
‘Make them know’: Reclaiming Undomesticated Landscapes and Disposable Bodies in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*

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Abstract

As Michael Kreyling has pointed out, since “Southern Literature” was “invented” by the Agrarians in 1930s, the elements that define the field such as a sense of defeat, nostalgia for the past, and a sense of community. These pervasive borders have largely served only white, male thinkers of the South, while leaving women writers and writers of colors marginalized. Recent turns toward a “New Southern Studies” have served to remedy these earlier ills by imagining a more capacious and inclusive definition for Southern Literature. In this essay, I posit that Jesmyn Ward, in her National Book Award-winning novel *Salvage the Bones*, helps to redefine the borders of what Southern Literature represents. *Salvage the Bones* revolves around the plight of Esch, a young African American girl living in fictional coastal city of Beau Sauvage, Mississippi. The plot explores the days just prior to, of, and following Hurricane Katrina’s devastating landfall. Although Esch experiences myriad trials both manmade and “natural,” what becomes clear throughout the novel is that Ward firmly refuses to let her character become, what Dori Laub calls, a “designated victim” or for Esch’s family to be ostracized in their rural community. In line with SSAWWS’s conference theme of “Border Crossings,” I intend to demonstrate how Jesmyn Ward’s novel works to disassemble and reestablish the borders of what Southern Literature means. By reclaiming undomesticated spaces and, to borrow Patricia Yaeger’s term, disposable bodies, Ward effectively shifts genre boundaries to create a more thoughtful and inclusive definition of Southern Literature.

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