, “I will write about home. I will do everything I can to never feel what I felt those last few years in Mississippi. I will bend. I will break. I will build. I will recover” (162). This prose reveals how Laymon feels about a place forgotten by someone like President Bush while also narrating how Laymon feels about the place he grew up. He is fond of the place while still feeling broken by it.

This vulnerability is crucial to understanding how Laymon talks about the shame centered around his body. Laymon understands that white America does not see Black bodies as human. Guerrero writes, “For Laymon, there are few things that black people can do to stay alive when the white American imagination requires your death. In this way, the status of black death in black America is constituted as primary to understanding black subject formation. Black life is not lived unto death. Instead, black life exists within and despite black death” (424). Laymon writes explicitly about his Black body, the weight on it, and its effects on him. This is important because he not only expresses that he experienced body dysmorphia as a man, but also demonstrates how he allowed the influence of white people and their perceptions of his body to change how he thought about himself and others. He realizes this when he is home visiting his Grandmama:

Uncle Jimmy was right. I’d spent the last four years of my life reading and creating art invested in who we were, what we knew, how we remembered, and what we imagined when white people weren’t around. For me, that vision had everything to do with Grandmama’s porch. Every time I sat down to write, I imagined sitting on that porch with layers of black Mississippi in front of and behind me. (167)

This moment is crucial to understanding that Laymon uses writing about his shame and his experience as a Black man as a way to construct a specific story for being Black in America. His transparency and exploration of the “layers of black” reflect on the past of where his ancestors have been and the oppression they experienced while also reflecting on how it influences Laymon, his mother, and the future for Black Americans. He recognizes the hope for the future, while also recognizing the oppression and hurt that

comes with being Black in Mississippi.

Long Division: A Protest Novel

The novel, *Long Division*, was published just a month before the Black Lives Matter movement began in the United States. Although it was not directly influenced by the movement, Laymon explores race, space, and identity and their effects on the Black characters. Thus, the text presents itself as protest literature that can be analyzed through a decolonial lens. Both Richard Wright and James Baldwin influenced Laymon and his writing. They both engage with the protest novel and its tradition in Black literature. In his essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin critiqued Richard Wright’s *Native Son* alongside *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Baldwin concludes that neither are successful protest novels because their writing devalues and dehumanizes the Black characters. In the essay, “James Baldwin’s ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’: Educating our responses to racism,” Jeff Frank summarizes Baldwin’s argument: “When the complexity of racism is deflected into a simplifying fantasy everyone loses. Not only do the subjects of the fiction become distorted as characters, readers are given the consoling, but false, impression that they have understood something morally significant about racism” (Frank 26). Baldwin’s critique of Wright concerns himself with the fictionalization or fantasizing of racism and the implications it takes away from the movement. Wright, as Baldwin sees him, has also lost faith in America (Kim 396), making his ideas of protest literature feel to the cultivation of a progressive vision. While Wright defines protest literature as something that challenges the systems of oppression, Laymon challenges and speaks to a change in

the system. He bluntly and clearly calls out the systems of oppression while simultaneously writing a narrative that explores the idea of liberation.

In this genre-bending novel, the protagonist, a teenager named City, finds himself navigating violence, religion, racism, sexism, and coming of age in a rural Mississippi town outside Jackson. The novel is set in two stories that intertwine with one another. Citoyen or “City,” the protagonist, opens the novel by making a statement on racism during a nationally televised quiz contest. As he leaves, he’s handed the novel *Long Division*. To City’s confusion, the novel is about him but set in the past in 1985. It tells the story of him falling in love with Shalaya Crump traveling to the future of 2013 and finding out that they have a daughter that is orphaned after they died in Hurricane Katrina. They then travel back to 1964 where they encounter the Klan while trying to protect their family and another time-traveler. Ultimately, the two stories of City converge in a shed at City’s grandmother’s house where City comes to terms with a queer love he has for his formal rival, LaVander. All of this to say, the novel can be confusing and frustrating at times as the characters navigate time travel and racial injustices. I believe Laymon disorients the reader intentionally. This confusion for the reader often represents the confusion and frustration of living in a Black body in America.

In the essay, “Nobody’s Protest Novel,” Vincent Haddad describes Laymon’s novel this way: “In the metafictional and speculative space of *Long Division*, City struggles against a novelistic world in which he is constantly figured as not mattering, unimportant, and perhaps not even ‘real,’ and in doing so provides an aesthetic strategy of collective revision and radical love in ways that not only align more closely to the political output of the BLM movement but enervate and provoke its radical imagination”

(42). This idea of radical Black love, also present in *Heavy*, is expressed toward Laymon himself and his community to show his value as a Black writer. City experiences something similar navigating rural Mississippi in 1964, 1985 and in 2013. Haddad writes:

Together, with the toxicity of homophobia and masculinity stripped away, the two boys are able to begin a collective act of writing, reading, and revision that is grounded in history but imaginatively provocative. As *Long Division* suggests, novelization offers a kind of magic that makes available, like in no other medium, the reciprocal recognition and love between people of color that is necessary for liberation. (56)

Radical love is apparent in *Long Division* by the way Laymon ends the novel. He writes, “Hand in hand in hand in hands, deep in the Mississippi underground, we opened our eyes in that lavender darkness and taught each other how to revise until all of our characters were free” (Laymon, *Long Division*, 135). This mentality acknowledges that the system has to be revised and rewritten, but it cannot be done without community and empathy. The excerpt showcases the community and empathy Laymon desires for his community by expressing an idea of hope where they can come together and rewrite the narrative. This demonstrates empathy by calling for teamwork and love.

City shows a tremendous amount of empathy for others even though his character often seems rash. When his friends play a prank on him to search the pastor’s car for nude pictures in the glove box, he finds a picture of a woman’s chest that does not show her face. He thinks, “even though the breasts were nice, it was wack to just see breasts and no face... Still, I hoped the woman who owned the breasts wanted her head cut off

from the picture. If not, it was one of the meanest things I could imagine doing to someone” (101). Laymon counters the objectification of women through his characters and their display of empathy. This also aligns with the Black Lives Matter movement that is founded by women. By giving female characters development, having the male characters show them empathy and empower them, Laymon displays a revision of the narrative that shows radical love and Black abundance.

Laymon does not pull punches in using crude, blunt, and direct language in *Long Division*. In reading this novel, I couldn’t help but think about a genre in Southern Literature often called Grit Lit, “This subgenre of Southern fiction is a direct response to the work of William Faulkner, a close cousin to Erskine Caldwell's tales of rural poverty and Flannery O'Connor's grotesque fantasies of alienation. The best grit lit is filled with ornery, deranged, and desperate characters who are fueled by violence, sex, and alcohol... Grit lit never pulls its punches. It is, after all, gritty” (MacKethan). Grit Lit is also distinctly about the South, “Southern Gothic writing continues to flourish in its contemporary offshoot known as Grit Lit. Noted for its raw sensibility, Grit Lit captures a landscape of harsh realities, a rowdy world where mud tires and marijuana prevail over moonlight and magnolia. Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, and Harry Crews are frequently lauded as pioneers of the Grit Lit genre” (Rea 79).

Laymon’s language and style are reminiscent and influenced by similar styles of the South. “The physical is more important in the South. A sense of personal courage and prowess are much more important in the South than in other parts of the country. The South has a tradition of young men testing themselves--against each other, against the natural world, against the greater world beyond. This is related to identity and a sense of

manhood that springs from the past. The traditional way to gauge courage and prowess is violent means, be it football, arm-wrestling, driving fast or shooting each other” (Rea 91). The tradition of Grit Lit and Southern literature pushes men to prove their manhood through violence, and although *Long Division* has violence, sex and grit, it is not trying to prove its Southern identity and manliness. Instead, the grit in *Long Division* shows the dangers of white supremacy and sexism. Laymon writes the brutally honest ways in which his characters experience microaggressions, violence, and oppression.

In traditional Grit Lit, race is rarely discussed, and Black characters are not written to interact in a way that shows the systems at play. It does attempt to show a new South, although one that believes that race is no longer an issue in the South. According to Mitchell Plosknoka,

This assumed race-blindness is a hole, a denial of their complicity in the centuries of violence and exploitation of their similarly impoverished black neighbors. And while this becomes a viable part of the Grit Lit project as a whole—it is, after all, modeling the ways in which the poor southern white [man] is denied and unable to assimilate to the dominant white communities (even if many reject assimilation)—it must still be noted where the literature does, and does not, address race head on. Grit Lit models a slow, painful, incremental liberal narrative of progress with regards to race. (Ploskonka 35)

Laymon in *Long Division* works to address this hole in understanding of race within the South. Being postsouthern, as referenced in the introduction, includes a specific South that portrays the authentic and realistic experiences of Southerners, and that includes Black Southerners. Black Southerners have arguably created, influenced, and helped

establish the culture of the South, and as Laymon argues, in *Heavy* about America in general. Despite the oppression they've experienced, The South is often thought of as "backwards" and "As Heather K. Love has argued, the very notion of backwardness, particularly inflected through the lens of race and sexuality, provides the binaries by which modernity defines 'progress... the nonlinearity of the novel links time traveling into the past not just to reckon with the political and historical 'backwardness' of rural Mississippi, but to 'backwards,' queer modes of desire as providing potential pathways forward for Black liberation" (Haddad 52). In *Long Division*, this means that Laymon takes the binaries of gender and race and challenges them through the lens of Black abundance by giving power and empathy to his characters.

The novel represents City's coming-of-age as one in which he pursues his authentic and genuine self without using violence to prove his manhood. Laymon takes the Southern genre of Grit Lit, which is most notably written about the white working class and lacks inclusion and space for exploration of identity through means of authenticity and transforms it to a Southern Black perspective. Grit Lit also typically lacks the inclusion of the marginalized members of the South, like women and people of color. Whether or not it is Laymon's intention, his work as protest literature provides a different response to poverty, race, and Southern identity. As Haddad writes, "Through its nonlinear and metafictional narrative, *Long Division* makes demands of its readers to participate in a messy and uncertain act of collective revision and provokes a radical imaginary through its production of Black queer love" (Haddad 43). This is different than Grit Lit, which often uses titillation to draw in readers. Like Grit Lit, *Long Division* challenges the reader, makes them feel uncomfortable at times, and pushes the boundaries

of fiction — but instead of doing it for the titillation, Laymon does it to make a point about race and sexism in his characters and the reality of oppression they face as Black Mississippians.

In an interview with Laymon, Brandon Taylor says about reading his books, “There were times in reading this book that I had to set it aside because it felt like I was walking over my own grave.” Laymon’s memoir and fiction both evoke this feeling where at times the words are difficult and hard to read. This is most apparent when City encounters the KKK. He talks back to the men who seem like they are about to kill him. They have a gun and City does not. This perspective of City confronting the KKK, despite them reacting to him in a violent way, differs from the traditional Southern tropes of (white) men in narratives creating a piece of work that allows for decolonization by exploring gender, race, and identity directly. As City tries to figure out how to escape, Laymon writes:

I knew that each of the Klansman was feeling fear and trying to figure out a way to seem less afraid than he was to the other teammates on his Klan squad. But when you’re getting the taste slapped out of your mouth for no reason, it doesn’t matter if the person doing the taste-slapping is probably just as scared as you. And it makes you feel weird that no matter what, the taste-slappers never talk... they just breathe like new asthmatics and watch you. It made it easier to believe they lived their whole lives behind those white sheets, slapping Black kids up and never breathing right. (*Long Division*, 60)

This shift is interesting because, usually in Southern literature, the Black character is painted as lacking humanity, but in this excerpt Laymon shows how easy it is for City to

not think of the Klansman as people. Do not mistake this for Laymon trying to get the reader to empathize with the Klansman, but instead he shows how Black characters are often painted as easier to not imagine as human. This scene is a direct way that Laymon explores race and identity. The white characters are reduced to the white sheets they are wearing while City shows depth as he analyzes his next move to escape.

The book opens and directly confronts race and sexuality. City is in a national contest, similar to a spelling bee, where students must use a word in a sentence correctly to win. In an act of racial discrimination, the white people running the contest reprimand City for having a hairbrush with him while he is also being teased by his rival for being a “homosexual” (27). He puts the brush back in the dressing room and goes up to the mic to hear his first word, “niggardly” (34). After hearing the word, he goes back to the dressing room to retrieve his brush and begins to internally question why they would give him that word in a room full of white people. He uses the word “incorrectly” and then begins to call out the issue with the word and the way they treated him. The chapter ends with him reacting on the mic: “And fuck white folks!” I yelled at the light and, for the first time all night, thought about whether my grandma was watching. “My name is City. And if you don’t know, now you know, nigga!” (37).

This scene where City confronts the contest hosts and makes statements about race and the racist word he was given to put into a sentence exemplifies a narrative in Southern literature where a Black boy regains a sense of power: “I see an opportunity to instead consider narratives that interrogate the contemporary and particular ‘nobodyness’ of a Black protagonist, rather than a neat and conciliatory narrative of heroic ascent. Outlining the systemic devaluation of Black lives” (Haddad 43). City is devalued for his

sexuality and race but confronts it head on. This ‘nobodyness’ of a Black protagonist usually means that they are subject to State violence, considered disposable, and are abandoned (Haddad 43). Laymon addresses how his characters could easily be classified as “Nobodies” because of their poverty and race then instead has City’s reaction aired on national TV to give him national attention as he goes viral on YouTube. City starts to become well-known for it and people respect his reaction to the word he was assigned and the way he was treated.

The first half of the book reflects City as a teenager in 2013, whereas in the second half of the book we meet City as a teenager in 1985. This version of City is in love with Shalaya and travels to the future of 2013 to discover that they have a daughter, Baize. Baize, City, and Shalaya travel together to 1964. They try to protect a fellow time traveler, Evan, and their grandfathers whom they learn were murdered by the KKK that night. Evan is Jewish, and he and his family have attempted to assist Black families in their town. They dress in Klan outfits to protect themselves, but are caught by City, Baize, and Shalaya. Evan’s brother defends them:

“We was just trying to save our family,” his brother said. “That’s what y’all were fixing to do, too. If its right for y’all, it’s right for us, ain’t it?” It was so odd to hear a teenager’s voice coming from under a Klan sheet. “Some of these folks hate anyone who ain’t them. If you ain’t the right kind of white or you ain’t Christian or you ain’t Southern or you ain’t whatever they want you to be, you might as well be a Negro, especially with that Freedom Summer coming.”

“But y’all can hide,” Shalaya Crump finally said to the brother. “Don’t you see what we’re saying? We can’t ever hide.” She looked hard at Evan. “That’s all I

was trying to say earlier.” (Laymon, *Long Division*, 115)

This interaction and scene take people from the future and places them in 1964. They come to this time period with the knowledge of the future and of civil rights — but still understand the implications of being Black or not belonging in the South. Laymon examines the difference between being Black in the South and being non-white. The difference is stark and not always explained. He rejects the white narrative of Civil Rights that says that Black people experience equality and shows that there has not been as much progress as many thought in 2013.

In this excerpt, Shalaya tries to explain that being Black is part of her identity and not something she can hide from. After she has this realization, she decides to stay in 1964 and not return with City to 1985. She chooses this because she does not want her daughter to suffer in the world that she knows about already. In a letter they found from the Freedom School it reads, “This knowledge is the knowledge of how to survive in a society that is out to destroy you. They will demand that you be honest...” (93). Shalaya understands the reality of this society and does not want her daughter to have to live in it. This alters the future and means their daughter, Baize, will no longer exist. Haddad explains the context of this and how it is framed around the violence of being Black in Mississippi:

Ultimately, Shalaya discovers that, because of the inescapability of racialized terror and white supremacy across time and space, choosing between a prospective, or even speculative, future of continued racial violence versus the future of a child she does not know is really not to have a choice at all. This tragic moment leaves C2, and C1 [C2 is City in part 2 and C1 is City in part 1] as the

reader, mourning the literally inexplicable erasure of yet another young Black person and anticipating the desperate urgency of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” in the present. (42)

Shalaya’s reaction to staying in 1964, despite the racism she will encounter there, makes a point that terror is unavoidable.

In the first half of the novel, we likewise understand that terror is unavoidable when City talks about how his grandmother describes life in 1985: “every little thing had to be perfect, according to Mama Lara. And if I acted like I wasn’t perfect around them, Mama Lara would tell me to go get her switch and she’d give me twelve licks. I didn’t know if Mama Lara had ever been beaten by a white man in a sheet” (Laymon, *Long Division*, 61). City may have thought that things were safer now, but as he time travels, he learns the reality of oppression in the past and the future. This decision by Shalaya is one that Laymon makes as a blunt statement. She chooses to stay in the past because she knows that cannot avoid certain future terrors and pain. Her daughter’s birth is avoidable and so it is by not having her child in the first place that she can ensure that that one individual will avoid what is otherwise inescapable. It is worth sacrificing her daughter because she knows her daughter cannot be safe. Laymon is not writing a redemptive story where the characters overcome racism and inequality, but instead writes a story of loss and inescapability of the circumstances. This is a central idea and theme to writing about a New South, one that takes Grit Lit a step further by including and bluntly showcasing the inequity of the South through narrative and storytelling.

In both *Heavy* and *Long Division*, Laymon mobilizes vulnerability, honesty, bluntness, shame, and grit to confront the systems of the patriarchy and white supremacy.

He takes the white Southern world of Grit Lit and transforms it into one that showcases Black abundance and liberation through the lens of decolonization. Both of these texts are successful pieces of protest literature because they confront reality of oppression while also allowing his characters and himself to find Black abundance and love.

Trethewey, Ward, and Laymon are represent a progressive decolonial South in their memoirs, poetry, and novels. They create narratives that outline a world where Blackness is abundant and powerful. They use history, memory, and empathy to show the humanity of the South in contrast to the inhumanity of America's colonial, patriarchal, white supremacists' systems of oppression. These writers' emphasis the existence of these systems while also asking what would happen if they were torn down. Their writing is centered around community, love, and perseverance while also combatting hate helping them write a narrative of the South they dream of.

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