WITH SLABS, BONES, AND POLES: DE/CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF HURRICANE KATRINA IN JESMYN WARD’S SALVAGE THE BONES, NATASHA TRETREWYEY’S BEYOND KATRINA, AND SELAH SATERSTROM’S SLAB

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS English

May 16, 2016

Winston Salem, North Carolina

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have the humblest admiration for Joanna Ruocco and owe her far more gratitude than the “Acknowledgments” page of my thesis can give. Dr. Ruocco, thank you for giving me so much of your time. Thank you for supporting both my creative and academic writing and for being so attentive to sound and to Margot and Ruby. If ever I own a vineyard, you’ll never spend a day grape-less.

This thesis would not exist without Rian Bowie’s immense insight on Hurricane Katrina or Erica Still’s knowledge of literature and trauma. Dr. Bowie, I cannot thank you enough for showing me the beauty and the “power of being uncomfortable,” for challenging me, and for making me a laugh when I most needed to. Dr. Still, thank you for always having another question. You epitomize humility in the love you have for your students and in the way you make each of us feel illuminated.

I would like to thank Omaar Hena for his encouragement and never-dwindling enthusiasm. Dr. Hena, you instilled in me a love and need for poetry, though I suppose that need has always been present. Thank you, then, for uncovering it.

I would not be who I am today or see how I see today without the late Angela Lang and Hannah Lang, my Ruby.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis incorporates literary trauma theory, social theory, and cultural trauma theory in an examination of three texts about Hurricane Katrina: Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Natasha Trethewey’s *Beyond Katrina* (2010), and Selah Saterstrom’s *Slab* (2015). The texts are arranged by form, beginning with Ward’s novel, followed by Trethewey’s hybrid memoir, and finally, Saterstrom’s experimental novel. The trajectory demonstrates the complexity not only of the storm but also of trauma—a theoretical concept that disrupts linear time, an experience that necessitates, yet eludes language, and a process through which collectivities make sense of “social pain.” Ultimately, this project affirms Hurricane Katrina as cultural trauma—Katrina shattered a collectivity’s identity, exposed the underlying fissures of American politics and biopolitics, and set the stage for competing narratives to tell, at least attempt to tell, the “true” story of one of the “costliest” storms in American history. Yet, even cultural trauma, comprehensive as it is, does not encompass the complexity of Katrina.
INTRODUCTION

Fighting Katrina Fatigue

Even before *Salvage* was published, I was hearing that people were tired of Katrina, that there was Katrina fatigue. I think that Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the South and the country in general—ugly things about race and class and about how certain human lives are valued more than others…Maybe it was just too much and people are afraid to address it because it was so awful. In that regard, I might have been a little naïve before I started writing *Salvage*. I wasn’t in New Orleans during Katrina. I was on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and the storm was so bad here that we had no idea what was going on in New Orleans. Maybe some houses had generators and access to a television, but the local station was covering what was happening here, not in New Orleans. We didn’t know about people being trapped on the roofs and we didn’t hear about the black people being called looters when they were looking for food. I didn’t see any of that until I left two weeks later and drove to Michigan, where I was teaching, and my friends were asking me, “Isn’t it awful what’s happening in New Orleans?” And I was wondering, “What the fuck is happening in New Orleans?” I wasn’t watching it on CNN. I was just dealing with living through it.

-Jesmyn Ward in an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, March 17, 2014

In late August 2005, one of the costliest storms in U.S. history hit the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath registered over $80 billion dollars in losses, over 1500 deaths, the displacement of millions, many of whom never returned to the homes and cities they left, and the destruction of homes, buildings, schools, and towns (“3 Views on a Tragedy,” Eyerman 5). *NPR*’s Kathy Lohr reported from Biloxi, Mississippi, on September 2, 2005:

Katrina's nearly 30-foot storm surge and the tornadoes that came in with the hurricane flattened or damaged nearly every home, building and business along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The live oaks that lined this once-picturesque area were cracked open and uprooted. And there was so much debris—piles and piles of splintered wood, sagging insulation, shattered glass and the unrecognizable tiny pieces of tens of thousands of lives.
Comparatively, Katrina’s winds were responsible for far less damage in New Orleans, Louisiana. After the “worst of the storm” was over, the city of New Orleans seemed unscathed. Then came the water. On August 30, 2005, Doug McCash and James O’Byrne, staff writers at *The Times-Picayune*, reported: “The breach [of the Canal levee] sent a churning sea of water from Lake Pontchartrain coursing across Lakeview and into Mid-City, Carrollton, Gentilly, City Park and neighborhoods farther south and east. As night fell on a devastated region, the water was still rising in the city, and nobody was willing to predict when it would stop.”¹ The levees breaking in New Orleans forced residents who had not evacuated the city, whether willfully or not, onto their roofs for days. Many survivors of the storm were left without food, water, and shelter. Over ten years later, recovery—physical, emotional, and otherwise—is still in the works. Cultural trauma theorist Ron Eyerman says, “Katrina was remarkable not only because of its devastation, but also because of how it was experienced, understood, and interpreted” (5).

This thesis explores Katrina’s multifaceted remarkableness.

The following pages incorporate literary trauma theory, social theory, and cultural trauma theory in order to compare three texts about Hurricane Katrina: Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Natasha Trethewey’s *Beyond Katrina* (2010), and Selah Saterstrom’s *Slab* (2015).² Though similar, the three texts, via their forms and narrative strategies, offer different approaches to Katrina and different interpretations of the storm, which is unsurprising given the number of narratives that circulated and are still in

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¹ For more coverage of storm by the local newspaper, see “The Hurricane Katrina Archive” at *The Times-Picayune*’s website, [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com).

² Ron Eyerman distinguishes individual, collective, and cultural trauma. “Social” most appropriately coincides with “collective.” Social or collective trauma does not necessarily turn into cultural trauma. For more on that process, see Eyerman’s introduction to *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma*, pp. 6-7.
circulation about Katrina and its aftermath. Who was at fault—local or national authorities? What role did the media play in the perpetuation of violence and prejudice? How did recovery efforts benefit certain areas and not others? Where was and is God in all this? Even the “trauma” of Katrina is debatable.³ Was there anything “natural” about Katrina, after all? “Katrina” means one thing to one person and something wholly different to another; New Orleans residents recall one thing when they hear “Katrina,” and Mississippi residents recall another. Though the three aforementioned texts are my primary texts, I attempt to lay bare the “grand narrative” of Hurricane Katrina, and thus, in my analyses, I also look at media accounts of the storm, personal and political narratives, religious and regional narratives, and narratives told through other art forms.

Ward, Trethewey, and Saterstrom are from Mississippi and locate their narratives there. Negotiating public and private histories, they demonstrate how individual trauma narratives are influential in constructing a larger, collective narrative as well as affected by that larger narrative. They address race, gender, and the socioeconomic and political conditions of America and the American South today, conditions that are very much so haunted by histories of oppression, complicit perpetuation of prejudices, and passivity. They show trauma’s resistance to linear temporality and categorization. Nonetheless, the texts represent Hurricane Katrina in distinct ways. I aim, via the lens of trauma studies and most immediately, via cultural trauma theory, to put the three texts in dialogue in

³ Words like “‘trauma’ and “traumatic” have become ingrained in lay speech. Thus, when we say “trauma,” we must unpack it. That is one goal of my project. Jeffrey Alexander explains this unpacking from a sociological perspective: “[W]ith the idea of trauma we are on to something widely experienced and intuitively understood. Such rootedness in the life-world is the soil that nourishes every social scientific concept. The trick is to gain reflexivity, to move from the sense of something commonly experienced to the sense of strangeness that allows us to think sociologically” (7). What is “trauma” is still debated. For my part, I am working toward a definition of trauma, particularly in the context of Hurricane Katrina, that includes, among others, Alexander’s sociological perspective.
order to make sense of the significance of Katrina as more than a “traumatic event,” a bump in an otherwise linear narrative.

Throughout my project I will be asking questions like, what really was the trauma of Katrina—the hurricane, the aftermath, or politics predating the storm and its destruction? How do different literary techniques, like form and structure, work to convey and foreground particular aspects of the trauma process? Finally, what is literature capable of, incapable of, and even culpable for in telling and retelling the story of Katrina? In order to address these questions, my project takes both a creative and a critical approach. On one hand, I engage with the texts via literary, social, drama, and even media theorists and scholars, who have helped shape trauma studies, narratives regarding Katrina, or arguments about the texts at hand. On the other hand, I engage with Ward, Trethewey, and Saterstrom’s writing via my own fiction in the hopes of gaining a better personal understanding of the complexity of this literal and figurative storm.

The fictional component, “Squint,” tells the story of Margot Dowling and Ruby Walker, who both have experienced a recent loss. Margot is the young narrator, whose mother died of an illness a little over a year prior to the story’s present. Ruby, a native of the Mississippi Delta, came to live in “the blue shed in the back” of Margot and her father’s home in Yazoo City as Margot’s new babysitter. Ruby’s “man” left her to help his family in New Orleans after Katrina, and he never came back. Margot overhears the situation and mistakes the hurricane for a woman named Katrina. This mistake and personification of the hurricane together make up one facet of the story’s project: to demonstrate the malleability of the storm’s narrative.
Accurate information about Katrina was hard to pin down. “Facts” about Katrina changed depending on which TV channel viewers were watching. Photographs captured “chaos,” and newspapers bestowed titles like “hero” and “villain.” Careers were made by the coverage, and then, the hurricane was no longer a disaster of economic and political implications but merely an engine that propelled reporters like Anderson Cooper into investigative journalism spotlight (Morris 43). But “a disaster of the scale of Hurricane Katrina can show us the bones beneath the skin of our society” if we dig deep enough (44). The fictional component of my thesis digs for bones, so to speak, and addresses questions raised in the second part of my project—questions of identity, memory, gender, and race, as well as the perpetuation of institutional prejudices.

Margot and Ruby’s story is about growth, grief, change, and the American South. The story fits with the three texts with which I am working in that it does not shy away from the reality of the fundamental problems in the South, and thereby in America, but the ending is yet hopeful.\(^4\) Significantly, at the end of “Squint,” Margot is doing just that—she is squinting and is seeing how someone else sees. She has yet to construct her own identity but is being constructed by those (women) around her. Though Ruby seems a better, more inclusive and loving set of eyes than Teddy, Margot’s grandmother, Ruby is nonetheless flawed. She laughs at the reaction she receives from the male gaze and clings, however secretly, to the past—as exemplified by the photograph she stores in the

\(^4\) “I tried to explain...that Louisiana was not America, that although things were not perfect up north, there was at least a show of tolerance and social justice. But they had driven as much as fifteen hours north, twelve hours east, and twenty hours west...and they had never seen anything contrary to what they witnessed in and around New Orleans. If an expanse of territory in which you could fit nearly all of Europe did not represent America, then what country was it? They were right, and the answer was obvious. What they had seen was at least as American as the multiethnic high school in New York City where I once stared out the window at the Statue of Liberty.” –Billy Sothern, *Down in New Orleans: Reflections from a Drowned City* (2007) pp. 7-8.
chest in her bedroom. Still, there is hope. Margot's youth functions much like Esch's confidence and the unborn child do at the end of Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*. Esch’s child is no longer a secret but a source of power and growth for the narrator. Likewise, though the hope offered in *Beyond Katrina* and *Slab* is embedded with challenges and hesitation more so than in Ward’s novel, hope for recovery beyond just physical rebuilding is present.

The second part of my project is critical. I have arranged the texts according to form.\(^5\) Ward’s National Book Award-winning novel is the most traditional in terms of form and narrative structure. Of course, the past affects the characters’ lives in a large way, but the text primarily follows a linear movement beginning a little over a week before Katrina hits. The other two books are not so linear. Trethewey’s nonfiction account began as an assignment for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. The complexity of her home state, before and after Katrina, surprised Trethewey, and though the book gets labeled “memoir,” the author includes poems and photographs in her personal account of life on the Mississippi Coast and of Katrina’s destructiveness, feeling that one form of writing was inadequate. *Beyond Katrina* tells Trethewey’s story, but she realizes that she cannot grasp her own story or that of the Coast without telling the story of her brother Joe and the stories of her grandmother and great uncle. Published in August 2015, Saterstrom’s *Slab* encompasses elements of fiction, poetry, and drama, and includes line drawings and clever, imaginary interviews with Barbara Walters. This final text is furthest removed temporally from Katrina’s landfall on August 29, 2005, and is also the most experimental, layering literary forms as if to show the complexity of Katrina and the

\(^5\) As opposed to arranging them, say, chronologically. Their publication dates fall within a five-year span. Other than the fact that Saterstrom’s text is the most recent and the most experimental, I am less interested in the chronological development of texts than in their formal development.
difficulty in constructing a coherent narrative of such trauma. Using a variety of formal elements, *Slab* is able to give the most complex picture of Katrina and, paradoxically, perhaps the clearest picture.

This disaster was a both/and storm. It was both social and environmental, both unnatural (i.e. man-made) and natural.\(^6\) The devastation and repercussions were much heavier than if it had been one or other. By excluding the group, particularly in Mississippi, that experienced the bulk of the natural disaster and focusing only on or primarily on New Orleans, which was hit by government failures, engineering failures, and apathy, writers and critics and media neglect to tell the full story of Katrina. Importantly, the primary texts I am considering here are set in Mississippi, not in New Orleans, a common trait I have already noted. The texts illuminate the both/and aspect of Katrina and reveal the holes left by Katrina’s winds and history’s wounds.

The primary lens through which I am examining the literature is that of cultural trauma theory. This theoretical approach privileges collective trauma over that of the individual and as such, falls into contemporary trends. Contemporary approaches to studying trauma and its representations are expansive, including neoFreudian and neoLacanian approaches, postcolonial approaches, and more broadly, cultural studies approaches.\(^7\) Ultimately, I aim to show the insufficiency of contemporary approaches so long as they reject important claims regarding trauma made in the 1990s, which tended to privilege the individual. I argue that we need to understand Hurricane Katrina as personally and individually experienced and as socially constructed and very much so predictable. Unlike the trauma of war or the Holocaust, the trauma of Katrina was *both*

\(^6\) However, many argue there was nothing “natural” about the storm.
\(^7\) For more, see Michelle Balaev’s collected essays, *Contemporary Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
natural and unnatural. However appropriate and true it is to view Katrina as/through

cultural trauma, for, “the foundations of an established collective identity [were] shaken,”

I argue the study of Katrina eludes being confined to a singular theoretical mode

(Eyerman 8). *Salvage the Bones, Beyond Katrina,* and *Slab* foreground Katrina’s elusive

complexity.

Here, I provide a brief overview of trauma studies of the last several decades. I should note that this exposition is far from exhaustive; however, I hope to provide

enough foundation as to properly acknowledge where trauma studies have been in the last several decades and where they are now. I will eventually arrive at the most influential text to my study, Ron Eyerman’s *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma* (2015).

At the end of the 20th century, trauma theory, specifically works like Cathy Caruth’s seminal text, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), focused on the unsaid and the unsayable. Scholarship like that of Caruth and Shoshana Felman emphasize the inevitable lack of access by way of language into trauma and past experience. Trauma was, and is often still, viewed as forming a “gap,” which can only be addressed in a belated context, if at all. In other words, a witness must be removed from the traumatic event in order to actually recall and speak about the event, to put the event

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8 Of course, trauma studies have been in existence longer than the last thirty years. For the constraints of this thesis, I will only consider theories beginning with Cathy Caruth and her contemporaries.

9 Some influential scholars excluded in this very brief overview: Kai Erikson, whose *Everything in its Path* (1976) was foundational in distinguishing collective and individual trauma; Ruth Leys, whose *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) lays out a much more extensive history of trauma studies, including the influence of WWI and the transitions from psychoanalysis to literary analysis; Roger Luckhurst whose work, such as *The Trauma Question* (2008) and “The Trauma Knot,” emphasizes the multifaceted concept of trauma and explores the ways in which trauma and memory shape individual and collective identity.

10 For instance, Ruth Leys writes in *Trauma: A Genealogy,* “[Bessel] van der Kolk and Caruth have materialized and literalized traumatic memory in ways that make it seem as if trauma stands outside all knowledge and all representation” (148).
into language. For Caruth, however, that action of putting trauma into language is essentially an impossibility.\(^\text{11}\) Similarly, psychoanalyst Dori Laub articulates the separation of self that occurs when testifying to a traumatic experience that happened in the past as the first of “three levels of witnessing… the level of being witness to oneself within the experience” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 61). Laub, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, notes the witness or victim’s “imperative to tell.” Yet, there is a dilemma: “There are never enough words or the right words, never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech” (63).

While the “original” focus of trauma studies was primarily psychoanalytic and placed emphasis on the individual’s experience, more recent scholarship takes a sociocultural approach, focusing not as much on the unsaid as why the unsaid is so. In other words, theorists began looking into the nature of the “unsayable.”\(^\text{12}\) Many contemporary scholars are skeptical of “trauma’s intrinsic dissociation” and instead, focus concerns on “gapped” subjectivity (Balaev 2, my emphasis). In other words, “gaps” are often indicative of group oppression rather than individual repression. For instance, Michelle Balaev accuses Caruth’s research of being simplistic and reductive, and asserts that it does not account for the “contextual factors… interacting and influencing the process of remembering” (*The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* xiv). Other scholars are not so harsh in their movements away from Caruth et al. Laurie Vickroy, for example, is interested in the political and social contexts that encourage, whether directly or

\(^{11}\) These early theories on trauma and the inevitable “failure” of language developed out of analyses of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and his study of war veterans’ nightmares. For more on Caruth and her emphases, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, chapter 8.

\(^{12}\) I should note that this “why” goes beyond noting the failure of language.
indirectly, the silence that Caruth stresses. In “Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction,” Vickroy approaches contemporary fiction not from a “traditional Freudian perspective,” which might look to “childhood trauma, repression, and repetition,” but from the perspective of social influence (Balaev 130). Rather than fully rejecting former theories, Vickroy “corrects” Caruth’s interpretations. All in all, gaps came to be viewed as not necessarily inherent in “traumatic events,” but in subjectivity; that is, the concern of trauma studies shifted from trauma’s power to the ways in which society and political structures dictate what can be said and by whom.¹³

Jenny Edkins argues that which is unsaid is so by way of Foucauldian power relations. Trauma produces both a sense of “utter powerlessness” and also, a “betrayal of trust” (4). Edkins’ work in Trauma and the Memory of Politics is helpful to my project in a number of ways, specifically her examination of the breakdown of temporal linearity via the work of Slavoj Žižek and the directly proportional relationship of humanity and politics. According to Edkins, true victimhood is having no political voice (204).¹⁴ Laub’s assertion of the “imperative to tell” is not recanted in these more recent studies; it is viewed as even more paradoxical. Edkins says, “[Trauma] is outside the realm of language, and to bring it back within that realm by speaking of it, by setting it within a linear narrative form, is to destroy its truth” (214). Yet, if not through language, how does a witness, of any kind (e.g. survivor-witness or third-party witness), give her testimony?

Now, I turn to the two sociological theorists whose work most influences the ideas of cultural trauma, which are particularly relevant to my study: Jeffrey Alexander

¹³ See Jenny Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, chapter 5. “There is a gap or abyss at the heart of subjectivity…because every formation of a subject in relation to language is flawed” (214).
¹⁴ Regarding nonlinear temporality and the particular way in which Edkins utilizes Žižek’s work, see Žižek’s For They Know Not What They Do, p. 272, and Plague of Fantasies, pp. 213-18.
and Ron Eyerman. Alexander suggests there is a “naturalistic fallacy” of “lay trauma theory,” which, in turn, forms the basis of Enlightenment and psychoanalytic thinking.\textsuperscript{15} The fallacy is the neglect of the social constructions surrounding “trauma” (\textit{Trauma: A Social Theory} 13). Alexander develops a “social theory of collective trauma” rejecting that fallacy and outlines a “trauma process” through which collectivities make sense of “social pain” (1). Rather than “denial, repression, and ‘working through’” as an individual sufferer does, collectivities create a narrative, says Alexander; “[i]t is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there” (3). Alexander’s concerns are global. For instance, he examines how the “trauma process” played out during the Holocaust and the Partition of India and Pakistan and determines how these events and their respective aftermaths changed the sociocultural and political landscapes in a global way.\textsuperscript{16}

Ron Eyerman echoes and builds off Alexander in his recent text. \textit{Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma} locates Alexander’s definitions in the context of Hurricane Katrina. He explains cultural trauma as a specific type of social trauma, one that disrupts a collective’s sense of identity; thus,

\begin{quote}
Cultural traumas are not things, but processes of meaning-making and attribution, contentious contests in which various individuals and groups struggle not only to define a situation but also to manage and control it.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Alexander associates Enlightenment thinking with Arthur Neal’s developments on national trauma and with Kai Erikson’s early sociological work, and psychoanalytic thinking with Caruth’s work. For more, see Alexander \textit{Trauma: A Social Theory}, pp. 7-15.

\textsuperscript{16} In 2004 Alexander published \textit{Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity}, which includes chapters from fellow sociologists, such as Ron Eyerman and Neil Smelser. While this collection is helpful, and, importantly, was published eight years prior to \textit{Trauma: A Social Theory} and over ten years prior to Eyerman’s text on Katrina, in the later book, Alexander’s ideas are more coherent and conclusive.
That is, they struggle to push collective understanding in particular
directions…Cultural traumas are responses to deeply felt emotions that are
publicly expressed and represented in this very same process. (9-10)

Eyerman attempts to understand the grand narrative of Katrina via the different
(sub)narratives it encompasses, including those “written” and told by print media, by
residents in New Orleans and in Mississippi, by the arts, by political legislation, and by
TV reportage. He opens his book referencing the “social contract” understood between a
government and its people. The basic idea of the contract or covenant is that the former
will protect the latter; that the head will meet the body’s needs and come to its aid.
Katrina represented the breaking of that promise. “Finally,” Eyerman writes, “the
president, the person in charge of overseeing the covenant, appeared…in ways that
suggested serene passivity with regard to the suffering of citizens in the region” (3).

Eyerman concludes his book reiterating the questions he raises at its
commencement. “What is the lasting heritage of Katrina on the American consciousness?
Did Katrina burst the bounds of our understanding? Did it lay open the ideational
foundations of the American nation? Did Katrina evoke cultural trauma, and if so, for
whom?” (145) The short answer to the last question is yes, certainly. Katrina did evoke
cultural trauma, and the books I am analyzing address the second part of the question,
“for whom.” Even so, looking at Katrina solely under this light, thereby, rejecting earlier
trauma theories, is problematic in that, for all its vastness, cultural trauma is still a label.
Katrina resists labels.

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17 See Michael Ignatieff’s The New York Times article “The Broken Contract,” originally
published September 25, 2005.
Thus, my analyses of *Salvage the Bones, Beyond Katrina*, and *Slab* incorporate the work of recent scholarship on trauma, specifically the sociological work of Alexander and Eyerman. Still, my project lends a critique of the absolutism of the more recent theories on trauma—that is, the absolutism that rejects the art in language’s conflicting role as both savior and oppressor and focuses strictly on the political, sociocultural “why?” In other words, in its advancement, social, cultural critique begins to ignore the aesthetic choices made in and by literary texts. Literary form, for instance, gives new access into thinking about collective, social, and historical conditions, and politics. In its complexity, Hurricane Katrina becomes a vehicle for that juxtaposed employment and critique.

In Chapter 1 I look at three facets of Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*—community, place, and story-telling. Rick Crownshaw, in the vein of Edkins and Alexander, reads the novel as “post-naturalistic.” He focuses his concerns on the space (i.e. gap) between “biological life and socio-political belonging” presented in the novel (165). Crownshaw’s analysis guides my own interpretation of the text, which encircles a key phrase in the book—“it’s in the dirt.” Via Patricia Yaeger’s influential work on dirt in Southern novels, I determine the meaning of “dirt” as referential to place, community, story telling, and finally, a sense of waiting in the book, all of which are significant threads in narratives of Katrina. I veer slightly from Crownshaw’s reading in my analysis of dirt-as-story and the ways in which the novel’s first-person narration initiates a particularly inclusive “expansion of the ‘we’,” which complicates Crownshaw’s strict sociopolitical bent.18

18 For more on the formation and expansion of the “we,” see Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, chapter 1 and Eyerman, *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma*, p. 10.
Ultimately, I conclude Ward’s traditional novel is a depiction of familial and regional resilience, of assurance of recovery and rebuilding after tremendous loss. The hope in the waiting at the end of the novel is embodied in Esch’s repeated “will.” The theme of waiting, hopeful or otherwise, is central to the grand narrative of Katrina. For instance, two years after Katrina, New York artist Paul Chan came up with a project involving, among other things, performances of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Chan came to speak at Tulane University in 2007. Says Holland Cotter of the *New York Times*, “[Chan] was stunned by what he saw, both the ruin and the reclamation work.” Chan, a political activist and artist, “insists that his art and his political work run on two separate, possibly conflicting, tracks. Political action is collaborative, goal-specific and designed for power, he maintains. Art, by contrast, is individually produced, ductile in meaning and built to last… is made to melt power” (Cotter).

The *Godot* performances, directed by Anne Pasternak, were a “merging” of the “two trajectories” Chan assumes in his work and art. “Christopher McElroen… had directed a well-received run of *Godot* for the Classical Theater of Harlem using the agonizing wait for help after Katrina as central metaphor.” Chan used McElroen’s direction for his own outdoor project (Cotter, my emphasis). Chan’s performances were staged in Gentilly and in the Lower Ninth Ward, two areas deeply affected by Katrina and the flooding. Interestingly, the Samuel Beckett Estate has since “pulled the rights to the play,” not wanting to link the play to post-Katrina New Orleans (Murray).

Trethewey’s *Beyond Katrina* incorporates the theme of waiting in a slightly different way than Ward’s novel. Whereas *Salvage the Bones* is a story of confident expectation of what “will” be, Trethewey’s representation of the storm, its beginnings
and aftermath, is more overtly antagonistic. The text does not reserve that antagonism for typical culprits of the storm (i.e. the Bush administration or nature), but extends culpability into the realm of the individual. In Chapter 2 I consider how this extension functions in the grand narrative of Katrina. I note Trethewey’s status as an outsider who has returned to the Coast in order to tell her own story, as well as the story of the Coast, in general. Trethewey’s hybrid memoir, which is more “involved” than Ward’s novel in terms of form, oscillates between public and private narratives, between the past and present, and presents Katrina as a complicated, misunderstood storm and the Gulf Coast as a complicated, misunderstood place. Trethewey indicts herself as part of the problem.

In Chapter 2 I utilize Greg Forter’s neoFreudian approach to trauma. Shifting the focus from Freud’s “second” theory of trauma to his earlier work on the subject, Forter provides a way of thinking about mundane, almost unnoticed traumas, like “everyday racism,” as opposed to Caruthian, “punctual” traumas, like “lynching” (Forter 260). I admire and utilize Forter’s approach; yet, for my purposes, his methodology is lacking. I suggest Beyond Katrina argues the necessity of punctual trauma in order to address overlooked, historical traumas. In other words, Katrina’s destruction caused Trethewey to re-examine the histories, stories, and photographs she thought she knew and understood so well.

In Chapter 3 I focus on the most recent of the three texts, Selah Saterstrom’s Slab. In terms of form, Slab is as “de-categorizing” as Katrina itself (Heng). Though labeled “fiction,” the book is structured like a play and is divided into two acts with a list of characters and their roles. The fragmented structure and the slippage between performance and “reality” push against the confines of genre. I argue this “de-
categorizing” aspect is key to the book’s project of defiance of labels and certainty. Still, the text is more than simply a product of post-postmodernism. Slab’s emphasis on “de-categorization” and ruptured identities shifts the focus away from recovery and rebuilding efforts, like in Ward’s fiction, and underscores the critical slab, the multifaceted wound, which is coincidentally “trauma” in Greek. Slab seems wary of a focus on recovery and “re-aggregation” when the depth of the wound has not yet been touched (Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* 27).

The primary concerns of Chapter 3 are performance, identity de/construction, and the ways in which Slab seems to create spaces of potential for authentic selfhood. The text recalls the ways in which Katrina was put on stage and the trauma re-enacted by theater performance. Included in the same arena as the Beckett plays (i.e. art), Slab does not shy away from the implications of performing and repeating trauma, but participates in what Mark Seltzer coined “wound culture,” that is, the “public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (Seltzer 3-4). While Slab does focus on the body, particularly the female body, it also lays out the open wound of the nation, a wound that was on one hand, created by Katrina and on the other, merely exposed by Katrina. I suggest the slab/wound becomes a space of potentiality, in addition to it being a site around which the rest of the novel circles.

Overall, my project is concerned with cultural and social theories of trauma, not with drama theory. Nonetheless, in order to properly address Slab, which has been staged

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20 For more on “institutional arenas,” see Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, pp. 19-25.
21 See Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Introduction, p 15.
as a play, it is important I engage with literature on the relationship between performance and trauma. Suzanne Little writes on that sensitive relationship. She, among others, notes two major types of witnesses: the survivor-witness, who experiences trauma firsthand and relays that experience directly, and the third-party witness, who relays another’s trauma (45). The survivor-witness is a complicated role. Little attests, “Testimony is…restricted to what elements and fragments of the traumatizing event or situation the survivor-witness has been able to assimilate and share with another person” (45). Because trauma is so concerned with belatedness and with absences or gaps in narrative and memory, the survivor-witness is at once trustworthy and untrustworthy. Moreover, the survivor-witness is both an individual who experienced trauma as well as a stand-in for a collective who experienced trauma.

Little notes that most often in performances “it is not the survivor-witnesses who present their testimony. It is instead presented by actors” (45). The presentation vis-à-vis actor might be a strategy of distancing the survivor-witness, protecting her from re-experiencing trauma. Conversely, however, the use of an actor might “nullify…the witnessing effect central to trauma studies, whereby a survivor-witness may therapeutically ‘work through’ or have her or his experience affirmed through having [her or his] testimony witnessed by another in a live personal exchange” (45). Slab’s protagonist occupies a peculiar position. She is both survivor-witness and actress. My analysis examines the effect of this dual position.

My conclusion provides a brief summary of the three chapters and addresses the question: where are we now? I use the trajectory of the three texts in order to answer this question. Then I make use of a different arena, the political/legalistic. Via a brief
examination of the Gulf Opportunity Zone (GO Zone) legislation put into effect after Katrina, I situate where we are now in this particular trauma process, and where, perhaps, we ought to be.
“Squinchureyes!” Ruby says. Sometimes Ruby says things so fast I don’t even know what she’s saying, and I have to look real hard at her mouth and watch it move so I can catch the shape of the words right as they’re coming out, or I’ll miss it all. It’s ok because she’s got a big, fish mouth, a “mouth like a trout,” Teddy says, and her lips are always the same color, a color between watermelon and ketchup. She showed me her gold lipstick tube once. The bottom of it said *Town Trollop.* I’m not sure what a trollop is, but I think it’s a flower because it sounds like a flower, one of those flowers with the bell-shaped petals, the flowers that remind me of the bell at the top of Grace Chapel. Sunday mornings after church, Pastor Tom helps me pull the rope to ring that giant music-maker. The rope is heavy and leaves my hands burning. Anyway, I’ll have to ask Teddy to be sure about trollops. Teddy knows flowers.

“Squinchureyes!” Ruby says again. She’s driving. I see her mouth, red, in the mirror.

“Ruby, we’re not there yet,” I say from the backseat.

Ruby smiles at me in the mirror with her trout-mouth. She turns the radio up. It’s Christmas music time, and the radio’s playing the slow song about chestnuts.

I used to not understand Ruby-speech. I used to not understand when she said things like “Squinchureyes” or “Lawsy” or “This is the myoo.” Now, I know that sometimes three words turn into one for Ruby and that *myoo* is really *mule* and it just
means that she likes something, a food-something, something that tastes extra good, like chicken potpie crust.

Ruby’s my babysitter. She’s from Mississippi, too, but she’s from the Delta. Ruby speaks about the Delta like it’s another world, a place with its own language where roads ride straight through the sky wall, and great machines unearth worms and ghosts and a lady’s voice singing sad songs. I’ve seen pictures, and the pictures made me think of s’mores because the cotton looks like marshmallows. I like my marshmallows burned. I like to stick them in the fire and watch the orange flames paintbrush the clean, white puff yellow, and then brown, and then black.

Ruby talks fast most of the time, stringing her words together like they’re beads on a necklace. But when she says Delta she says it slow, sitting in the word like an alligator in hot, Louisiana swamp-water, just waiting, smelling for the right time to move on. We live in Yazoo City—the “gateway to the Delta”—that’s what people call it—the “gateway to the Delta.” Ruby’s old home is not that far from where we live, but the way Ruby talks of it, we might as well be millions of miles from there. I tell Ruby that we’re kind of sort of part of the Delta here, and she shakes her head and says, “Not my Delta, Margot.”

Dad and me live at 76 Ivey Lane, and Ruby lives in the blue shed in the back of the house. It’s not really a shed, that’s just what we’ve always called it. Dad used to keep his old Chevy in the shed, but he moved it so Ruby could come stay with us last November. A few of Mama’s old paintings were in the shed too before Dad moved them, some unfinished ones that she didn’t like or got sick of looking at. But she didn’t throw them away. She never threw them away. She just piled the paintings in the corner and
said, “I’ll come back to them,” like they were in some other place, not just in the back corner of the blue shed, but somewhere nice where she’d go on vacation “when she had the time and the money,” like Florida.

Dad called Mama Suz and sometimes, especially when Mama was mad, he’d sing to her. He sang, “Suzie Q., Baby I love you, my Suzie Q.” Dad talks ok, but he doesn’t know much about singing. Sometimes his singing made her laugh. Sometimes it made things worse. Mama would whisper-hiss at him so I couldn’t hear her words, only sounds, *h-s-sh* sounds, sounds like an old truck smoking on the side of the highway, dying. Sometimes Dad’s singing did nothing. It didn’t help or hurt, Mama’s face stayed the same—still, like stone—but I couldn’t get his song for her out of my head, so I’d just go up to my room and hum.

I used to think Mama’s name was Suzie Q. and that the *Q* was just silent most of the time, like my *T*-M-A-R-G-O-T. But her name was always Susannah, with just a silent *H*. I like my *T* and Mama’s *H* because they’re our secret letters nobody else hears.

Dad fixes things, like dying cars and leaking tubs. Once he fixed the leak in the ceiling in my room. I didn’t want him to, but Mama saw it and said he had to fix it. She said it was “dangerous,” that leaks and water coming in 76 Ivey Lane were “bad news,” so Dad and me went to Home Depot and got something to fix the leak with. But that sneaky leak came back after a while, after Mama died too, so she couldn’t tell Dad, and I didn’t tell him because I like the rain coming in. I like hearing the splat-splat of the drops hitting the bottom of the bucket. I like to pretend it’s a ghost, a small ghost named Lottie who likes to tap-dance. That’s the splat-splat, the taps and clicks of her small shoes.
When Mama died, Dad fixed the blue shed into a room for Ruby. Uncle Willem came over to help. They listened to music real loud and drank from bottles from the mini-fridge by the washer-machine. Some of those days, the days between Mama and Ruby, Dad let me stay home from school. I’d dance to their loud music or draw chalk-pictures on the driveway and drink yellow Gatorade while they worked. Uncle Willem almost always brings me a yellow Gatorade and peanut M&M’s. He’s not really my uncle, but I’ve called him “Uncle Willem” ever since I can remember.

Tonight, Ruby’s driving us to the City of Lights. She says we’re gonna go to the City every year at Christmas. She says it’s gonna be our tradition. She says, “It’s our tradition, Margot, you and me, girl, and we’re gonna see the lights and all the colors and make ‘em come alive.”

Once, I asked Ruby how old she was and she said, “How old you think I am?”

I said, “Twenty-two.”

Ruby laughed for a long time before she said, “I like that age much better.”

I said, “Me, too.”

The first thing I noticed when I met Ruby last year was her mouth. And her tangled, yellow hair that comes down to just below her shoulders. And her big, blue glasses. Ruby’s not skinny, but she moves the way a skinny person moves, like water. She says she used to be a ballerina, a “damn good one,” she says, so maybe that’s why she moves that way. I remember she said she liked my curls. She called them moppy, and I thought about the mop in Fantasia that cleans too hard and about how my cousin Birdie was scared of mops and brooms and any sweeping thing after watching that movie.
Ruby came to 76 Ivey Lane like this: Uncle Willem said he knew somebody, a nice woman from Clarksdale, he said, who had “fallen into hard times,” he said. He said she had been “laid off” and that her parents died some time ago, “been dead a while now,” he said, and her man left for New Orleans to help his family after Katrina and never came back. “She hasn’t heard from him. Nobody has. For all anybody knows, he’s stayin’ put in New Orleans,” Uncle Willem said, and now this nice woman was looking for work but couldn’t find much in Clarksdale, so.

Then, Dad told all this to Teddy. Teddy’s my grandmother. I have another grandmother, Nona, but she lives in Shreveport, Louisiana, with her new husband, George. Nona and my first grandfather got divorced a long time ago. Dad says that’s ok to do sometimes. I never met my first grandfather, but I would’ve called him “Podge” because I think Podge is a good name for a grandfather. I met George once. I just call him “George.” Teddy’s married to Pop. Teddy’s name used to be “Gram,” but I couldn’t say “Gram” without thinking Teddy because cinnamon Teddy Grahams were the first real food I got to try. Dad used to crumble the small bears into dust and then sprinkle the dust in my plastic cup of milk. I loved that cinnamon dust. Anyway, now I just call her “Teddy.” I don’t know where Gram went.

I remember Teddy and Dad were in the kitchen, talking, and I was listening on the stairs. Teddy had brought us two big Tupperware containers of homemade lasagna that she put in the freezer. I think one’s still there, frozen past eating.

Teddy wasn’t all too sure about Ruby at first. She said, “A nice woman that Willem knows?” She said nice and Willem the same way, like they were dirty, not dirty like the words that Ruby says sometimes that I’m not supposed to repeat, but like the
words tasted like dirt on her tongue and she wanted to spit them out. She sat down at the kitchen table and said, “I just don’t think Susannah would want this.”

She wasn’t looking at Dad, and he wasn’t looking at her either. She said, “We can work it out. Pop and I will pick her up most days. She can carpool with the Nicholas boy on the others.”

Dad was leaning against the sink, facing the window. It was late October, almost Halloween, and the leaves had started changing colors. Some leaves had fallen already—too early, I think. Dad turned to Teddy and said, “Susannah’d want Margot to be taken to school every day and be picked up on time and to have a nice, packed lunch, and—” He stopped. I think he knew I was on the stairs sneaking listens.

Anyway, Ruby came to 76 Ivey Lane, but not till after I dressed up like Ms. Jones, the school librarian, for Halloween. I wanted to wear socks that came up to my knees like the ones Ms. Jones wears and glasses like hers, the kind that point up and out at the corners, up and out like my elbows when I do the chicken dance. Teddy helped me find my Ms. Jones glasses. She found them at an antique shop. That’s a shop for old things. Dad took me trick-or-treating. He didn’t dress up because he says he doesn’t like to dress up, but he helped explain my costume to people who’d never met Ms. Jones before.

I’d eaten over half my Halloween candy when Ruby and her trout-mouth showed up.

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My tummy starts rumbling. I wish I’d brought something to eat. There is a box of Lucky Charms on the floor of Ruby’s car behind her seat. I can’t reach it, but it doesn’t
matter anyway because I know it’s empty. It’s been empty since before Thanksgiving break.

“Ruby?” I say.

Ruby looks at me in the rearview mirror and turns the music down a little.

“Ruby,” I say again, “I’m hungry.”

“You are?” she says.

“Yeah.”

“How hungry?” Ruby says. “Hungry enough to eat a bobcat?”

“No,” I say. “I wouldn’t eat a bobcat.”

Ruby digs in her purse and pulls out a green Life Saver candy. It’s cracked into two pieces and the plastic wrapping is loose and sounds like radio static when she reaches her arm back and gives me the candy. I know why I’m so hungry. I didn’t eat all my lunch today, but it wasn’t my fault. It was Mary Middleton’s.

Ruby packs my lunches for school now. On a good day I get a strawberry-jam-and-banana sandwich and chips, chocolate pudding or Oreos, and a Capri-Sun. On a bad day I get four dollars. On a good day, Ruby draws on paper napkins, folds them, and tucks them in my lunchbox. Most days she draws a picture of an elephant’s bottom and writes underneath it, “Ella Fun says learn something real good today” or “Ella Fun says always eat dessert first.” My friends are jealous of my lunch napkins from Ruby. On a bad day, I get a plain, square napkin from the cafeteria, no elephants.

Today wasn’t a bad lunch day. I had a sandwich and chips and a couple chocolate covered cherries and a slice-n-bake sugar cookie leftover from a batch me and Ruby made a couple nights ago, but I traded Mary Middleton my chips and one chocolate
covered cherry for her peaches. But I didn’t even eat her peaches because they weren’t the kind of peaches I like. I like real peaches, the fuzzy kind, peaches that are yellow at the top and bottom and orange around the middle with the smallest bit of yellowy-pink on either side, like they are blushing. Mary Middleton had the kind of peaches in the cup, the kind of peaches cut into squares and floating in juice. I wanted to trade back, but Mary Middleton said, “No. That’s not allowed.” It’s not time for real peaches, see, but I didn’t know it wasn’t peach time. I didn’t know there was a peach time. I guess I’d never thought about when we didn’t have fuzzy peaches in the bowl in the kitchen, only when we did have them. Now, I know that there is a time for peaches and that Mary Middleton is tough with her trades.

“I traded Mary Middleton my chips for her peaches,” I say with the Life Saver on my tongue, but Ruby doesn’t hear me over the Christmas music.

When Mama packed my lunches, I got grapes instead of chips, or apple slices with peanut butter. She made me turkey sandwiches or vegetable soup, the kind with letters, and I always spelled M-A-R-G-O-T. I’d eat the T first—quick—so no one saw it.

In kindergarten for my birthday, Mama made chocolate cupcakes for the whole class, and for Valentine’s Day she made vanilla ones with pink icing and red and white sprinkles. Last year for my birthday, Teddy gave me a cookie cake to take to lunch, and on Valentine’s Day Ruby drove to Walgreen’s before school and helped me pick out glittery stickers, chocolates, and pink Tic-Tacs to take to my class party. I was late to school that day, but Ms. Humbird—that was my first grade teacher, Ms. Humbird—she wasn’t all that mad. It was the Valentine’s party after all and it’s hard to be mad when there’s so much color.
Once, I asked Ruby what it means to “fall into hard times.” That’s what Willem said had happened to Ruby.

She said, “It’s like when you step in a puddle. Or what you think is just a puddle. But it’s really a cold, muddy lake, and somehow, you’ve forgotten how to swim.”

“A lake with snakes?” I said.

“Yep,” she said.

“Can snakes swim, Ruby?”

“Yep,” she said. “You can’t, and they can. And they’re just-a-swimmin’ around you.”

“What do you do?” I said.

“All you can do is wait till you remember how to swim.”

The bad, four-dollar-lunch days don’t come around as much as they did when Ruby first moved into the blue shed. She used to blame the bad days on her alarm clock, or on the rain if it was raining, or on the moon.

“She’s out to get us, Margot,” Ruby would say.

I think Ruby was fibbing about the girl on the moon. I think Ruby had bad dreams or maybe sad dreams about her man in New Orleans, because on the bad day mornings her eyes looked small, and they had little, red vines running through them, the kind of vines that mean crying. We’d listen to the radio turned down low the whole way to school. Then, she’d give me my lunch money and promise me that after school, we’d drive through Sonic and get ice cream cones or the fizzy, blue drinks. Sometimes
the little vines were there after school, too, and I think Ruby must’ve spent those days swimming in snake puddles.

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I’m trying real hard not to fall asleep on the way to the City. Even with my tummy rumbling, it’s hard. My body always gets so tired in the car, like I’ve just been running for miles, like I’ve been running from Yazoo to the Delta, to the way, way other end of the Delta, the dark part in the pictures, past the very last blooming cotton marshmallow.

I look at the freckles on my arm and start to count them. I think about ladybugs. In the winter I sleep with them, with ladybugs. They come in through the cracks in the windows in my room. They must get cold, colder than other bugs because they come altogether, every winter, just ladybugs, not rollies or caterpillars or crickets. My bed is small and only sleeps me, but I’ll scoot over for the ladybugs. I give them the side by the window so they can look outside, so that maybe other ladybugs will see them and see that there is a place that’s warm and open if they only can find the right cracks to crawl through. There are lots of cracks in 76 Ivey Lane, and I can hear the wind at night sometimes, especially when it’s storming. Water comes in through the crack in my ceiling, the leak Dad fixed once. Lottie tap-dances. I wonder if ladybugs can swim.

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Ruby came to us last year right after Thanksgiving. She ate the rest of my Halloween candy, mainly the little red bags of Skittles and the candy corn. Mama used to keep a drawer in the kitchen full of candy leftover from birthdays or Halloween or Christmas or Easter. Teddy has a candy drawer at her house too. Pop’s not supposed to
get any candy—Teddy says to him, “Don’t you go get in that drawer”—but I’ve seen him sneak caramels in his pocket. Now, there are just old peppermints and some pieces of bubblegum in the drawer in our kitchen. Sometimes Dad fills the drawer with Reese’s cups or Hershey kisses, but once they run out, it’s back to peppermints and bubblegum.

Ruby didn’t have much stuff when she moved into the shed, but she did have a bag with a broken zipper that was overflowing with clothes, CDs, and two pictures in frames. One picture was of Ruby and Ruby’s mom and dad. They’re on a porch somewhere, probably in the Delta somewhere, and Ruby and her mom are sitting in a porch swing held up by iron ropes. Her dad is in a rocking chair not looking at the camera. That picture is on her chesterdrawers, and I asked Ruby if that was her mom and dad and she said, “Yep.” That’s how I knew who it was, see?

I said, “Do you miss ’em?”

She said, “Yep. Sometimes.”

She keeps the other picture in the drawer beside her bed, frame and all. It’s of Ruby and a black man. They’re outside somewhere, probably in the Delta somewhere, and Ruby looks happy and the black man looks happy and they’re holding onto each other real tight like a pinky promise. I’m pretty sure that’s her man, the one who went to New Orleans to find Katrina and never came back.

Ruby’s not wearing her blue glasses in the picture, but her hair is still in knots. I think it’s summertime because Ruby’s wearing a green dress with no sleeves, and her cheeks are red, sunburn red, and her man’s skin looks hot. It’s not red, his skin, but it just looks hot, hot and smooth like a bed sheet straight out of the dryer. They’re both barefoot. I go barefoot in the summer, too. By August, the skin on the bottom of my feet is hard as
bone. Nobody cares much when I don’t wear shoes but when I go in the sun I have to wear sunscreen because I get sunburn red and more freckles. Teddy says my skin is like hers—fair. I wonder if Ruby’s man wears sunscreen.

I’m not sure why Ruby’s man went looking for Katrina anyway. CJ Holiday went running from her. CJ’s real last name is “Holloway,” but everybody at school calls him CJ “Holiday” because that’s a better last name. He came to our school last year from the coast, from a place called Biloxi, and so did a girl with hair so light and thin it looks like white noodles. Everything about her is small, especially her nose, and even her voice. Her voice is so small I couldn’t hear her name, but she reminds me of Lottie the ghost who comes with the rain.

_Biloxi_. I like saying that word because it sounds like something strong and magic, like an animal that everybody knows exists but nobody has seen and all the pictures of it are foggy, snapped too late.

My school had a supply drive for the schools in Biloxi. We were supposed to bring notebooks and pens and crayons and scissors, pencils, black Sharpies, and pink erasers for the students on the coast. I asked CJ Holiday and the girl with noodle hair if they were going to bring the school supplies with them when they went back to Biloxi. CJ Holiday said he didn’t think he was going back. He said his house was gone and I said, gone where, and he said, it got swallowed, swallowed by Katrina. He said that his aunt and uncle and two cousins live in Yazoo anyway. The girl with the noodle hair didn’t say anything. I think Katrina must’ve swallowed her voice, or her name, or both. Maybe she swallowed _all_ of the girl, thinking she was food with her noodle hair, and then maybe she spit her back out without her name.
CJ Holiday never left, just like he said. He’s in my class this year, too, for second grade. I’ve liked second grade so far. My teacher, Ms. Collier, is a nice lady who wears panty hose everyday, no matter how hot it is. Her smile is smaller than Ms. Humbird’s smile, and her dresses and skirts don’t have as many colorful patterns as Ms. Humbird’s dresses did, but I still like her anyway. She puts stickers on our homework. I think the girl with noodle hair moved to Texas because I haven’t seen her since the end of last year, and I heard she moved to Texas. I’ve never been to Texas, but I know where to find it on a map. I can find Mississippi, too.

First grade was last year—was when Mama got sick. She got so sick that her body just gave up the living part. It was the end of August and the first week of September when it all stopped, Mama’s body, her whole body. I remember because the calendar in the kitchen didn’t move, and it was September 2nd for days; it was September 2nd until Teddy came over and put an X in September 2nd’s box and the boxes for September 3rd, September 4th, September 5th and 6th. Then, it was September 7th, but I am not sure what happened to the other days. I asked Dad if we lived them and he said, “I think so, Margot,” so I guess we must have lived them. I remember our house was dark and hot, and the lights wouldn’t come on no matter how many times I flipped the switch up and down. Once, Teddy told me that turning the lights on and off, on and off real fast could start a fire. But the lights never turned on when I flipped the switch, so I wasn’t afraid of fire.

When Mama died, I didn’t go back to school, not for a while. After the dark days came the “stop-by” days, days when people like Uncle Willem and Hi I’m your neighbor,
Cindy Todd showed up to 76 Ivey Lane. People said they were “just passing through” and “decided to stop by,” and then they came in and sat in the kitchen or den, and Dad sat with them, and sometimes me too. Sometimes the stop-bys said they would’ve come earlier but they were stuck, and the gas stations didn’t have enough gas, they said. Sometimes they brought food, and then came the turkey chili days and the chicken spaghetti days, the days when no ice cream’d fit in the freezer. There were the crying days, and the flower days, and the days Dad let me sleep with him and Mama, only Mama wasn’t there, so we had more room in the bed but I slept in the middle anyway, and in the mornings her side of the bed was always still and cold.

Mama’s funeral was at Grace Chapel. Teddy says a funeral is a ceremony that celebrates someone meeting God. Pastor Tom spoke about that, about Mama meeting God, and an old woman I’d never seen before sang “Amazing Grace.” I remember her chin mostly. A flap of skin connected it to her neck, like a turkey’s neck, and when she sang, that wrinkly, old skin trembled, rippled like mountains of sand in the desert. I’ve seen pictures in magazines of those sand mountains, and pictures of people riding up the sand on camels like cowboys on horses.

I can’t remember if the bell at Grace Chapel rang that day. I didn’t pull the rope. I know that.

The cars driving into the graveyard looked like ants. Dad rode in the first car, with the box, Jesus-Susannah. I saw him touch the box in the church before the people got there. He said real soft, “Jesus, Susannah. The hell do I do now?” I don’t think you’re supposed to say that word—not in church, anyway—only if you’re Pastor Tom, but it’s ok, I think, because Dad whispered.
I rode with Teddy and Pop. “I’ve never been to a graveyard before,” I said.

Teddy said, “Cemetery, Margot.” She was sniffling in the passenger seat beside Pop. He was driving.

“But,” I said, “but isn’t this a graveyard?”

“Cemetery is a better word to say,” Teddy said.

Then Teddy said that Mama would be buried here, but I could come visit her whenever I wanted because Teddy would take me to see Mama whenever I wanted.

“Ok?” she said. “We’ll bring flowers. Ok?” she said.

I remember that day was hot—sticky hot. I remember crying and being thirsty and scared I was losing too much water and scared the little red vines growing in my eyes would grow and grow and wouldn’t stop growing and would come out of my eyes and start wrapping around me like wire or a snake. I remember Teddy’s tissue wadded up in her fist. I remember all the people—rows of people—singing a song I didn’t know the words to, so I hummed “Suzie Q., Baby I love you, my Suzie Q.”

A man in a black suit buried the box, Jesus-Susannah, in the dirt under a dark green tent. He used a crank that reminded me of the one in the Chevy that you have to push round and round to roll the windows down and back up. Sometimes the crank in the Chevy gets stuck, but this crank ran smooth. Pop had tears coming from his eyes and sweat coming from his hair and it looked like his whole body was crying. He told me the box is called a coffin. Teddy heard him and said, “Casket, Charles.” Pop shrugged. I liked his word better anyway—coffin. I know Mama was inside the coffin, inside Jesus-Susannah, meeting God, but I couldn’t see them. I wonder if He met her in the coffin or in the dirt.
I remember Teddy said, “More people would’ve come if not for the hurrahkin.” I think *hurrahkin* must be a better word for *storm*.

When I came back to school, CJ Holiday was in my class. The girl with white, noodle hair was, too. Everybody was bringing pencils and pink erasers and chalk and chalkboard erasers and notebooks for the schools in Biloxi. *Biloxi*. They talked about Katrina. Ms. Humbird told me to tell her if I needed anything, *anything*, she said, and she gave me a juice box from the cooler she kept behind her desk, which was real nice because I was thirsty. I remember feeling hot and thirsty for days and days.

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Once, I dreamed about Katrina. Her mouth was red like Ruby’s, red like the lipstick in the gold tube, red like *Town Trollop*. She smelled like sweat, like how Dad smells after he’s been fixing something for too long and he’s mad that it won’t fix. I stepped into her mouth and she swallowed me up whole like a piece of candy she’d been sucking on. She was laughing and I could feel her laughing from the inside.

I saw CJ Holiday’s house inside Katrina. I wasn’t sure how I knew it was his house, I just knew it was, so I knocked on the door, but nobody answered. “Hello?” I said. Nobody answered. And all round me was water, and clothes, clothes floating on top of the water, and a doll with a striped dress on and a bow in her hair that was white underneath the dirt stains. The doll looked like she was sleeping on the water. I said to her, “Follow me,” and started to swim away. But the doll just kept floating. She must not have been taught how to swim, or maybe she forgot.

•
At first, I didn’t want Ruby. I didn’t see why we needed her because we had Teddy and Pop. On Fridays before Ruby, I got to stay at Teddy and Pop’s house out in Vaughan, and we’d have breakfast for dinner or homemade pizza, cheese with pepperonis and black olives. I’d trade Pop my olives for his pepperonis. I like olives ok, the black ones anyway, but I like pepperonis better.

I remember hearing Teddy and Pop talk about Ruby before I met her.

“What does he even know about her?” Teddy said.

“Who?” said Pop.

“This Ruby-woman.”

“Well,” said Pop, “she’s from—”

“The Delta, yes, but that’s all we know.” Pop’s a slow talker. Teddy finds his words for him most times, or she gives him some of her own. “And what Willem said about that man moving to New Orleans, that man she wasn’t even married to—” Teddy put another slice of pizza on my plate. “Who are her people anyway? Do we even know who her people are?”

I picked off the olives one by one and put them on Pop’s plate. They looked like burned SpaghettiO’s.

Pop laughed. “We don’t know everybody, Claire.”

“We know a lot of good people.” She put a fresh slice on Pop’s plate.

Pop said, “We don’t know ’em all.”

“He was black, Charles.”

Pop took a bite of pizza. The cheese squished, and it sounded like rain boots stepping in a mud puddle.
“She’s got that big trout-mouth, I know that,” Teddy said. “She wears that bright red lipstick, I know that.”

“Hey!” I said to Pop. “You ate my pepperoni!”

Pop looked at his pizza. “I did, didn’t I?” he said. With his pointer finger and thumb, he plucked off an olive and handed it to me. Our hands were slippery with yellow pizza grease, and I dropped the olive on the floor. I picked it up quick though, quick enough to beat the germs.

“Don’t eat that, Margot,” Teddy said. “And how does Willem know her?”

Pop shrugged and took another bite, and orange cheese and red sauce pushed up into the spaces between his crooked teeth. Teddy said something else, but I wasn’t listening. I snuck the olive in my mouth when she and Pop weren’t looking. I didn’t get sick because I was quicker than the germs.

Once, when we had pancakes for dinner, I told Teddy and Pop that pancakes always make me think of the collie dog that lives up the road from 76 Ivey Lane because one time I was playing with her, and she peed on my shoe, and I remember my shoe smelled like syrup.

Teddy said, “Don’t say pee, Margot.”

I told that same story to Ruby when we were eating pancakes and scrambled eggs at IHOP one time, and she made me eat asparagus for dinner the next night. She said, “Just wait till you have to pee. It’ll smell somethin’ weird.”

I don’t like asparagus and I won’t eat it again, but I ate it that night to see what would happen. And Ruby was right.
Dad works in a big, silver building wrapped in windows. He wears suits and ties and nice socks that match, and wakes up early and drives even farther than the City of Lights to the silver building every day. He even works some Saturdays. But not Sundays. I don’t think Teddy would let him work Sundays. And he doesn’t take the old Chevy to work—that’s just for driving in the fields behind our house. It was Dad’s first car, the Chevy. He says it’s where he kissed Mama for the first time. I don’t think I’d like to be kissed in the old Chevy because it’s rusty and chipping on all sides, and dead bugs are always smooshed on the windshield.

Dad said we needed Ruby. Dad said Ruby was a “good thing.” He said that Teddy and Pop, much as they wanted, couldn’t be at 76 Ivey Lane every day, and Ruby would be my “friend,” he said, and would pick me up after school. A couple times after Mama died, Dad showed up later than all the other moms and dads to pick me up. I didn’t mind so much because Ms. Humbird stayed with me and gave me some frosted animal crackers and a book to read about the planets. My favorite one is Pluto, the smallest and bluest. Whenever he was late, Dad would say, “I’m so sorry I’m so sorry,” over and over again, and I always said it was ok, and Ms. Humbird always said it was ok, but he kept saying sorry to somebody, or nobody.

Now, I understand Ruby, my “good thing.” I understand that she packs my lunches and draws on paper napkins and picks me up after school and is most times on time. I understand the best way to eat eggs is scrambled with milk and cheese and just a little bit of Delta hot sauce. I understand when some songs come on the radio, you just have to stop talking and sing as loud as you can.
I understand the difference between Ruby’s real laugh and her fake laugh. When she’s really laughing, she doesn’t make a sound, just opens her mouth up wide, wide as Ella Fun’s ear. When Ruby’s really laughing, I can see all the way to the back of her mouth, all the way to the red teardrop hanging down behind her tongue. The teardrop that won’t ever fall, I don’t think, won’t ever cry.

I understand the way Ruby likes to cry, all alone in the blue shed, and the way she talks—in word-necklaces. *Squinchureyes:* It’s how Ruby makes the colors dance, and she taught me how.

Dad understands Ruby, too. Once, I saw them in the kitchen. They were just sitting in the kitchen, not talking. It was last year, after Christmas, but the stockings were still hanging. Our stockings—Dad’s and mine—they look the same, but Ruby has her own and it’s got a big, red *R* on it. Mama’s stocking was hanging too, but it had been empty Christmas morning because Santa knew. He always knows. Dad and Ruby were drinking from a bottle that must’ve come from the mini-fridge, and Ruby was eating leftovers cold. I didn’t move for a long time, just watched them for a long time, real careful not to lean on “that stupid stair.” That’s what Dad says every time he steps on it because “that stupid stair” *cr-creaks*, and it would’ve told on me.

Dad says when you can sit with somebody and say nothing, that means you’re good friends. He says you don’t need words or just don’t have them and that’s ok. That’s why sometimes when Uncle Willem is over, they don’t say anything. They just sit in the den and watch TV or sit outside and drink from glass bottles from the mini-fridge or work on the old Chevy, fixing it. Something always needs fixing at 76 Ivey Lane.
One time last summer, Uncle Willem came over. He brought me a Gatorade. We were all sitting outside and Dad had music playing from the small radio, the one that doesn’t need a plug. It was almost the fourth of July. I remember because of Ruby’s shirt, it was a color between gray and blue, the color of fog, and it had the American flag on it, fifty stars and all. It was too big for her and fell off her shoulders, and showed a thin, red strap pressed tight against her shoulder-skin. It looked like a scrape, a long, fresh cut. It was her undershirt, I think. Or maybe it was her bra. Teddy wears those. I’ve seen them in her closet. They’re all the same color, something like oatmeal. Mama wore braws, too, and sometimes she’d leave them hanging near the washer-machine but I’m not sure she was supposed to do that because Teddy says braws go under clothes, they’re supposed to be hidden, like a secret only for girls. But if that red strap was Ruby’s braw, Ruby didn’t mind it showing. I’d never seen a red one before and I remember wondering if they make them for all holidays. I’ll have to ask Teddy. Teddy knows braws. She says I’ll get my own when I get older.

Ruby was barefoot and wearing blue jean shorts. Her shorts were torn up and they had holes in them, and strings were hanging down that swished when she walked and hit her legs. I bet they tickled, those strings, but Ruby didn’t laugh when she walked her ballerina walk to the mini-fridge. I remember seeing a skinny, blue vein going up her thigh. It looked like a branch in the winter with no leaves—nakkid.

Anyway, Dad and Uncle Willem must’ve understood Ruby, and she must’ve understood them too because we all sat for a while real quiet, only the radio making sound. I was blowing bubbles and trying to catch them in my palms without popping them. Uncle Willem kept looking at Ruby, but he didn’t say anything. They didn’t need
words, see? After a while, Ruby smiled, her trout-mouth wide, her American braw still showing, and she said, “Margot, let’s go get some snow cones. Wanna?”

I got a watermelon snow cone and Ruby got sour apple and we stopped by the fireworks store on the way home and bought sparklers so we could write our names on the air in gold light.

* • *

I heard that in New Orleans there are queens ten feet tall, who float through the city and throw beads, so many beads it looks like the sky is raining colors. I wonder what happened to the queens. I wonder if Katrina was one of them. When I asked Teddy about the queens, Teddy told me that New Orleans is a dirty place, but I don’t mind dirt so much. I used to make pies for the lost, lazy turtles that came wandering up to 76 Ivey Lane. I mixed dirt and water to make rusty red mud and topped the pies with buttercups. Ruby said the dirt in the Delta is *special*. So I asked her, “Have you ever eaten Delta dirt, Ruby?”

She said, “No.”

I said, “How do you know it’s special then?”

“Cuz I’ve bathed in it,” she said. Then, she looked at me and started laughing. “One day, we’re gonna go to the Delta, Margot, you and me, girl. We’re gonna go, and you’re gonna bathe in the dirt, and you’ll see what I mean.”

I wonder what the dirt over Mama tastes like. I want to wash in *that* dirt.

* • *

The City of Lights is forty long minutes from 76 Ivey Lane. I try to stay awake. I think about ladybugs and how Mama would’ve liked Ruby. Now, Ruby’s singing “Mele
Kalikimaka” and bobbing her head like a bobber on a fishing line. I imagine a catfish flopping around on the floorboard by her feet, jumping between the gas and break pedals, its whiskers long and sharp.

Teddy and Pop take me fishing on the Yazoo River. Most of the fish I catch aren’t so big; I’ve only ever caught two catfish. Pop says he’s caught hundreds. Mama used to come with us and bring her rickety, red stool and her watercolors. She’d sit and paint while Pop helped me put worms on the hook. Whenever I caught a fish, I’d bring it to her, and say something like, “Paint this fish, Mama! He’s so small. See how small he is? And wiggly.”

My favorite painting of Mama’s is the one that hangs in the bathroom beside my room. It’s small and square. It’s of a beach, and on the beach is a small, brown house, one I’ve never seen before in real life, and the door to the house is open but only a little bit, you can’t see anyone inside the house, just the door that’s open a little bit, and coming out the door are colors—blues and purples and baby pinks and yellows. Sometimes when I’m brushing my teeth I forget that I’m brushing my teeth, and I just look at the beach house and wonder who’s inside, and then toothpaste mixed with spit falls from my mouth onto my pajamas.

The first horses I remember seeing were the wild ones in her paintings. The three horse paintings hang in the den on the wall behind the couch. One time, before Mama was sick, I ate spaghetti on the couch and dropped a noodle on one of the cream-colored cushions. I cried when I showed Dad the orange stain, but he just put his finger to his lips and turned the cushion over. A couple weeks later I spilled chocolate milk on the same
cushion, and Mama found the other stain, the spaghetti noodle stain, but she only
laughed, and I almost cried, but I didn’t.

The watercolor horses are different shades of browns and reds and are running
against wind the color of grapefruit and lemons. Sometimes I wish I was made of
watercolors so I could jump into Mama’s paintings and run beside the horses. I want to
be in the world she saw and made, where colors are alive and live in houses on the beach
and push open doors and spill out.

Mama used to drive to the Coast to see the Watercolor Man. I called him that
because he was a famous watercolor painter, and his name even had the word water in it,
but I can’t remember the whole of it. I think he’d give art lessons down there. Mama’d
come back smelling like gulf shrimp, sand, and oranges.

One time, she and I painted together. She sat on her red stool and I stood in one of
the kitchen chairs. She said, “Margot, the trick is not to worry about gettin’ everything
just right—the water’ll help with that.” She showed me what water does to the colors,
how the colors smear and smudge and press into each other and run together like her wild
horses.

“See?” she said.

Mama taught me the names of the brushes: round, pointed, oval, bamboo. The
kitchen chair creaked under my weight as I leaned forward to paint and backward to
watch Mama. We painted flowers—lilies and bluebells and morning glories and rho-do-
den-drons, and maybe trollops, but I can’t be sure. We gave that painting to Teddy and
Pop because Teddy loves flowers. She gardens.
I want to be an artist like Mama and the Watercolor Man. For my fifth birthday, Mama gave me a bucket filled with pieces of different colored sidewalk-chalk. I draw on the driveway. I draw cities with tall, silver buildings and flowers of all different colors. I draw birds with polka-dotted wings and lions with rainbow manes. After the rain is the best time to draw with chalk because the colors stick better when the concrete’s wet. The colors are brighter then. Sometimes, when I notice the clouds getting darker and fluffier and meaner, pushing against one another, I’ll get my raincoat and bucket and place them right beside the front door, ready for when the rain stops. I think God always knew I’d want to be an artist because we’ve got one of the only concrete driveways around.

But my chalk drawings don’t run wild like Mama’s horses. Sometimes I get scared looking at her watercolors, scared that I will blink too long and the colors will have run off somewhere and I’ll have missed it all.

Once, not long after Ruby had moved into the shed, I dumped my bucket over so there was a pile of chalk on my bedroom floor. I threw the chalk, piece by piece, at my wall. I remember how the sticks, some thin, some thick, popped and cracked when they hit the wallpaper. It all looked like little pastel bugs, smooshed, dead. I started to cry and threw the chalk harder. Dad wasn’t home from the silver building yet. I don’t know what Ruby was doing, but she must’ve heard the pops because she came into my room and saw the chalk bits and saw me crying and came to me and dropped to her knees.

“They’re dead, Ruby. They’re dead!” I said.

“Who is, Margot?” she said, holding me against her warm, unskinny body.

“Who?”
Ruby must’ve seen the ladybugs on the floor and in my bed because she said,

“They die sometimes. They aren’t meant to live forever.”

But I meant the colors, see? Because I wanted them alive like in Mama’s paintings, but I didn’t say anything because I started crying harder and forgot to speak. Ruby pushed the dead ladybugs on my bed onto the floor and hummed me a lullaby from the Delta. My mustard-colored snot smeared on her shoulder, and when Ruby didn’t wipe it away, I knew she loved me.

I wondered if Ruby’s man used to sing to her the way Dad used to sing to Mama. I wondered if somewhere there is a song he wrote for Ruby, his flower, his trollop, and if he sings Ruby’s song to Katrina now, and if his Katrina is the same one who brought CJ Holiday and the girl with noodle hair to my school, the same one who swallowed me up and spit me out, who swallowed CJ Holiday’s house but kept it.

I said, “Ruby, I’m sorry about your man.”

Ruby must’ve known what I was thinking. She must can read minds sometimes.

“Margot,” she said, still rocking me, “Katrina was a bitchofastorm.”

A bitchofastorm. “Ruby,” I said, “what’s your man’s name?”

Ruby stopped rocking. She didn’t say anything, was just still. I thought my question made her mad, and all I wanted was for her to sing that Delta song again. I almost asked her to start singing when she said, all of a sudden, “Tre.”

“Oh,” I said.

After a while, I said, “Can you sing some more?”

She kept on with the lullaby.

I walked away and I wrang my hands and cried,
I walked away and I wrang my hands and cried,

Didn’t have no blues, I couldn’t keep tarryin’ around.

With Ruby’s arms tangled around me the way they were, it was like I was wrapped in a blanket and rocking in a rocking chair on a porch somewhere, in the Delta somewhere.

•

Later that night I saw a ladybug crawling along near the window. I put my finger down in front of her, in her way, so she had to crawl up on my nail. As the ladybug moved from finger to finger, I wondered if she was lonely, if she had a mama, or a Ruby, or a Teddy, or a man. I wondered if she was cold. I stuck her on the extra pillow and watched her ladybug legs move her little red and black body across the white space. I went to bed thinking about words and Katrina.

Katrina: that bitchofastorm that swallowed names and houses in Biloxi. Biloxi.


Trollop.

Trollop.

Trollop. That flower.

And in the morning, she was dead, too.

•

My body must can tell we are getting close because all of a sudden I’m not so tired anymore, and my tummy’s stopped its gurgling. I tug at the seatbelt. “Deck the Halls” plays, and Ruby and me scream “fa-la-la-la-la, la la la la” as loud as we can. I find two lost baby Goldfish in my seat and eat them. I like the baby ones better than the
regular-sized Goldfish. I like to see how many bites I can take before the whole fish is gone.

We pull into the City, and Ruby parks her car behind the bank, the same “secret spot” we parked in last year. I think Ruby calls it a “secret spot” because no one’s allowed to be parking there. A big sign says NO PARKING, but Ruby did it anyway, and twice now. I’m a little nervous parking where we aren’t supposed to since it’s so close to Christmas, but I was nervous last year, too, and I still got a full stocking and a purple scooter and these yellow rain-boots with caterpillars and ladybugs on them, these ones I’m wearing now even though it’s not raining.

There’s a car parked next to us. Somebody else must not be worried either, must know the City’s secrets, too. The back window of the car is covered in stickers—red, white, and blue ones, one that says something about GOD, a black one with a white W, a deer, a fish, a gun, some circles, some rectangles, some yellow, an eagle.

“Did you see all those stickers, Ruby?”

“Mmhm.” Ruby’s car jerks forward when we stop.

“How come you don’t have stickers on your car like that?”

Ruby looks in the mirror, this time at herself, and puckers her lips like she’s about to kiss a toad-prince. She puts on more Town Trollop. She rubs her lips together. “I’m more of a make-love-not-war kindagirl,” she says, “And jury duty’s not that bad.” She takes off her blue glasses and cleans the clear parts with the bottom of her sweater. She opens her car door and sings, “It’s the hap-happiest season of all!”
The City of Lights is really just Canton, but I like calling it the City of Lights because that’s what’s on the sign—“Welcome to Historic Canton, the City of Lights.” That’s what Ruby calls it, too. I don’t think she’s ever called it just “Canton.”

The City’s more crowded than it was last year. Lots of kids are waiting with their parents and grandparents and babysitters in a long line to sit with Santa and remind him of what they’d really like to see Christmas morning. The smallest ones cry when their mamas plop them on Santa’s lap. I count three small dogs in Christmas sweaters. I don’t see any cats though, and I wonder why nobody ever brings the cat. A girl and boy stand close, holding hands and also holding little, white cups, and I see steam and small, black straws coming out of the cups, and I think they must be drinking hot chocolate, maybe with baby marshmallows on top, and now I want a cup of hot chocolate with baby marshmallows on top.

It’s cold. The town trolley rides by and the people on top bundle together under blankets they brought from their homes. There is a man shivering with only a blue jean jacket on. He’s got his arms crossed tight across his body and his hands tucked under his armpits and beside him, a boy with dark, curly hair is eating boiled peanuts. They must be waiting for the lights because they aren’t in line to see Santa or to ride the yellow train around the square. Ruby and I are wearing our heavy coats. I pull my hood up around my ears. The trolley bell rings, and it sounds happy.

“Everybody walks the same way when it’s cold,” I say.

Ruby says, “Mm?”

I say, “We all walk like this.” And I hug my stomach real tight and lock my knees, stiff, like the man in the blue jean jacket and take small steps like my shoelaces are
tied together. Once, in kindergarten, I knotted my shoelaces with the shoelaces of another girl in my class to practice for a three-legged race. We walked hip-to-hip all day, hip-to-hip even to the girls’ bathroom. At the end of the day, we had to cut our shoelaces because the knot was too tight.

Ruby’s smiling at me and nodding. Her mouth curves like a sleeping, red moon.

“Ruby?” I say.

But then, the lights are on—silver, red, green, white, blue, gold, more white, more green, magenta.

“Squinchuresyes, Margot!” Ruby says. She’s got her eyes pinched and is moving her yellow, messy head side to side, and she looks just like she did last year, in her big coat with her fish lips stretched across her face like a slinky. Her glasses almost fall off, but she keeps shaking her head side to side anyway. I laugh because Ruby looks silly, but I move my head, too, side to side like Ruby, silly like Ruby, and I see how Ruby sees.

Ruby’s squinchinghereyes so tight she’s squeezing tears out.

“Squinchuresyes!” I say. “Squinchuresyes! Squinchuresyes!” And the lights move, and the colors move, and they dance. I make them go this way and that way and then, they are going on their own, they are alive.
PART II

CHAPTER 1

“It’s in the dirt”: Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones

The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully…proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was—only is. If was existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.

Nothing can make parvo better. Puppies don’t survive that. And if I don’t get rid of this one, the others will catch it. And then, they will all die.
-Jesmyn Ward, Salvage the Bones, p. 44

Not all social disasters evoke cultural trauma (Eyerman 6). Cultural traumas arise from collective trauma when the collective’s sense of identity has been disrupted, when the “social fabric” has been torn. Cultural traumas instill feelings of necessary “revision” of the collective’s narrative, and attempts at that revision surface in print media, TV reportage, art, local and federal legislation, religion, and group activism aiming to “make meaning,” to “interpret the significance of what [has] occurred” (8). Hurricane Katrina evoked such trauma. In the introduction, I stated that “Katrina” has multiple meanings, depending on an individual or group’s experience and/or interpretation of the storm. The name “Katrina” carries more weight for some than others.

In Jesmyn Ward’s National Book Award-winning novel, Salvage the Bones, Katrina becomes a lens through which Esch and her family are able to process the initial loss presented in the text, that of the matriarch. Katrina’s destruction allows for, and even generates, Esch’s confidence in “watching and waiting” at the end of the novel and the beginnings of re-construction, particularly by way of story-telling.

22 For more, see Ron Eyerman, Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma, chapter 1.
23 Ibid. Eyerman calls media, religion, legislation, etc. “carrier groups” or “actors” who help to make meaning of the traumatic experience.
*Salvage the Bones* tells the story of the days leading up to and immediately following Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of Esch Batiste, a young, pregnant, African-American from a small town on the Mississippi Coast. Rick Crownshaw calls Ward’s novel “post-naturalistic” in its handling of Esch’s testimony. “Where American literary naturalism at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth century tracked an environmental over-determination of subjectivity, the lives novelistic subjects lead and the very form of the novel itself,” writes Crownshaw, “Ward’s post-naturalism suggests a progression of the relation between subject and environment in which the subject’s sovereignty over itself has further weakened but in which new forms of cognition have arisen” (161). In other words, as the subject is granted less agency—becoming “excluded” or deemed “inhuman”—she gains consciousness of the very system from which she is excluded, thereby (ironically) acquiring the qualities necessary to “interrupt the political regime of disposability and indispensability” (174).24

Crownshaw explains the text’s treatment of subjectivity as “systematic indistinction and [the] slippage between human, animal, and environment” (170). “Not only bestial,” says Crownshaw, “these characters are also increasingly indistinguishable from the surrounding detritus of poverty and post-hurricane ruination, and from the environment more generally” (161).25 He notes, for instance, the similarities in the birth of China’s puppies and the day Junior, the youngest Batiste, was born via imagery of “blooming, purple and blue flowers” (Crownshaw 170, STB 2-4). The Pit, what the

24 Crownshaw’s reading of Ward’s novel aligns with the social politics and biopolitics upon which Jenny Edkins and Henry Giroux found their work. See Jenny Edkins’s, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, for a more general overview of the “disposable” political subject, “that can be killed but not sacrificed,” and Henry Giroux’s *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (2006) for a more precise look at the disposable subject in the context of Katrina.

25 Crownshaw seems to be using the following definitions of bestial: “of or belonging to the lower animals” (1); “below the dignity of reason or humanity, brutish, untaught, barbarous” (2) (OED).
Batistes call “home,” becomes a “symbolic landscape of the socio-economically and racially marginalized” (Crownshaw 162). Ultimately, Crownshaw follows in the way of contemporary trauma theory.\(^{26}\) He determines that there is a gap inherent not in the event of Hurricane Katrina, but in the subjectivity of poor, African-American life, particularly located in the rural American South. Therefore, destruction is not a product of the hurricane itself but of the national political environment that produced and still allows the “reduction of life” to bare and biological (160).

I am in agreement with much of Crownshaw’s analysis of the novel and with his critique of the “progression” of America’s political narrative; while post-Civil Rights America at least seems politically equal, it is nonetheless undoubtedly socially and economically disparate (163).\(^{27}\) I support his attack on the “negligence” within the Homeland—that is, his argument that in a post- 9/11 U.S., American soil became the very site of national trauma (169, 166). Finally, I agree with the “slippage” in subjectivity in the novel and the “blurred [boundaries] between humanity and the surrounding animal (and ecological) life” (160). These points support my own argument regarding Katrina as cultural trauma and my exploration of Ward’s novel as a representation of cultural trauma and as a representation of resilience, strength, and re-construction after loss.

However, Crownshaw’s analysis is at times too far removed from the primary text. He engages with other “carrier groups” and “institutional arenas” in their narratives of Hurricane Katrina often to the point of placing those narratives in front of or on top of the text’s own narrative, rather than in conversation with the text’s narrative, giving room

\(^{26}\) See Introduction for a brief overview of trauma theory.

\(^{27}\) I note a slight distinction between Crownshaw and Edkins. It is Edkins’s assertion that political voice is power; those who are “voiceless” are the true “victims.” Nonetheless, they both look to Agamben’s paradox of the “subhuman” as simultaneously included and excluded.
for discourse, for agreement and disagreement. In the following pages, therefore, I return to Ward’s text. On one hand, I supplement Crownshaw’s arguments, and on the other hand, I suggest ways in which Ward’s novel challenges other narratives, forming its own argument for familial and regional resilience and for re-construction via storytelling. Whereas Crownshaw emphasizes the processes of “unbecoming” or “becoming other” in the novel, I aim to show the novel’s model of “becoming again” and creation.

My explorations stem from one sentence in the novel, and I use the phrase metonymically—“It’s in the dirt.” This is what Skeetah says about Parvo, the unseen disease responsible for the death of one of China’s prize puppies (59). One puppy dies in childbirth; “His tongue protrudes through the tiny slit that is his mouth, and he looks like a flat cartoon dog. He is dead” (8). Another dies of parvo, from “swimming in the [diseased] dirt.” “What if it’s in the dirt?” Skeetah says. “What if the rest of them get infected?” (39) Esch remembers the story of Big Henry’s cousin’s dog, who “had a whole litter die of parvo…the first one died, and then each day after that, every time his cousin walked out back to his doghouse, he would find another puppy dead” (40).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “dirt” in a number of ways: “unclean matter, such as soils any object adhering to it; filth” (2a); “a scornful name for land (as a possession)” (2c), “applied abusively to persons” (2d); “scurrilous information or gossip; scandal” (2f); “mud; soil, earth, mould” (3a). Dirt, therefore, can refer to place, to a collective or group, and to reporting, as in retrieving the “dirt” of a story or situation. Via its dirt imagery, Salvage the Bones is in company with other Southern works of fiction, and Ward is in conversation with other Southern writers, like Eudora Welty, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and of course, Faulkner. Patricia Yaeger describes dirt as

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having a “metaphoric power in day-to-day life; it offers a category of alienation that has peculiar powers of abjection” (65). Dirt is “a potent symbol,” says Yaeger, and most often in Southern literature that symbol has negative qualities (66). Yet, for all the “negative qualities,” dirt can be connective and sustaining. Yeager writes, “Pollution metaphors often define what it is like to be outside of human care, but they may also augur a turn toward redemption, reparation, rebirth” (261). She goes on to say that southern literature’s obsession with community goes hand-in-hand with an obsession with pollution and dirt (261).²⁹

I navigate the novel’s particular handling of dirt in three ways: place, community, and story. In the first section, I ask, what are the implications of place in the novel? Could this testimony have come from somewhere else, somewhere other than a poor, black community in Mississippi? Drawing on Crownshaw, how do place and subjectivity mirror one other within the novel? In the second section, I ask, what role does community play in this novel and in the context of Katrina? What about the community of Bois Sauvage makes its constituents “dirty”? How does the text celebrate community? Here, I argue the novel’s resistance to objectification via community. For Crownshaw, subjectivity in the novel “is to be found forever breaking its bounds, oscillating between the world of subjects and objects” (161). That “slippage” is certainly present (170); still, I argue that Big Henry’s affirmation to Esch that her baby has “plenty daddies,” is a moment in which the community intervenes in the oscillation process, and disrupts the inclination toward objectification.

In the third section, I examine Esch’s role as story-teller. I consider Esch’s infatuation with texts, particularly with the myth of Medea. According to Jesmyn Ward, “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” (Hoover). I juxtapose Esch and Medea (and Katrina), noting Esch’s world-making power at the end of the novel. In this section, I provide an alternative reading of the novel’s final pages to Crownshaw’s reading. Additionally, throughout the chapter, I aim to identify (if only implicitly, at times) the possible meanings of the “it” that is in the novel’s dirt. The pronoun’s implications range from death and disease, to strength and camaraderie, to historical prejudice and silence. The “dirt,” and the “it” in the dirt, offer a way of considering the complexity of Hurricane Katrina and the complexity of the particular narrative of Katrina presented by Ward’s novel.

**Place**

The Batiste family lives in “the Pit,” which Sinéad Moynihan notes is “a desolate landscape… a space of discarded plastic garbage cans, detached fenders” (Moynihan 564; STB 126). The Pit is equivalent to trash; it is unkempt and unvisited by others outside the Batiste family and the Batistes’ close friends. For instance, Esch fears that the white man is “going to hear [his dog] hollering, and he’s going to follow it here,” to the Pit, where she and her brothers retreat after stealing some cow wormer for China (82). Significantly, the white man, though he is angry and sends his dog chasing after them, never comes. His own house is described as “blind with closed eyes;” its doors and windows, “shut” (71).
By contrast, the Batistes’ house is “nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided” (116).

As Crownshaw suggests, the setting and “symbolic landscape” of the novel paint the picture of a “socio-economically and marginalized” other-place. The Pit and the surrounding woods are shut out from the “included” society, which is represented above as a house “with closed eyes” and “shut” doors (Crownshaw 162, STB 71). Moreover, the inhabitants of this place inherit the qualities of the physically and socially marginalized landscape—they are “human debris in the middle of all the rest of it” (STB 237). They are the “wild things of Bois Sauvage” (117). Thus, place indicates one’s status in American biopolitics, and Esch’s story significantly occurs in a place of exclusion.

In one sense, this exclusion refers to the ways in which the novel portrays the characters’ subjectivity. The Pit and the Batistes are on the outskirts of society, literally and figuratively. In another sense, Mississippi itself is a place of exclusion. Natasha Trethewey says that before she reads her poem “Theories of Time and Space,” a poem about trying to go home when “home” is no longer—it is “gone or forever changed”—she asks her audiences what they remember about Hurricane Katrina. “Almost all of them say ‘New Orleans,’ recalling the footage beginning the day after the landfall, when the levees broke. Almost never does anyone answer ‘the Mississippi Gulf Coast’” (Beyond Katrina 2). New Orleans, after all, is “exotic…an irreplaceable national treasure” (Eyerman 52).

Crownshaw notes the little mentioning of “infrastructural institutions” in the novel and acknowledges that the institutions that are present are connected to race and Civil Rights legislation (163). The local elementary school where Randall’s basketball
game takes place “used to actually be the black school for the district before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane, when people were too tired finding their relatives’ uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses…to still fight the law outlawing segregation” (STB 140). The description of the elementary school’s (racial) history is brief. Crownshaw nonetheless uses this as a platform for linking social and natural histories. “It was not so much political and civic will that desegregated the school, but the byproduct of a disastrous distraction,” he writes. “Nonetheless, natural disaster still reveals a history of social disaster” (164).

I am more interested in the way in which the novel uses memory and history to encourage a concern for the future of this place of exclusion, as much as a concern for, and an awareness of, its past and present. In one paragraph Esch internally travels from the school’s gym, to the school’s history and a national history of desegregation, to a memory in which her mother shared her own memory about when she and Esch’s father first met. “On one of their blues nights after I had danced myself to shaking,” Esch says, “Mama told the story of how they met, that Daddy would not stop pulling her hair in the hallway…Then he stopped pulling her hair, but started leaving her presents in her desk.” The paragraph ends with “That was their beginning” (141).

The narration here is nostalgic, though the narrator herself did not experience that which she seems nostalgic for. Esch slips from her mother’s memories back into her own experience. She describes the gym, “Now, there’s construction paper taped in makeshift galleries along the wall by the door. They flutter in the wind driven by the industrial fan” (141). The quick shift between the past and present is easily accomplished due to the
residue of the past still visible on Mississippi’s present condition. The slippery and swift progression of the paragraphs’ development mimic the state’s refusal to truly accept and instill Civil Rights legislation of the mid-twentieth century.\(^{30}\) The use of words like “industrial” and “construction” and the exchange of plant and land imagery between the two paragraphs—that is, the movement from “whole pecans” and “blackberries dusted with ditch dirt, hot from the sun, leaking black juice” to mere metaphorical language like the woman’s “lips the color of azaleas”—ironize and undercut a movement in the direction of progression, industry, and production (141).

As Crownshaw suggests, *Salvage the Bones* “challenge[s] a national narrative of progress” via “its symbolic geography [which] suggests an existence on the threshold between nature and civilization” (164). Not only does the text here mock the idea of progression, I argue it also points to the problem with nostalgia and with situating in one’s past. On one hand, Esch’s memory of her mother and father is pastoral, idyllic, and simple in its demonstration of courtship. On the other hand, the layers of mediation between the actual event being remembered and the remembering indicate how far removed Esch is from that time, causing the reader to pause, to question this idyllic pre-desegregation picture.\(^{31}\) Esch recalls a memory of her mother recalling a memory. The detached memory and, thus, ambiguous nostalgia signify the novel’s forward-looking emphasis.\(^{32}\)


\(^{31}\) Later in the text, Skeetah says China’s dog food tastes “salty… like pecans,” affirming dog food as an optional food source after Katrina hits (193). This comparison further situates the memories of the idyllic past as questionable in their seeming perfection and simplicity.

\(^{32}\) In other words, we wonder if this sense of nostalgia is generated by narrator or by novel; it must be the latter since the Esch herself did not experience the memory. Then, the novel seems to be suggesting the futility in nostalgia if it is not used as a tool for moving forward.
The dirt gets shaken, stirred, and then spit back out in both literal and metaphorical terms via the hurricane and the lasting cultural effects. Esch describes, “With all the trees gone, it is easy to see that we are approaching the train tracks, the same train tracks that carried the trains we heard blowing raucously when we were younger, swimming in the same oyster-lined bay that came in and swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine’s, and vomited it out in pieces” (252). Katrina exposed memories, personal and historical, like it exposed the path to the train tracks; yet, the text seems to argue that those memories should only cause us to recognize the reality of now and to look to what will come.

**Community**

Crownshaw writes, “Hurricane Katrina affected all racial groups, [yet] African Americans bore the brunt of the storm’s effects for historical reasons” (163). In addition to noting moments in which *Salvage the Bones* engages with Civil Rights legislation, he points out the resonances of post-Katrina New Orleans in Bois Sauvage, such as the evacuation orders unattended to by many African American residents of New Orleans (and along the coast) due to lack of transportation or place to go (163). Having nowhere else to go, the Batiste family has *no choice* but to prepare the Pit for the storm. Crownshaw’s claims are indisputable. “The novel underlies that it is those who already vulnerable, ‘the wrinkled newborn babies,’ who suffer its [i.e. the storm’s] effects most drastically” (Moynihan 564, *STB* 255). The poor communities of Bois Sauvage and St. Catherine’s are the “excluded”—the financially and physically vulnerable, the “voiceless” (Jenny Edkins 181).

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33 See Moynihan’s article “From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*” for “the neoliberal discourse of choice” that framed the evacuation orders given by local and federal authorities, pp. 554-5.
Even so, I would argue that the novel takes an interesting—perhaps, surprising—turn via the use of first-person narration. Esch directly engages with the reader. The first-person narration brings readers into Esch’s experience so much so that readers might even feel at times uncomfortably close, as if intruding in an intimate, personal moment. For instance, readers follow Esch “[i]n the bathroom” where “I bend over standing and knead my stomach, knead the melon to pulp, but it just keeps springing back: ripe.” Esch then considers, “I could find something big enough and hard enough to jump on: Daddy’s dump truck hood, Daddy’s tractor” (102). She thinks that if she gets rid of the problem that is steadily growing larger inside her, Manny would never know and eventually he would love her. As readers, we are brought into the bathroom and then, into Esch’s intimate interiority. If Esch ever becomes a spectacle and the reader voyeuristic, it is the reader’s doing, not the character’s or the novel’s doing. In other words, Esch is not ashamed to share her testimony.34

The first-person narration expresses an important attribute of cultural trauma—the construction and then, expansion of a “we.”35 Jeffrey Alexander writes, “[Cultural trauma] is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. A ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger” (3). The poor, African American residents of Bois Sauvage encompass such a construction within the novel. I argue that the interiority of Esch’s first-person narration enables at

34 Of course, she shouldn’t be. My point is that the first-person perspective allows readers into Esch’s mind; her thoughts, emotions, and feelings are laid bare willingly.
35 Ron Eyerman writes in Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma, “A question that often emerges after a shocking incident… in the early stages of cultural trauma is not just ‘why is this happening to me?’ but ‘why is this happening to us?'” (10). Eyerman says “us” might refer to “a specific group, real or imagined community such as a racial or ethnic group, an entire nation or even a civilization” (10).
least the expansion of that “we,” if not the construction and expansion of a kind of “we” that extends beyond the book’s boundaries.

This expanded “we” aligns with Crownshaw’s understanding of the novel and its (the novel’s) ambitions. Quoting Jane Bennett, Crownshaw writes, “The ‘locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group’…”

Bennett’s mapping of the distribution of agency beyond the boundaries of the human, as part of a network of things and bodies, recalls the indistinctions of Ward’s novel. If agency is distributed so, then no claim to superiority on the grounds of membership of a particular group (racial, ethnic, economic, gender, sexual, religious, and so on) holds true because those members cannot lay claim to themselves, let alone the group. (173)  

Thus, the “we” breaks down the barrier between things and bodies, between the included and excluded. Crownshaw argues that the break down of barriers and boundaries leads to an “interruption,” which “enable[s] us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions” (Crownshaw 174; Bennett quoted in Crownshaw 174).

Yet, for all the oscillation and blurring of boundaries, there are moments when the “oscillation between the world of subjects and objects” stops on the side of the former. Significantly, this points to another possible project of the text—to reinstate subjectivity. At the end of the novel, Esch says to Big Henry, “It don’t have a daddy,” referring to her unborn child. “You wrong,” Big Henry says. “This baby got a daddy,

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37 This is opposed to Crownshaw’s suggestion that the novel proposes a new kind of subjectivity, or a new way of thinking about subjectivity, “new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception” (174).
Esch…This baby got plenty daddies” (255). Big Henry’s response demonstrates an important function of community within the novel. Notably, Big Henry replaces the indefinite pronoun “it” with “this baby.” The replacement becomes a speech act that reinstates the subjectivity of Esch’s illegitimate child. The unborn child, present throughout the novel, has been represented as voiceless, undesired, hidden, a “dirty secret,” so to speak. Furthermore, Esch describes Big Henry’s hands not with ecological or bestial descriptions but with reference to his own body. Esch says, “He reaches out his big, soft hand, soft as the bottom of his feet probably, and helps me stand” (255).

In this case, what is in the “dirt” of the community is a network of resilience and an affirmation of personhood. Moynihan describes Big Henry’s response here as one that “openly contradicts the kind of stereotype propounded by commentators [and reporters following Katrina]” (559). Big Henry is not the stereotypical young, black instigator of chaos and violence post-Katrina, and he refuses to allow Esch’s reduction to the stereotype of “black, single motherhood” (552). The end of the novel depicts the “dirty” community of Bois Sauvage as strong, resistant, and poised for re-construction. As Esch is picking up the pieces of what used to be, “the piece of glass, marbled blue and white…another that is red and a pink brick stone,” she is re-membering a shared past of the members of the Bois Sauvage and St. Catherine’s communities as well as affirming

38 Concerning “bestial,” see footnote 25.
39 Here, Moynihan references George Will, who wrote in the Washington Post to then Senator Barack Obama: “America’s always fast-flowing river of race-obsessing had overflowed its banks…[Obama] might, however, care to note three not-at-all recondite rules for avoiding poverty: Graduate from high school, don’t have a baby until you are married, don’t marry while you are a teenager.” Will then goes on to talk statistics. “…It is a safe surmise that more than 80 percent of African American births in inner-city New Orleans—as in some other inner cities—were to women without husbands. That translates into a large and constantly renewed cohort of lightly parented or adolescent males, and that translates into chaos in neighborhoods and schools, come rain or shine.”
the unity of those communities even amidst Katrina’s destruction (*STB* 254). Esch says, “I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina…She left *us* to learn to crawl. She left *us* to salvage” (255 my emphasis). Moynihan uses the term “mutual responsibility” to describe Esch’s futuristic outlook after the storm: “Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah and Skeetah will watch none of us” (Moynihan 559; *STB* 258). The individual members of the community have a responsibility to one another—to watch one another, wait for one another, and witness to one another, as well as to intercede total objectification. Thus, while there are many moments in which objectification wins out, moments in which the boundaries of human, animal, and environment are blurred, as Crownshaw notes, the text presents significant resistances to objectification that demand attention, as well.

**Story**

In one sense, the “dirt” on Esch is her pregnancy. She is an unwed, motherless, African American teenager in rural Mississippi. When she tells Manny she is pregnant with his child, Manny says, “I ain’t got nothing here. Nothing” (203). He calls her “a stupid bitch” and a “slut,” reminding her of what he presumes everybody knows to be true (204). I argue that Esch takes “the dirt on her,” Manny’s story and the rest, and shakes it up herself, re-writing her own story, thereby showing the “world-making” power of story-telling.

Esch is growing up surrounded by men. Her mother’s absence gets emphasized in displaced domestic roles and in the family’s dirty clothing. For instance, Esch recalls having to feed her youngest brother Junior and raising him alongside her brothers. “When
he was a baby,” she says, “Randall held him the most, and I did the rest of the
time…Randall mixed the bottles, kept them filled in the refrigerator so he or I could feed
Junior” (91). Esch helps cook meals, like noodles and eggs, and prepares the home for the
impending storm. Additionally, her mother’s absence is linked to the family’s filth.
“After Mama died,” Esch says, “Daddy moved the clothesline to a closer tree, but he
didn’t tie it tight enough, so when Randall and I wash clothes and hang them out with
wooden clothespins, the line sags, and our pants dangle in the dirt” (108). In this instance,
the “it” in the dirt at the bottom of their pants refers to death and maternal loss.

Other than the memories of her mother, the tangible exemplar of femininity and
motherhood for Esch is China. After witnessing China’s birth and aggression toward her
puppies, Esch wonders if death, blood, and murder are implicit in “motherhood” (130).
After all, the absence of the matriarch affects the Batiste family much like the effects of
Katrina, “the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and
bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched
baby snakes” (255). Even the sounds of the hurricane remind Esch of “Mama’s moans, of
those bowing pines, of a body that can no longer hold itself together” (223).

Other than the memories and China, Medea is Esch’s model. Esch’s fascination
with the story of Medea is worth unpacking. By anyone’s standards, “Medea is not an
obviously sympathetic figure… her action in killing her children places her at the centre
of a complex web of ideas about the female body and the relationship of children to their
mother, ideas which have social and political implications” (Griffiths 3-5). Esch, too,
seems situated in this “web.” She consults Medea throughout her testimony. For instance,
Medea teaches Esch about love, the pangs of it, how “love makes help turn wrong” (154).
Medea protects Esch, stabilizes her when she feels most unstable. For instance, Esch “imagine[s] herself tall as Medea, wearing purple and green robes, bones for gold and jewelry” when she sees Manny at the dogfight (170). Reading and thinking about Medea offers Esch a way out of the Pit, as well as a way of making sense of it. For Esch, Medea and Katrina are analogous in their viciousness and wrath. Medea and China are analogous in their aggression and thirst for blood, even that of their own children. Moreover, the “myth of Medea,” a compilation of oral and written stories, different versions of the “same episodes,” teaches Esch about writing and re-writing and the expansive power of story-telling (Griffiths 7; STB 154).

By the end of the novel, Esch’s perceptions of motherhood, children, and herself have shifted. Her own story has become more significant than Medea’s, and more significant than the stories others, like Manny, say about her. Esch’s final words are:

*China.* She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. 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)

The invocation of the future with the repetition of “will” gives the impression that Esch’s story is not finished. She looks to what is to come, though impossibly known, with confidence and certainty. It is as if she somehow knows the rest of the story or, at least, is able to envision or imagine such. Esch becomes a world-imagining, world-*creating* figure. The text juxtaposes Esch’s power here with that of the “world-unmaking” power
of Medea, Katrina, and even the Batiste children’s dead mother (Hoover). In this instance, Esch is much like “the writer” herself. Peng Cheah, a scholar and theorist of world literature, writes on the potentiality of literature. He says, “World literature… is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world” (26). Cheah goes on to say, “I suggest we conceive of the world as a dynamic process of becoming, something continually made and re-made rather than a spatial-geographical entity.” World literature, then, can be understood as “a fundamental force in the ongoing cartography of the world instead of a body of timeless aesthetic objects” (30-1). Cheah’s research deals primarily with cosmopolitanism and the effects of globalization. I do not need to dwell on his theories of world literature. Still, Ward’s novel supports his claims about potentiality and literature as ongoing and as a force of making and remaking via the imaginative activities of Esch at the end of the novel and the way in which the novel stores potential in the repeated “will.”

Crownshaw describes Esch’s “mythopoetic framing of the hurricane” as indicative of a desired transcendence, as “symptomatic of the desire to apprehend what will always remain beyond the frame” (172-3). Esch describes the storm as “the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons” (STB 255). Crownshaw argues Esch’s “transcendent perspective” is a strategy of transcendence in itself, a strategy of transcendence of “a politics of disposability” (174).

Yet, again, Crownshaw is too removed from the text. The systemic obstacles hindering Esch and the rest of the Batistes are undeniable, and I agree that the underlying challenges are not so much presented by Katrina but by external, “sources of harmful

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40 Here I mean “the writer” as a figure, not necessarily Jesmyn Ward.
effects” (Jane Bennett, quoted in Crownshaw 174). Undoubtedly, “Katrina revealed…the exceptions to a national narrative of American democratic exceptionalism” (164). Still, I would argue in Ward’s text, it also revealed the holes left by a missing matriarch, a role Esch, at the end, is willing and determined to fill. My project does not shy away from putting the multiple Katrina narratives in conversation; however, in order to properly do so, we must consider what the text is suggesting about the power of literature and storytelling. In the final scene, Esch becomes a world-maker. The final pages juxtapose her power with the “world-unmaking” power encompassed in the death of her mother and in Katrina’s winds. As she “waits and watches,” Esch is confident of what “will” be (258).

This final scene in which “will” echoes reads as a corrective to the earlier scene I mentioned at the start of this section. After Manny calls Esch a slut, refuses to acknowledge the baby as his, and begins to walk away, Esch thinks: “Tomorrow, everything will be washed clean. What I carry in my stomach is relentless; like each unbearable day, it will dawn. I watch Manny getting smaller and smaller… ‘The baby will tell,’ I scream. ‘It’ll tell!’ But the wind grabs my voice and snatches it out and over the pines, and drops it there to die” (205).

The ensuing trajectory in my project builds off the ideas and concerns with aesthetics I have presented in this chapter. In Chapter 2, I discuss Natasha Trethewey’s representation of the Mississippi Gulf Coast before and after Katrina. While her hybrid memoir is similarly hopeful in its look forward, like the multiplication of literary forms—poetry, prose, and photography—the hope is not without its own challenges and questions. For Trethewey, the post-Katrina waiting cannot include watching, but must, as I will argue, work toward an active “seeing.”
CHAPTER 2

Form, Re-vision, and Responsibility in Natasha Trethewey’s Beyond Katrina

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

In Chapter 1, I suggested the final image of Jesmyn Ward’s novel is one of waiting and watching. Esch is confident in her post-Katrina moment of what will happen, however unknowable the future is for her and the rest of Bois Sauvage. Salvage the Bones shows how Katrina shook up the toxic dirt of the South, and thereby of America, exposing the underlying fissures of American exceptionalism and laying bare the falsity in “narratives of progress.”41 Natasha Trethewey’s hybrid memoir, Beyond Katrina—Chapter 2’s focus—follows this thread of uncovering and laying bare, and also addresses the theme of waiting. In terms of the cultural trauma of Hurricane Katrina, waiting recalls the victims waiting for help, for food and water, and for recognition. In terms of Trethewey’s novel, the waiting is less expectant and more provocative. Furthermore, whereas Ward’s novel seems to elevate the role of literature, Trethewey implicates herself as part of the underlying problem.

Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast is like water in that it constantly moves, progressing and then also going back, like waves on a beach. The text includes essays, letters, poems, and photographs. Much like the revisions made and being made still along the Coast post-Katrina, Trethewey’s multi-form “meditation” is a process of constant and necessary revision and re-vision. On one hand, Trethewey

focuses on the revision and rebuilding efforts on the Coast post-Katrina. She discusses the economic and physical progressions, like the casinos, job and housing markets, and commercial appeals to tourists. On the other hand, she emphasizes active re-vision, “that is, not just rebuilding the physical structures and economy of the coast but also rebuilding, revising, the memory of Katrina and its aftermath” (20). That type of re-vision (my spelling, not Trethewey’s) involves looking back and re-examining the history of the Mississippi Coast, investigating how and when certain structures and institutions came to be. It is an active and intentional “seeing” and involves rotating that which is being examined in order to see it fully, from all sides.

My examination of *Beyond Katrina* considers Trethewey’s handling of revision as physical rebuilding and making stronger physical structures on the Coast and re-vision as a re-examination, as using the present to make sense of the past, then allowing history to make sense of the present and what is possibly to come. Additionally, I am concerned with the text’s hybrid form as well as Trethewey’s commentary on responsibility. Challenging the temptation of mainstream media to define “heroes,” “villains,” and “criminals,” Trethewey shows how complicated placing blame can be in the context of Hurricane Katrina (Morris 41). Joe, the arguable hero in Trethewey’s text, finds himself in jail for selling cocaine; Trethewey, the poet, cannot or at least does not write. Trethewey demonstrates her own culpability in the Coast’s grieving and sets herself up, along with readers, in a position whereby she is forced to choose an action. I end Chapter 2 in the same way I ended Chapter 1, with an examination of waiting. Importantly, Trethewey’s waiting is not just the “familiar hands-in-the-air gesture of appalled helplessness” that we are often left with after trauma or after encountering representations
of trauma; it is not just the realization that “these things have happened before; they will happen (and today are happening) again: there is nothing we can do except remember and memory always fails” (Wood 16). Though Trethewey’s book does not sugarcoat the current and previous states of the Mississippi Coast, the waiting she writes about is not one of complete despair. By looking at Trethewey’s handling of revision and what I am calling re-vision, her handling of form(s), and finally, her handling of responsibility, I aim to show Beyond Katrina’s contribution to the grand narrative of Katrina. In general, the book works in a similar vein to Ward’s text; it supports and expands upon the claim of Katrina as a complex cultural trauma as well as challenges simplistic narratives surrounding Katrina and the history of the Mississippi Coast.

Prior to diving into the politics of form and further explaining the process of re-vision at work, I ought to say that much of my thinking coincides with that of Greg Forter and his neo-Freudian notion of “retrodetermination.”

Though likewise concerned with Freud, Forter’s explorations of trauma depart from Cathy Caruth’s “punctual” model (Stampfl 22). He explains her model of trauma as “a punctual blow to the psyche that

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43 Forter returns to a Freudian theory that came before the one utilized by Caruth et al. Freud’s second theory “absolved him of historical guilt by tracing all human misery to a non-historical or structural cause, namely the psychoanalytic redaction of original sin called the death drive” (Forter 261). This is where Caruth’s writing finds its basis. Freud’s first theory, however, was historical, political, and, of course, rooted in human sexuality. Freud based his work on a link he saw between psychic and physical trauma, namely by way of sex, which is at once pleasurable and also socially repressed (Forter 263). He then came to conceptualize trauma as “the psychic result of a (sexual) knowledge that comes at once too soon and too late” (264). His first theory “emphasizes the traumatizing consequences of the fact that each of us is implicated in the world of adult sexual meanings before we have the psychic equipment to process those meanings” (261). Freud himself turned away from this theory because in it, he, too, was a culprit and subject to scrutiny. Forter takes Freud’s first theory beyond sexuality and into the realm of institutional
overwhelms its functioning, disables its defenses, and absents it from direct contact with
the brutalizing blow itself” (Forter 259). This model can be effective, particularly in
explorations into significant, “punctually” traumatic moments, like the Holocaust or rape.
Forter is more concerned with traumas that are so commonplace they seem almost non-
traumatic by way of societal standards. Put another way, he is concerned not with a
dramatic “lynching” but with “mundane catastrophes… everyday racism” (Forter 260).

Forter “seems to make realization the core of trauma” (Stampfl 25). Initial
traumatic events, what Freud called “primal scenes” are given context and significance
only in a belated scene. In other words, it is the “second moment in which the latently
traumatizing event [i.e. the primal scene] is retrodetermined as trauma” that is central to
Forter’s study (Forter 275). In terms of Katrina, the physical devastation of the
Category 5 hurricane might be categorized as punctual trauma, the kind of moment that

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44 For a brief summation of Freud’s earlier work, see Forter’s article “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth:
45 Freud developed the concept of the “primal scene” in the Wolf Man case history. The “primal
scene” referred to the first time the patient witnessed his parents having intercourse, presumably
before the subject was two years old. Only later does the patient recognize the scene as traumatic.
See From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (1918).
46 For instance, consider his analysis of a particular event in Absalom, Absalom! When, sometime
after Thomas Sutpen has moved to the Tidewater area of Virginia, Sutpen’s father sends him to a
plantation to deliver a message. The slave who answers the door at the plantation immediately
rebukes Sutpen for not using the correct door. The slave slams the door in Sutpen’s face. Then,
Sutpen “seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and run back through the two years
they had lived there like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and
you turn and go back through the room again and look at all the objects from the other side and
you find out you had never seen them before” (Faulkner 186). The character “sees” for the first
time what had actually been in front of him his whole life (Stampfl 26, Forter 275). The
slamming of the door and the subsequent revelation is the “second moment in which the latently
traumatizing event is retrodetermined as trauma. Sutpen’s primal scenes (there are ‘dozens’ of
them) are by now already behind him” (275). As Forter says, “It is therefore only through a
second event—through Sutpen’s affront at the hands of the plantation-owner, for whom the slave
merely serves as a medium—that the humiliating content of his initial impressions become both
conscious and retrospectively significant” (275).
forces the “great waiting silence” at the end of *Salvage the Bones* (Ward 258). The trauma Forter would be interested in, and what ultimately seems to interest Trethewey, is the *realization* of the underlying trauma of systemic racism consistent in the history of the Coast, a system so entrenched that even coastal residents, even Trethewey herself, are responsible for its perpetuation. Throughout *Beyond Katrina*, Trethewey makes clear that she too is somehow involved in the past and even, in some ways, responsible for it and also for the unknown future. As she says in her poem “Grace,” from her collection *Domestic Work*, “What are those moments that happened in the past that have everything to do with this moment and me in it?”

What I am calling re-vision differs slightly from “retrodetermination” in that it encompasses more, if only because it *must* do so due to the nature of Katrina and the nature of *Beyond Katrina*. The difference between re-vision and retrodetermination is that for Trethewey, Katrina started as a punctual trauma and became something else once she started looking into the past and asking (the right) questions. The moment of realization—the crux of Forter’s research—required the punctual trauma. Re-visions are not just secondary events that help reveal and make sense of initial ones, though that is one aspect. Trethewey writes, “The past can only be understood in the context of the present, overlapped as they are, one informing the other” (*BK* 51).

Consider the following example of re-vision at work in the text. On page forty of *Beyond Katrina*, there is a black and white photograph of a woman standing on a beach.

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47 For comparison, Forter determines that Faulkner’s writing depicts a social hierarchy, one that stresses the inferiority of blackness and femininity. The characters “realize” the hierarchy later, after they have been subjects to it for a considerable period of time. They begin to see past events in a different, conscious light. Then, the characters and the author himself are confronted with the choice of perpetuating the hierarchy and merely finding one’s place within that system, or with resistance. They choose the former path and thus, allow the “mundane” traumas of racism and sexism to carry on.
She is smiling, has one hand propped on her cocked hip, and above her the name “Leretta” is in faint lettering. The caption reads: “Leretta Dixon Turnbough on the beach, Gulfport, Mississippi, circa 1940.” Not until the turn of the page does the reader get more context on the photograph. Trethewey writes, “In a photograph my grandmother stands on the small part of the beach designated for ‘colored’ people. She is smiling, though it will not be until 1968, four years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, that the beaches are finally fully integrated” (42). The beginning of the paragraph situates that “small part of the beach” on the (in)famous “longest man-made beach in the world” constructed in Harrison County, Mississippi, mid-century. “The restaurants and hotels alongside [the beach], lit up by neon signs, were for whites only” (42).

The photograph and the belated explanation illustrate how re-vision gets carried out within the pages of Beyond Katrina. Once contextualized, the photograph changes in significance. Leretta’s mostly white dress sprinkled with black flowers in a vertical strip down the front changes in significance once Trethewey tells the story of integration in the pages following the photograph. Trethewey relates a story her grandmother told her: “‘When the white woman saw me sit down at the counter,’ my grandmother tells me, ‘she asked her daughter to take her somewhere else.’ The daughter said, ‘Mama, they’re going to be everywhere’” (42). Leretta’s white dress is like the white beach she stands on pre-integration; it is white and sprinkled with black, but only in a designated area.

The pages of her meditation are full of re-visions, moments when Trethewey sheds a different light on a subject. She talks to Jocelyn Heath about her most recent collection of poems, Thrall, and how researching and writing that collection served as “a widening of the lens, a broadening of the field of vision” (Hall 198). The same happens
during her undertaking of writing about the Coast. Trethewey explains that as she was “turning to survey the past, I did not expect to find what I did.” She researched the effects of the gaming industry and the seafood industry on the Mississippi Coast, anticipating that gambling was part of a more recent history, with environmental effects beginning to surface at the end of the twentieth century. That was not the case, however. She says, “I was going back to read the narrative I thought was there…I expected to find a story that would tell me that everything had been fine until 1992, when legalized offshore gambling returned, not that the losses to wetlands because of development had already begun as long ago as 1950” (51-2).

Thus, re-vision exposes the underlying layers of trauma, much like the moment of realization or retrodetermination. *Beyond Katrina* demonstrates Katrina as cultural trauma and as such, a complex breaking of the social contract and a shattering of collective identity. Yet, the construction of that collective identity has been problematic and has partially been the work of a significant lack of “political resistance” from subjects of dominance, according to Forter. For him, the initial traumatic event requires the second event in order to make sense. In fact, the initial event is not even “traumatic” and is “repressed as part of the general amnesia that sets in during latency” (264). Even so, in the particular instance of Katrina, the punctual should not be so overshadowed by realization, and here, I depart from Forter, and re-vision departs from retrodetermination.

Katrina was devastating, particularly in the Mississippi Gulf region, Trethewey’s home. *Beyond Katrina* demonstrates the destruction and emptiness left by Katrina and felt by residents on the Coast in form and in content. Intertwining the narratives of the Coast, her family, and Katrina, the text incorporates a number of forms. Her multi-form
meditation shows the complexities of cultural trauma. The forms work together in
collage. Like the past and the present, they slide into one another. Trethewey explains to
Jocelyn Heath, “There were things that needed the space of prose to consider. But then
there were things that I felt could not be rendered most effectively without the language
and imagery, the density and compression and music of poetry” (Hall 197).

In one sense, Trethewey’s memoir recalls Robert Penn Warren’s Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South. Published in 1956, Segregation “doesn’t have any poems in it,” but, as Trethewey describes, “it [is] a literary hybrid nonetheless because it
involves a blend of investigative reporting with interviews…a travel narrative, blended
also with personal narrative” (Hall 203). Warren’s “small book…captured not only the
racial prejudice that would make social progress so painful, but also the moral reflection
that would make it inevitable” (Mettress). Warren himself writes, “I was going back to
look at the landscape and streets I had known…to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to
hear, in fact, the voices in my own blood” (Segregation 3). Trethewey’s work resonates
with Warren. Beyond Katrina is an investigation of personal and public history, a
discovery of self and of Mississippi’s difficult past and present. The book’s form points
to the complicated nature of the Coast, before and after Katrina, as well as to Trethewey’s
own hardship of making sense of her past and her family’s past. It also points to the
poet’s experience of straddling multiple fences—white and black, of being from a lower
income community in Mississippi and now located in space of academia, privilege, and
international recognition, culprit and victim.

Forter describes contemporary writings on trauma as “perform[ing] or act[ing]
what it has to say rather than (or in addition to) conveying it representationally” (260).
This is particularly the case for Trethewey’s hybrid writing. In addition to representing trauma, Trethewey demonstrates trauma and its complexity on the page; she performs it. Forter calls one strategy for this “‘biphasic textuality’ that echoes Freud’s biphasic sexuality.” In other words, “our first ingestion of the plot” is separated “from our understanding of that plot’s significance” (279). He provides the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* as an example. The “opening pages contain a basic summary of the book’s plot that is both precise and impossible to ‘take in’” (279). The first poem of *Beyond Katrina* functions in a similar way. In an interview with Trethewey in 2007, Pearl Amelia McHaney discusses the tropes of the collection *Native Guard* and posits that within the first poem, “Theories of Time and Space,” “all of the tropes that you are going to use are there: journeys, and ‘going home’… the ‘waiting,’ the ‘return.’ Every line, it seems has something to it that carries us forward and alerts us to the histories that you are unveiling.” Trethewey simply answers, “Yes” (Hall 58).

“Theories of Time and Space” sets up the rest of Trethewey’s meditation, though the rest of the book gives weight and (more) meaning to the poem. It opens: “You can get there from here, though / there’s no going home.” Originally, Trethewey wrote the poem “figuratively” (*BK* 2). The words were intended to echo and expand upon Flannery O’Connor’s words, “Where you came from is gone. Where you thought you were going to never was there.” Trethewey explains that we are met with the “impossibility of returning to those places we’ve come from—not because the places are gone or substantially different but because we are” (*BK* 2). By 2005, the poem gained literal significance. Home, that is, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, was and is no longer the same after Katrina. Certain businesses will never be rebuilt; certain homes were destroyed,

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48 It is also the case for Selah Saterstrom’s experimental *Slab*, which I discuss in Chapter 3.
either by the storm or torn down afterwards; lives were lost. For Trethewey’s brother Joe, “the biggest loss to the coast…is in the displacement of the people” (60). The displacement of Gulf residents stands in contrast to the new “multiethnic narrative” of the Coast due to the influx of immigration in the area (60).

The deixis in “Theories of Time and Space”—there, here, this—suggests more than physical locations. Following the imperative “try this:” are driving directions, taking readers down the Mississippi coast. “Try this: / head south down on Mississippi 49, one- / by-one mile markers ticking off / another minute of your life.” The deigetic words insinuate that poetry and the words are active in the transport. The line “You can get there from here” suggests that the poem (and literature) itself is transportive. Here is the page. Thus, for Trethewey writing is a form of movement and a portal through which to revisit a place and a past. In terms of “performing trauma” on the page, this first poem at once gives “too much and too little” and propels the reader forward into the rest of the book and into (public and private) history (Forter 279).

The reader then follows Trethewey on her journey into her past and the past of others and the Coast as a whole. She often “turns” in her writing, using words like “but” and “still” to demonstrate or perhaps even force a re-thinking, a re-vision of a situation, law, or response to either. For example, the effects of the shipbuilding, shipping, and (legal and illegal) gaming industries in the Gulf region were, on one hand, profitable and encouraging, particularly following World Wars I and II. The industries brought business, attention, and money to the suffering economy. Trethewey’s great uncle, Son Dixon, made a good living building and running a nightclub, The Owl Club, and eventually building shotgun houses. Yet, there is more to this story of economic boom. Trethewey
says, “Opportunities followed growth, but so did environmental havoc” (43). She realizes both the detrimental, harmful effects in economic growth—like the destruction of the naturally protective Mississippi Wetlands and the underlying current of racism inherent in the way the Coast’s prosperity came to be—and the way in which the system gets justified, even deemed “good.” She wrestles with these dichotomies on the page, and the reader joins in the back-and-forth movement, the turning and re-visioning.

The turns occur throughout the book. Monuments built on the coast post-Katrina have literal and symbolic purposes. Trethewey describes one in Biloxi: “A gift donated to the city by ABC’s Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, the memorial not only remembers the storm and the people but also inscribes on the landscape a narrative of the commercialization of memory” (57). Trethewey notes the importance of monuments and memorials; then, she notes the problem with certain monuments, like the one in Biloxi. She says, “[P]eople will recall the storm, but they will also recall the network [ABC] and its programming. Still, the monument is small compared to the giant replica of an electric guitar that looms nearby” (57). The guitar belongs to the Hard Rock Casino. Here, re-vision occurs thrice. Trethewey is both satisfied and dissatisfied by the Biloxi monument’s effect. In one sense, the monument is commercializing individual and collective trauma and thus, writing a narrative that does not truly represent the area or its residents and their experiences. Yet, the monument’s narrative of Katrina and its aftermath, however flawed, gets overshadowed by the narrative told by the gaming and tourist industries represented by the Hard Rock Casino. These industries were part of the original destruction of the Wetlands, a destruction that would come to haunt the region. Understanding the coast and writing its narrative and the narrative of Katrina, whether by
way of memoir writing or monument building, requires knowing the region’s history and knowing where the gaps in that history are and why they might exist.

Trethewey uses the white space on the page to enforce the prevalence of the gaps and holes in national and regional histories and in subjectivity, as well as those gaps and holes left behind after hurricanes. Consider the effects of poetic form and enjambment in the poem “Providence,” a poem about Trethewey’s memory of Hurricane Camille, which hit the coast in 1969. The speaker of the poem relates:

The next day, our house –
on its cinder blocks – seemed to float

in the flooded yard: no foundation

beneath us (BK 29)

Enjambment makes use of two lines and forces the reader not only to look forward, to continue on to the next line, but paradoxically, enjambment also draws the reader back to the previous line. Enjambment is a microcosmic representation of the poem’s project as a whole, as well as the project of Beyond Katrina, which oscillates between past and present, memory and forgetting, looking forward and looking back. The white space on the page is hard to ignore, particularly in the lines “no foundation / beneath us.” The emptiness beneath the tangible foundation is made evident on the page via the poem’s loose form, in which the words appear like the cinder blocks floating away from each other. Additionally, though the poem recalls Hurricane Camille, the connections to the effects of Katrina resonate. The disrupted, absent foundation recalls the absent national foundation, that narrative of progress and security that Hurricane Katrina exposed as fraudulent.
It is ambiguous as to whether the title of the poem, “Providence,” is ironic or suggests the possibility of divine order amidst the chaos and ruin. Perhaps, the hurricane’s destruction is providence’s way of “cleansing” the region (28). What is clear is the ruptured subjectivity due to the devastation. The form of the poem mimics the instability in identity felt after an event like Camille or Katrina:

In the water, our reflection
trembled,
disappeared
when I bent to touch it. (29)

It is not just a singular identity that has been dismantled, however; it is also the collective’s identity. In *Beyond Katrina*, Trethewey works to tell the story of the Coast, not just her own story, and thus, she is constantly negotiating her experience with that of the other “story-tellers.” In an interview with Sara Kaplan, Trethewey describes her admiration of the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, mainly “because of [his] connection to place and to [his] geographies” (Hall 41). In another interview years later, she reiterates her connection to Heaney. It seems to her that “Heaney felt a calling…to deal with this particular history that he’d been given,” that is, the violent history (and at the time of his writing, the violent present) of Northern Ireland. Trethewey says of her own work, “And my South, of course, is a difficult South. It’s a South that has created in me a sense of psychological exile. It’s a place that I am both of, but a place that has rendered me illegitimate” (Hall 183).

Trethewey’s work, *Beyond Katrina* in particular, recalls Heaney’s poetry in a number of ways: in its “dredging”; in its negotiations of public and private histories, of

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49 Of course, Trethewey does not think so. However, there are other “meaning-makers” who argue this. See *Beyond Katrina*, p. 27.
being inside and outside the place/space about which she is writing; and in its honest self-reflexivity. When a security guard outside of the Beau Rivage casino describes the days after Katrina to Trethewey, she compares them to wartime destruction. “It was like a bomb had went off,” she says. “And now everywhere is slabs, just slabs. And the water is still full of debris—houses, cars. We need to dredge the Gulf to get it all back, including the bodies…including the bodies” (BK 17). These Mississippi “bodies” have stories, and these stories are part of the true history and narrative of the Coast. The anxiety of erasure is palpable in the text; people worried their stories and the stories of their loved ones would not get told. I think of Heaney’s bog poems, in which the poet describes bodies preserved in the bog, bodies of the victims of historical violence. Heaney digs into the bog metaphorically, uncovers a troubled history, and lays it bare. I can only speculate that Trethewey was thinking of these poems, too, while writing Beyond Katrina, if only subconsciously. Dredging is part of Trethewey’s project, and furthermore, it is part of her responsibility as a writer. To use Heaney’s metaphor, her pen becomes her spade.

Still, her pen’s power is brought into harsher light. Like Heaney, who often questions the poet’s role in stopping, preventing, perpetuating violence and erasure even as he writes, Trethewey is self-reflexive. In the book’s final section, Trethewey relates a memory from the morning of Joe’s sentencing, when a couple asked her for directions to the public library. Trethewey recalls the feeling of helpfulness amidst feelings of helplessness. She recalls feeling purposeful even while she felt out of control of her brother’s fate. She writes:

Nodding, I turned in the direction of the beach to point them toward it, raising my hand before I caught myself… [F]or a moment I stood there,
my hand in the air—a gesture like the beginning of a benediction—before I could think of what to say. All the clichés come to me now: *a stone’s throw away, as the crow flies*, and—finally—*you can’t get there from here*; the library had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Even now, as I write, it hasn’t been rebuilt. (122-3)

Here, Trethewey implicates herself in two ways. First, she sets herself apart from the Coastal subjective that cannot forget what is no longer standing and what has not been rebuilt. For example, earlier in the book, she writes, “It is not uncommon to hear directions given in terms of landmarks that are no longer there: ‘turn right at the corner where the fruit stand used to be,’ or ‘across the street from the lot where Miss Mary used to live’” (61). Conversely, Trethewey does not catch herself. She does not think in terms of what ‘used to be.’ Thus, although Trethewey is part of those who remember the pre-Katrina landscape and culture and mourn the devastation, she is not one of those confronted with the *post*-Katrina landscape and culture on a daily basis. Her own memory is not so unsettled. In other words, where Coastal residents cannot forget, Trethewey can.

Second, Trethewey distinguishes writing from physical rebuilding. In this instance, that empty space where the public library used to be is still empty, regardless of words filling a page. Even more potent, the library represents here a space of safety, cleansing, and rest. Trethewey says about the couple, “With the windows rolled down, they were still sweating in the late morning heat, and I could imagine many reasons, beyond books, that they might need to reach the library: Internet access, air-conditioned respite, a public restroom in a clean, comfortable building” (122). “Beyond books”
suggests that her role as “help” has been twice compromised—in her forgetfulness and in her profession.

Thus, as she moves through the histories of her family and the Gulf Coast, Trethewey constantly negotiates her role as poet and her responsibility, as poet, as person, for the past and for the future. She writes, “There are concrete slabs so overtaken by grass, roots, and weeds it is as if no one ever lived there—so quickly has nature begun its rebuilding…The devastation reminds me of our fleeting imprint on the landscape, the impermanence of our man-made world…our own culpability writ large in the damage wrought by Katrina” (24 my emphasis). The use of the possessive pronoun indicates Trethewey’s inability to deny her own role in the destruction, literal and otherwise, of her home and the people’s lives there.

Nonetheless, like Ward’s novel, Beyond Katrina maintains writing and witnessing as crucial to the grand narrative of Katrina. For Trethewey, “the only way that the memory and memorializing of Katrina can be fair: to acknowledge all of those stories, all of the difficult parts of the story that show us ourselves in the mirror in ways we might not like seeing” (Hall 197). So, then, this is the role of the writer—to acknowledge and tell the difficult parts of the story, in this case, the story of the Mississippi Coast and of Katrina. Like Heaney, Trethewey’s role as writer requires the negotiations of inside/outside and victim/culprit. In these instances, Trethewey is both/and.

On the day of Joe’s trial, Trethewey sits in the courtroom with her husband and Joe’s girlfriend hearing other cases being tried. One case regards “a man accused of molesting the teenage daughter of a friend” (120). The accused man was previously convicted as a sex offender and ought to have notified local officials of his presence in
the area. His response to the judge’s question as to why he did not inform the authorities was that his move to the Coast was “temporary,” and “Anyway, I figure you people always know where I am.” Trethewey joins the “we” that laughs with the accused man, the “we” that must “regain our composure” so as not to “anger the judge into handing down harsher sentences for our loved ones” (120 my emphasis). Trethewey recognizes to whom “you people” refers—the authorities, the ones with power. The accused man gives the rest of his testimony, and his friend, the father of the molested teen, speaks on his behalf. Quickly, then, Trethewey empathizes with the absent daughter, the one molested, the one whose voice was missing. “I wonder,” writes Trethewey, “what she would think about her father’s request” (120). In one page, Trethewey is part of a collective and also feels removed from that collective. She participates in the “we” and also removes herself from that “we,” in order to think about those absent, those wounded, those who are spoken for.  

Additionally, Trethewey’s text gives space for other, sometimes more proficient, story-tellers. Joe’s voice takes up much of the book’s later pages. Via his story, the text challenges the polarizing language and quick categorization often depicted in media accounts of Katrina and the surrounding events. Such polarizing rhetoric contributes to the worry of stories being lost and erased. Merrill Morris writes on media studies. One thing he has noticed is the media’s need to fill certain roles—scapegoats, heroes, and

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50 These negotiations are not specific to Beyond Katrina, but are part of Trethewey’s overarching project. Katherine Henniger argues, “Trethewey’s most powerful moderating force is her strategic manipulation of the temporal and spatial realm of her poetry through the interdevelopment of personae from history and a recurrent autobiographical figure of the poet as an adult child” (65). Though I do not have the space to discuss the “adult child” figure, the figure recurs in the collections Domestic Work (2000), Bellocq’s Ophelia (2002), and Native Guard (2006), and straddles positions of distance and nearness, inside and outside.
villains (43). He says, via the work of sociologist Ruth Sidel, that “poor people are depicted in American media as heroes, criminals, or comic characters. To report on the poor, the press chooses from a narrow range of proven narratives” (41). Katrina had, and still has, the chance to “show us the bones beneath the skin of our society,” says Morris; unfortunately, in the realm of media, the storm mainly became career-boosters for reporters like Anderson Cooper and Brian Williams and a platform from which reductive narratives regarding blackness and poverty were highlighted and perpetuated (44; 43).

After Katrina hit, Joe is “the watcher” and the helper. He cleans up the beach, searching for bones and collecting debris. He helps others get back on their feet. Prior to the storm, he took to fixing up the shotgun homes Son Dixon had originally brought to the Coast. “Joe began repairing each one, putting in new floors and carpet, new countertops and appliances, brushing on a good coat of paint. Miss Mary nearly cried when Joe fixed up her house” (BK 49). People thanked him repeatedly. Yet, the majority of the book’s end is dedicated to his incarceration. Joe is both good and bad, hero and villain, caring and criminal.

The narrative of black men (and increasingly, women), typically of low economic status, being incarcerated is not new but is troublesome. Via Joe, Trethewey’s text works to dismantle stereotypes and to expose narratives of anti-blackness, however obvious or subtle those narratives may be. Nagueyalti Warren says, “For Trethewey, the dichotomy [of the South] is black/white” (81). In the context of Katrina, “black” often equates to chaos and thievery, to that familiar narrative of criminality. The juxtaposition of two photographs and their captions from the aftermath of Katrina gained quick infamy once public. One photo was “of a white couple carrying bags of food, captioned ‘Two
residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store; the other, an AP photo of a black man, captioned ‘A young man walks through chest-deep water after looting a grocery store’” (Morris 40). Joe’s story works against this narrative and against the construction of blackness and the promotion of anti-blackness. In jail, Joe is respected; he is a hard-worker, determined. Inmates say to him, “Man I can’t believe I’m seeing you in a place like this.” Joe takes those reactions as “inspiration.” He thinks, “[I]f I stand out in this crowd, maybe I don’t belong here” (115).

Yet, Beyond Katrina is more complicated. Like his sister, Joe slips in and out of the “we.” He talks about the inmates’ “creativity” and their “ingenuity.” “We figured out a way to light a cigarette with a paperclip and an electrical socket,” he says, “boil water with a hot wire and a piece of metal…If only we had utilized these talents in the free world” (115 my emphasis). Ultimately, however, Joe is proud that he “stands out in this crowd,” that he does not belong behind bars. Joe, like Trethewey, obtains an outsider status. This outsider status seems advantageous, allowing for solidarity while granting the outsider mobility and distance should she or he need it. Implicit in Joe’s not belonging in prison is the notion that someone else does belong there. Thus, Trethewey’s meditation exposes the ways in which she and even Joe have failed to resist and thereby, have participated in the perpetuation of everyday, mundane trauma. For Joe, prison is a time of growth, of separating himself from the “cycle” into which he had begun to fall. His poem, entitled “Cycle,” gets at this. “I am named after / my father,” he writes. “I am nothing / like him. Although I am in / prison, I’m not him” (BK 114). Still, the moment of implicit acknowledgement of being an outsider, therefore signifying “insiders”—in this case, “criminals” and “villains”—complicates Joe’s redemption. Forter’s assessment of
Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen could just have easily been written about Joe: “The traumatic recognition of his social insignificance could equally issue in the revolutionary yearning to level the hierarchies that traumatize him as in the urge to perpetuate those hierarchies” (276). In other words, there is a choice.

So, what next? Trethewey seems to propose action without a plan. She relinquishes her role in the final pages—Joe becomes the writer. As her brother writes and tells his story from the inside of prison, Trethewey hides behind lists and “safe” objects like dental floss and “tuna in pouches, not cans” (111). Eventually she realizes that what her brother wanted, what he needed was exactly what she was not providing—words. Trethewey’s role as poet has been disrupted. But isn’t that just like Katrina—to disrupt, dismantle, confuse? Trethewey expresses how her silence in fact enabled her brother’s recovery: “And in the midst of my silence, he begins on his own to recover some of what had been lost to him. He becomes the one of us most willing to voice what had not been said, giving more weight to what is spoken than to the silence I had been keeping” (108).

In closing, I turn to two poems, which further this discussion on Trethewey’s call for action, though she is not sure what that action looks like. The first poem, “Watcher,” is about Joe. As I noted, after Katrina, his job was to watch,

Behind safety goggles, he watched the sand for bones, searched for debris that clogged the great machines.

Riding the prow of cleaners, or walking ahead he watched for carcasses – chickens mostly, maybe some cats or dogs. No one said remains. No one had to. (75)

51 “Faulkner emphasizes this sense of possibility through the very fact of having Sutpen retreat to a cave and debate his response” (Forter 276).
The poem describes the kind of paralysis that set in after the storm. The first line reads: “At first, there was nothing to do but watch.” “Watcher” describes the post-Katrina landscape, full of carcasses, bones, and death. The poem gets at the lack of words after the storm; words were either unnecessary or just lost; “No one had to [say remains].” Barry Stampfl cautions thinking that “a darkly transformative epiphany” is “necessarily antithetical to the idea of the unspeakable.” Rather, “the unspeakable is always already part of a universe of discourse, a form of signification” (25). I argue that Trethewey’s text lies at the paradoxical intersection Stampfl points out.

A few pages after “Watcher,” in the poem “Prodigal,” Trethewey makes a distinction between “watching” and “seeing,” and seems to suggest the former carries a negative connotation and implies passivity and a lack of commitment or authenticity. Unlike Joe’s “watching” which seems heroic, comparable to the poet’s project of digging for bones, of uncovering the stories of the devastated Coast and its residents, and if at all passive, understandably so in its proximity to Katrina’s landfall, Trethewey’s own watching is voyeuristic. “Prodigal” is about her return to Gulfport to write about Katrina. She writes, “I wanted to say I have come home / to bear witness…I wanted to say I see, / not I watch. I wanted my seeing to be / a sanctuary” (81). Instead, however, Trethewey admits, “I did nothing but watch, my face against the glass.”

Unlike the watching and waiting presented in Ward’s novel, Trethewey’s hybrid memoir finally calls for seeing. Thus, Trethewey’s waiting yields a different result than Ward’s novel, though also hopeful. It is not as expectant as active. Trethewey’s hybrid memoir leaves space for the reader to act, to choose her own path in the processes of revision, rebuilding, and remembering just as the author is acting and choosing. After all,
the landscape has been so changed, and in the end, there are no maps that could navigate through the Gulf Coast, as buildings, such as the public library are still missing. We—poet and reader—have to figure out a path for ourselves. Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza puts it well when she says, “Beyond Katrina suggests that the story of recovery continues past the bounds of the text, and implicates the witness/reader in the progression of the story, and the preservation of memory” (87).

The following, final chapter looks at Selah Saterstrom’s Slab, a text that plays with genre even more so than Trethewey’s hybrid memoir. Slab’s project is to bring readers back to the slab, to the wound of Katrina. This wound is complex; it is the site of an uprooted home and the hole left by a social catastrophe in which American exceptionalism was shown as fraudulent and a particular collective was abandoned. Whereas the ending of Salvage the Bones is a stage set for hopeful re-construction and (re)birth, Slab suggests that we must be wary of notions of quick re-construction and healing of the wound.
CHAPTER 3

Writing from the Wound:

Performance, Identity, and “Cutting the Body Loose” in Selah Saterstrom’s *Slab*

“The art emphasizes many parts of a flower. Stems, leaves, and wounds are not avoided; rather they are welcomed as moments of generative energy within the larger arrangement... At the moment of its extinction, the flower is perfect.”

-Saterstrom, *Slab*, Tiger on the art of Japanese flower arranging, pp. 66-7

Starting with Jesmyn Ward’s more traditional mode of fiction writing, then moving on to Natasha Trethewey’s hybrid meditation, and now to the most recent, experimental text, Selah Saterstrom’s *Slab*, my project has looked at Hurricane Katrina primarily via the framework of cultural trauma theory. I have been suggesting that “cultural trauma,” while an accurate description of Katrina, is not a complete one. I continue in this vein here, demonstrating how *Slab* both reaffirms Katrina’s status as cultural trauma as well as suggests that even *that* categorization and the comprehensive process it assumes do not arrive at the complexity of Katrina. The role of literary form is crucial to my project. Saterstrom’s book is of hybrid form, like Trethewey’s memoir, and includes prose, poetry, line drawings, interviews with Barbara Walters, theatrical script, recipes, and song lyrics. The book is not for readers looking for a straightforward plot or neatly wrapped conclusion. *Slab*, like *Beyond Katrina*, shatters categorization in several ways; it wrestles with stereotypes of persons and regions and with the “rules” of genre. In an interview with *Weird Sister*, Saterstrom says, “The de-categorizing hand of the disaster doesn’t mind manners or borders.” Though she is speaking on her choice of setting for her book, she could just have easily been referencing other borders, like the borders of genre. *Slab*, like Katrina, is in the practice of de-categorization.
The title of this chapter, “Writing from the Wound,” locates the text as not only writing about the wound (i.e. trauma) but as being from the wound, which is itself a place without definitive categorization or sure distinction. The novel has been consolidated in the following terms: “Southern poverty, institutional misogyny, gun violence, Hurricane Katrina, the Confederate Flag, and most painfully, their amalgam wound” (Lenhart). Thus, the wound is a space of different kinds of trauma—the mundane, often overlooked traumas and specific, punctual traumas. Rather than merely addressing the wound, Saterstrom is writing from within it, and is putting pressure on the politics of place, memory, and identity, politics that are taken for granted in 21st century America. I will unpack the multifaceted wound later in the chapter. First, and in order to set up my discussion of the wound, I examine the ways in which Saterstrom’s text rejects healing and recovery in order to keep focus on the wound. I suggest that Slab reveals the complexity of Katrina and the ways in which re-construction of collective identity after a social, cultural trauma can be detrimental and can prevent true healing of the wound, so long as that re-construction depends upon the very structures, institutions, and constructions culpable for at least some, if not nearly all, of the destruction.

I develop my argument in the following sections on performance and identity. Slab warrants discussions of performance for a number of reasons. Prior to its publication

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52 Regarding “zones of indistinction,” see Jenny Edkins’ work on the concentration camp in Trauma and the Memory of Politics, pp. 181-2.
53 See Chapter 2 and my account of Greg Forter’s distinction between “punctual” trauma and everyday, often overlooked trauma, e.g. the distinction between lynching and everyday, systemic racism.
54 Regarding the “social trauma process” and the “re-construction of [collective] identity,” see Jeffrey Alexander’s Trauma: A Social Theory, pp. 26-7.
as a novel, *Slab* was staged as a play.\textsuperscript{55} Additionally, the text is set up like a play; it is divided into acts and has a mock dramatis personae at the beginning, listing “players” by their names and providing quick, one or two-word descriptions. For example, the protagonist/narrator Tiger’s description reads, “See Hair.” Furthermore, Tiger is an actress. However, her status is peculiar in that she is both an actress playing the role of a survivor and a “survivor-witness,” i.e. the survivor herself, a dichotomy I address in the following pages.

Identity is significant to *Slab*’s project, as well. In this section, I will examine how Saterstrom’s writing constructs, de-constructs, and re-constructs identity. My examination of the book’s relationship to identity will eventually bring the chapter full circle. Saterstrom’s text does not seem to celebrate re-birth or the re-construction of identity; rather, the text emphasizes and extols the moment *before* re-construction but *after* de-construction. This is a moment of ultimate potential, a liminal space, which I argue, *is* the wound. The final section briefly addresses the form of the novel as mimicking a jazz funeral, but argues that the funeral process is as of yet incomplete. Here, I further explore the wound and suggest the reasons for which *Slab* argues its eminence.

**Performance**

Suzanne Little notes the ways in which theater performance paradoxically heals wounds as well as reopens them. Citing Mark Seltzer’s “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” Little says, “[S]eeking to repeat the pathological repetition of traumatic experience in performance…may contribute to a contemporary ‘wound

\textsuperscript{55} *Slab*, the play, was performed in Boulder, CO, at CU-Boulder’s Atlas Black Box Theater in 2014. The production was put on by Square Product Theatre. For more, see Lisa Kennedy’s review of the play in the *Denver Post* Entertainment section, published August 8, 2014.
culture’, characterized by ‘a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound’, indicative of ‘a breakdown in the distinction between the individual and the mass, and between private and public registers’” (Little 44, Seltzer 3).

Consider the following example in which Slab “contributes to ‘wound culture’” and insinuates the “breakdown in distinction between the individual and the mass.” Via an image of ballerinas in jewelry boxes, Slab recalls the victims crowded in the Superdome after Katrina and those displaced, by the storm or by authorities. Preacher’s dead mother, lying in a hospital bed in Jefferson Davis Memorial Hospital, “telepathically” reveals to her son “the story of how [he] became [his] name” (167-8).

His mother talks of walking in “an abandoned gymnasium” and seeing empty chairs. She sits in the one that seems designed for her and from there, talks to God and His angel. “All the while I was holding a girl’s jewelry box,” she tells Preacher. She continues,

> When I opened it, a miniature ballerina popped up in front of a tiny mirror glued to a turquoise velvet lining. The angel said, Behold, for this jewelry box shall multiply throughout the world. And I saw thousands. I saw them in overgrown fields, in upturned cemeteries, and in abandoned schools.

> They lined the gutters and hung from trees. They filled a stadium. (168)

Slab is a post-Katrina novel, and as such, it warrants the analogy between these jewelry boxes, or perhaps the ballerinas inside them, and the victims of Katrina’s (natural and unnatural or manmade) destruction. I argue, therefore, the descriptions and locations of the jewelry boxes lining the gutters, crowding in abandoned schools, and hanging from trees, allude to the treatment of the victims before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. I argue the “filled stadium” recalls the Superdome, which eventually “became a symbol of
refuge and despair… of indeed hitting bottom” (Eyerman 31). Media accounts repeated the same stories and showed the same images of desperate survivors “hitting bottom,” making their way to the Superdome or the Convention Center. Thus, there was a “breakdown in distinction between the individual and the mass.” Suffering individuals were swept into the suffering collective. Here, *Slab* is replicating the reduction of media narratives after Katrina, when labels like “villain,” “hero,” and “refugee” surfaced.56

Thus, on one hand, *Slab* participates in the “wound culture.” The jewelry boxes represent indistinguishable victims. On the other hand, it exposes the obsessive “wound culture,” whereby violence and victimhood become a spectacle. The reader, like Preacher’s mother, is told to “behold,” to watch as the individual victim multiples into thousands. This dichotomy of participation and exposure is significant to the book’s project—that is, to focus on the wound and reject healing and re-construction. The novel acknowledges the need for re-construction but ultimately concludes the impossibility of true healing so long as the wound has not received due attention.

Another dichotomy at play in Saterstrom’s experimental book, one that likewise works to elude healing, is the narrator’s dual-role as survivor-witness and actress. Suzanne Little offers two types of witnesses in her research on trauma performance—the survivor-witness and the third-party witness (45). In trauma performances, most often actors stand in for the survivor-witness, in order to distance the survivor-witness from re-experiencing trauma. Yet, the use of an actor might “nullify…the witnessing effect central to trauma studies, whereby a survivor-witness may therapeutically ‘work through’” the residual psychological effects of the experience (Little 45). *Slab* does not

56 See Merrill Morris’ article “A Moment of Clarity? The American Media and Hurricane Katrina.” *Southern Quarterly* 43.3 (2006): 40-46.
adhere to conventional witness categorization; it both distances the survivor-witness from re-living trauma and bridges that very distance by conflating actress and survivor, thus preventing the survivor-witness from fully “working through” her lived experience.

The protective distancing is neither simplistic nor one-dimensional here, but is layered. For example, Slab begins with the actress, “crouch[ed]” on stage (i.e. the slab), “waiting for it to begin” (front matter). Presumably this actress is performing the lead role, Tiger. Tiger is a self-proclaimed “performance artist” (106). She is a stripper, whose performances are “transformative” (12). During her performances she “transforms” into “profound women,” like Helen Keller and Florence Nightingale. “Under my nurse uniform,” she reveals about her Florence performance, “I put red tape crosses over my nipples. Wanda dyed my hair red” (13). Moreover, sex work as a profession requires acting and performance. For instance, Tiger utilizes looks that, through repetition, “come to be equated with that sensation [of pleasure]” (108). The layered performances expand the protective distance between the survivor and the experienced trauma.

However, at the end of Act 1, Tiger gets off the slab. Champ says, “It’s time for us to go. There isn’t any food or water here so we have to go.” Saterstrom describes the devastated scene: “In the distance, sounds of things disengaging from their function. We

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57 Notably, the text elevates sex work beyond its “conventional” societal status. Saterstrom describes her main character Tiger’s occupation as a stripper as “a no-joke job, requiring diverse skills that go unacknowledged as such because, whether true or not, exotic dancing, or stripping, is often considered sex work, and sex work is invisible labor in this country and in this world” (Heng). Tiger’s work is empowering. Her performances and the ensuing audience reactions inspire the other women who work with her. Nevertheless, Tiger still performs and works for men and their aesthetical preferences. She is aware of the “hustle” and of the rules to follow if you wish to be successful in the “career,” such as not drinking the champagne in the VIP Room (105-106). She knows that “the clientele at the Five Spot didn’t give a damn about flat stomachs or perky breasts. Meat on bones preferred” (109).

58 I should note that the slab is the stage, a point I expand upon in the final section of the chapter. See cover copy on front flap of Saterstrom’s novel.
aren’t safe here, [Champ] said. He stood and helped [Tiger] to her feet. They surveyed the ruined scene. He took her hand and stepped off the slab.” Finally, “[a]fter a moment’s hesitation, the *actress playing Tiger* joined him” (156 emphasis mine). While the distinction between Tiger and the “actress playing Tiger” is significant, the latter seems to experience the same trauma the former experiences, thereby the *actress* playing Tiger *is* the survivor-witness amidst the rubble and ruin.

Importantly, the end of Tiger’s “performance”—that is, the moment she steps off the slab—is not the end of the book. *Slab* is forcing the reader to reckon with the “reality” of the devastation, holes, and vacancies. The actress playing Tiger experiences the “ruined scene” just as Tiger does. She is surrounded by ruin, despair, and death, the tangible and intangible wreck of Katrina. Saterstrom writes, “The night was wet and thick, inky, pitch, but a green living shade, teeming. The night’s sound was like an oil well: every time the pumped lowered into the drum, a hollow boom.” She “could not sleep because she was afraid.” Overall, “[I]t was not worse than where she was before, but it was more than where she was before” (156-7).

The conflation of the survivor-witness and the actress playing such prevents the survivor-witness from psychologically “working through” trauma as well as shatters any sense of protective distance separating the survivor-witness from the trauma. Thus, via its relationship to performance, *Slab* rejects healing, rejects “working through.” The novel always returns to the wound, to the reality of the “ruined scene.”

**Identity (and Language)**
From a sociological perspective, identity is based on cultural constructions. Cultural trauma “destabilizes and shocks” the identity of the collective (Alexander 15). Yet, we seem to want to cling to identity constructions even whilst they are falling apart. Why else would the question “Is this America?” have been so prevalent, and relevant, after Katrina if American citizens were not clinging to the construction of an “American identity,” to what it means to be American? In this section, I examine the processes of construction, de-construction, and re-construction of identity in Slab. I argue that a liminal space forms after a *socially constructed* identity has been de-constructed, and that space offers potential for the creation of self or, in other words, a *self-constructed* identity. Additionally, Saterstrom’s use of language—a structural, patriarchal system—and her rejection of it, that is, the palpable absence of language throughout the text, compliment the argument for the creation of a space of authentic selfhood. The space of potential exists outside of language. The question is, of course, how does one reach that space of potential *without* language? Slab, as a novel about trauma and from trauma, gets at the heart of studies on trauma—the power and the subversion of language.

The following scene shows the formation of a small space of potential for the creation of a self-constructed, authentic identity. It also highlights the novel’s emphasis on language’s conflicting role. In Act 2, Preacher is walking through the debris and wreckage left by the hurricane. “Not once had he seen a standing structure…Preacher moved through the debris, corridors made of ruined parts and exploded subjects.” Any type of structure, concrete or metaphorical, that once existed is destroyed. Preacher sees a “pelican’s body enjambed in the heap (the pile of knotted driftwood).” Then,

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59 See Jeffrey Alexander’s *Trauma: A Social Theory*, p. 15
He rolled up to his knees and scooted toward the pile and dislodged the bird’s awkward sand-encrusted weight. He held the pelican’s head in his hands. He brought his mouth to the bird’s stiff neck and breathed until he could feel the stench and heat from inside his own living form and his lips quivered into words that he mouthed into the bird. The bird’s eyes opened.

And it took off in flight. 180

When Preacher first encounters the bird, it presumably is dead, pummeled, and entangled in the “knot[s]” of the driftwood. There is a brief moment between the bird’s death, which I argue represents the de-construction of identity or self, and the bird’s revival via Preacher. Preacher breathes into the bird’s “stiff neck” and the bird’s eyes open. This represents the re-construction of the bird’s identity by an outside source. In this case, that outside source happens to be “Preacher.” The space of potential for the self-construction of identity or the construction of an authentic self is quickly closed, and the potential lost.

The significance of Saterstrom’s use of poetic terminology, “enjambed,” is two-fold: first, poetry or, more generally, language is connected to destruction and death. Paradoxically, it is also connected to breath and life. After all, Preacher’s “lips quivered into words that he mouthed into the bird,” which resulted in the bird’s flight (180). Still, what Preacher breathes into the bird, along with language, is “the stench and heat from inside his own living form,” an ironic allusion to the breath of life God breathes into man (Genesis 2:7). With a description like hot “stench,” Slab seems to be commenting on the problem with identities constructed by outside, systemic or institutional (think:

61 Thus, this reads like a perversion of the traditional biblical story. There are such perversions throughout the novel. For instance, after Champ and (the actress playing) Tiger get off the slab and all that is around them is “ruin,” they describe their scenario as the Garden of Eden. “It’s the Garden of Eden, he said. And we are the last man and woman, she said. You mean, he said, the first” (156).
religion) forces. Second, “enjambed” reinforces the pelican’s existence as in between and liminal. Enjambment refers to instances in poems when thoughts or sentences carry on to the next line or stanza, and thus, the thought seems stuck or caught between two lines or stanzas.  

_Slab_ suggests the “enjambed” state is preferable. A few pages before Preacher encounters the pelican, he meets Mother Harriet, the card reader. Mother Harriet, we are told, “could feel how he was a crossed man and then she knew what to do and she did that thing and he wasn’t crossed anymore” (170). Preacher closes his eyes while Mother Harriet works over his “wrecked body” (171). When Preacher eventually describes his experience during the healing process, he does so significantly in terms of language and words. Saterstrom writes,

> While he was in the limbo place, he saw the way words worked, how each word had a multi-blooming gut that revealed itself as a mass of tendrils reaching down, very deep, as if through the ocean itself… until these tendrils exploded into a root ball of ultimate convergence, a holy notion. The cold, luminous fact that everything that is convergences into its most opposite expression and then becomes again. (172)

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62 The Poetry Foundation defines enjambment as “the running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation; the opposite of end-stopped.”

63 The favor of the “in-between” extends throughout the text. For instance, when asked if Tiger, as a “flawed female character” is meant to be anti-heroic, Saterstrom essentially denies the simplicity of such a term (Heng). An anti-hero, according to Saterstrom’s understanding, is “a character lacking in conventional heroic attributes.” Tiger exists outside conventionality; she is not merely “unconventional.” Saterstrom says, “I’m not sure if the ‘conventional’ should determine much since it seems an inaccurate model at onset…I feel that Tiger is between living and dying. Does being in such a way make one unreliable? I hope so. What is past the unreliable: That is the place I want to explore” (Heng).
It is in this celebratory “limbo place,” a place between being crossed and uncrossed, wrecked and healed, where “secret scriptures” lie. The in between place is the place where language is not merely part of an oppressive system, but is able to completely undo or de-construct what has already been constructed (socially). At the heart of each word is a “root ball of ultimate convergence, a holy notion” where ‘what is’ becomes ‘what is not but what ought to have been.’ The words “becomes again” indicate the constant potentiality existent in this in between space. The place is generative and is a place of becoming, of constant potentiality.64

Of course, Preacher opens his eyes and leaves the limbo place. The question is what then happens to that potential? Does it get actualized once Preacher opens his eyes? This scene and the questions it raises exemplify Slab’s status as a text on cultural trauma. For instance, I am arguing it is after the de-construction of identity has occurred but before the process of identity re-construction begins that the potential for authenticity exists.65 Slab’s project of rejection of healing and of re-construction works in favor of the limbo place. It is in the limbo place that words have their own agency and are, therefore, detached from the patriarchal system under which they are otherwise oppressed. In the final section of the chapter, I make the argument that the limbo place, the space of potential, is the wound.

Still Waiting to “Cut the Body Loose”

Much like the “dirt” in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones, “wound” has a number of implications, which, by now, are well worth exploring. In one sense, the wound is the

64 See Chapter 1 for more about the notion of “becoming” and about the theoretical work of Peng Cheah.
65 Construction, de-construction, and re-construction of identity are key to sociological studies and to cultural trauma studies. See Jeffrey Alexander’s Trauma: A Social Theory.
American South. “I grew up in Natchez, Mississippi,” explains Saterstrom, “which earns its bread, so to speak, by putting the Old South on display” (Winkler-Schmit). Slab equates the “displays of the Old South” with cheapness and fakeness. “The living room,” Saterstrom writes, “had the usual four walls… Above the drab couch opposite the sliding glass doors, a picture of .357. The frame was blue plastic dollar store, the picture cut from a catalog. Above that, a Confederate flag stapled to fake wood paneling. The flag was made of a slick, cheap material” (128). Later, Tiger draws rebel flags. The drawings are one-dimensional, lacking complexity, and the flags are ripped, stuffed in a pail, crossed through, and on bra cups.66

One of the most feared outcomes of Katrina was and is the loss of culture, particularly of New Orleans. Slab recognizes the rich culture of New Orleans and of the American South, more generally. The text includes recipes for gumbo, Southern colloquial speech, and snapshots of the eccentric character of New Orleans, aka “Big City.” At the same time, however, Slab scorns the culture for its attachment to violence and oppression via the novel’s treatment of symbols like the Confederate flag, which are cheap and/or crossed-out, and guns, which are used for suicide and murder in the text. Tiger explains the gun paradox to Barbara Walters, “[W]hat you have to understand, Barbara, is that despite the violence guns expose us to, there is a deep-rooted thinking that guns are necessary.” The thinking is that guns keep the government’s authority in check. After all, “[i]f Uncle Sam takes away the guns, if he then starts making trouble, who is going to shoot Uncle Sam?” (114)

66 Something I ought to mention, though I do not have the space to fully examine, is the cultural construction of “white trash” and the implications of moments in the text like that of Tiger’s self-appraisal. She says, “I couldn’t make money at Gentlemen’s Choice because I wasn’t skinny and I guess, aesthetically, it was never a good match. I had too many tattoos, which, Dixie noted, made my look too welfare-slut for the clean-cuts” (107).
The wound is also the vagina—the open, red space feared by a patriarchal society. “Dixie had a theory,” Tiger tells us. “In it men feared women’s vaginas because they had secretly believed they were lined with teeth.” Dixie says, “They want something different from wifey but they don’t want to feel too uncomfortable in the process of objectifying women in an effort to reappropriate their fear of the pussy” (107). Thus, the wound is a place of subversion, whereby existing, oppressive structures are threatened and exposed. Finally, the wound refers to the catastrophic blow and the repercussions felt by victims and survivors of Katrina—both the cultural and the physical blows of the storm and its hellish destruction. After all, Tiger is performing on the slab, which is “all Katrina left of her Mississippi home” (cover copy front flap).

Part of the wound’s complexity is its existence outside the boundaries of linear time.67 For instance, Tiger’s slab becomes what Pierre Nora calls a “lieux de mémoires,” a site of memory, that is, “the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (7).68 As one facet of the wound, the slab/stage represents the breakdown of linear time (and narrative). Slab is fragmented in form and structure and shifts between memory and the novel’s post-Katrina present. In her interviews with Barbara Walters, Tiger recalls working at the Trophy Club, advice Dixie gave her about the sex business, memories of friends and family, and her first experiences at church and meeting the devil. She recalls how she came to be “Tiger” and the memory of growing up in a house of murderous history. The slab represents the past, as well as provides the

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67 Quoting Žižek, Jenny Edkins describes this phenomenon: “We cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification. We cannot remember it as something that took place in time, because this would neutralise it. All we can do is ‘encircle again and again the site’ of trauma, to ‘mark it in its very impossibility’.” See Edkins, Introduction, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, p.15.

stage for the present and unknown future. In other words, Saterstrom’s hybrid novel does not follow a chronological narrative; rather, all the events, past, present, and impending, encircle around the slab, or more appropriately the wound, like electrons encircling a nucleus. This “site of memory” is not indicative of a point in linear time but a disruption in linear time, and thus, “retains another notion of temporality” (Edkins 15).

In an interview with 580 Split, Saterstrom says Slab “is modeled after a jazz funeral, which begins with mourners and musicians playing dirges, marching the body to the cemetery. After everything is done at the grave and the body is ‘cut loose,’ the music shifts into Dixieland Jazz” (26). The book, says Saterstrom, becomes “a funeral experienced.” So, then, has the body actually been cut loose? The argument could be made that yes, it has been. After all, the book’s final lines are a send-off: “There isn’t time to pack a bag, you must be on your way” (191). Still, if Slab is “from the wound,” then the body has yet to be cut loose, or perhaps, that would be better than the alternative. In other words, being in the moment before the body is cut loose, as the moment of potential for true healing and subsequent celebration, would be better than being in the actual process of healing.

Ultimately, I am suggesting that Slab makes the argument for a return to the wound, to the moment before re-construction, which is in contention with certain other narratives in Katrina’s grand narrative. Emmanuel David writes about performance and “remembrance work” after Katrina and relates the work to “post-disaster activism” (142). The main group on which he focuses is The Women of the Storm, a group of middle and upper class women from New Orleans who made it their mission to get members of Congress to come to their home and see for themselves the destruction that remained
months after Katrina. Ultimately, The Women of the Storm are interested in “repairing a sense of home and community,” says David (146). As its own version of “post-disaster activism,” Slab is more interested in exposing what words like “home” and “community” have come to really mean and why merely restoring “home” to its pre-Katrina setting is not addressing the real problem. Saterstrom writes, “It seems like, I said, the problem is the accident. Yes, he said. That’s how it seems. But what seems like the problem is really the least of the problems” (Slab 127).

Consider the way in which Slab employs “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In” as a representation of the “real problem” and why true healing has not and cannot yet occur. Discussing the famous gospel hymn, Ron Eyerman notes in Is This America?, “What is nostalgic in one context may be cathartic and mobilizing in another” (64). Tourists might understand the song “much differently than a tuba player playing the song in a… second-line parade or funeral procession.” The tuba player “might find a different kind of rootedness in his performance” (64). While The Women of the Storm would be interested in promoting the song regardless of context, Slab, I argue, would be interested in addressing the tension between the two conflicting contexts. “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In” recalls New Orleans, the Big Easy, the cultural memory of a “national treasure” and tourist hub, as well as funerals, death, and the afterlife.

Tiger sets up the song lyrics as “a recipe every Southerner knows” and provides the song after Barbara Walters asks for a “true regional classic” (79). Thus, the hymn is representative of a (Southern) collective’s identity. Yet, the song’s structural representation on the page complicates the wholeness of that identity and forces readers

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to reckon with the white spaces, the holes, and gaps in what the song represents and
recalls. Moreover, the repetition of “when” is visually and lyrically prominent. The lyrics
appear in the following way:

   when the trumpet sounds the call
   when the revelation comes
   when the revelation comes
   when the rich go out and work
   when the air is pure and clean (80)

The repeated “when” indicates that the particular time—the time of revelation, when the
rich go out and work, when the air is pure and clean—has not come yet. Whereas Esch
waits confidently at the end of Salvage the Bones and her hope and confidence are
represented linguistically in the word “will,” the overall tone of Saterstom’s writing as
satiric, ironic, comical, and critical, in addition to the repeated “when,” function as a
means of confrontation and exposure. Visually, the column of “when” becomes a slab on
the page, straight and unyielding, as if affirming there can be no compromise at this
point. Healing, or in other words, the re-construction of identity, must come after
addressing the wound in its entirety.

Saterstom’s experimental book puts the wound at the center. The wound is the
stage and the slab and without it, there would be no performance or book; the show could
not go on. Thus, the wound is necessary and not without hope. As a space of potential,
the wound is better than the alternative. Rather than constructing something “solid” from
the pieces left by Katrina, as Esch begins to do at the end of Salvage the Bones and as
Jesmyn Ward does in the form of a more conventional and linear novel, Slab is more
concerned with the pieces, holes, and slabs of concrete left physically as a result of
Katrina and metaphorically as a result of identities founded on stereotypes and guns,
God, and stagnant pride. The final image in the text is a photograph of the side of a house with the word “ALiVE!” spray painted on its side. The house is tilting, and the dirt beneath it is cracking. With this concluding image, the book reiterates the vitality not in spite of the cracks but because of them.
CONCLUSION

Redefining “Opportunity”

As we approach the eleventh anniversary of Hurricane Katrina’s landfall and the aftermath, I feel compelled to ask the question: where are we now? The trajectory I have been following suggests we are getting closer to “where we started,” which is not necessarily a good thing. In closing, I not only want to summarize the arguments I have been making; I also want to extend my arguments beyond the realm of art. I briefly turn to an examination of legislation concerning rebuilding efforts after Katrina, namely the Gulf Opportunity (GO) Zone and the organizing work of the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, to show how my literary analyses and the “where are we now?” question fit into other arenas. Then, the final pages of my conclusion revisit the previous chapters’ discussions as well as the goals for the project I laid out in the introduction.

Kevin Fox Gotham, professor of sociology at Tulane University, discusses the “inconclusive” evidence regarding the “positive impact of spatially targeted tax incentives” that are set up in order to help rebuild an affected city or region following a disaster (291). One such set of incentives was put into place after 9/11 in the form of the New York Liberty Zone; another set followed Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and was called the GO Zone Act of 2005. “From the beginning of the program in 2006 through its end in December 2011,” writes Gotham, “the GO Zone provided over $22 billion in bonds, tax credits, and tax exemptions to Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to rebuild

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70 See Chapter 1. The difference between my move and the move Rick Crownshaw makes is that my thesis aims to privilege the narrative(s) told through art and aesthetics, and then, once properly dealt with, to situate the narrative(s) in conversation with the narratives of other arenas.

71 On “institutional arenas,” see Jeffrey Alexander’s Trauma: A Social Theory, pp. 19-25.
their disaster-impacted places, the largest allocation of tax aid for disaster recovery in U.S. history” (292). The gist of the act was to catalyze the physical recovery of the Gulf by way of encouraging economic investment into rebuilding projects.

One of Gotham’s driving questions, the most significant for my purposes, is whether or not the incentives and tax credits “benefited certain types of businesses and certain areas within the Zone” more than others, such as the more affluent, less damaged areas of New Orleans72 (294). Incentives were offered on a first come, first serve basis, and since businesses in less damaged areas were ready to take advantage of government offers faster than those in more damaged areas, the former reaped the benefits while the latter continued to suffer (299). According to Gotham’s data, the heaviest damage often was situated within the statistically poorest parishes, such as Orleans and St. Bernard’s. These areas received considerably less funding than East Baton Rouge, for example, though the “severe damage (by housing unit)” was over four hundred times greater in Orleans than in East Baton Rouge (Table 2, 300). “Moreover,” notes Gotham, “none of the bonds issued for the New Orleans projects went to development in hard-hit areas like the Lower Ninth Ward or eastern New Orleans, areas that had up to 15 feet of flood water” (299).

Because of the expansiveness of the GO Zone, areas that were almost entirely unaffected still had the option to apply for the incentives. Thus, “the value of…bonds for damaged areas like New Orleans was reduced as the incentive was made available in nondamaged areas like Baton Rouge.” Gotham says, “The fact that tax exempt private

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72 For more information on Gotham’s complete study of the GO Zone Act, see his article, “Dilemmas of Disaster Zones: Tax Incentives and Business Reinvestment in the Gulf Coast after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita” in City and Community 12.4 (2013): 291-308.
activity bonds were made available across a vast geographical area (e.g., southern Louisiana) reinforced the deterrent to locate in damaged areas and thereby increased the attractiveness of investment in undamaged areas” (302). Areas less affected by Katrina’s destruction and the water damage attracted more investors and consequently a higher rate of rate of residential return than other more damaged areas—that is, if residents were even forced to evacuate. Gotham writes, “The first legislation approved by Congress to assist victims was tax relief” (293). Tax relief only benefits a particular group, those above the poverty line. Additionally, only those private investors well above the poverty line could afford to participate in GO Zone investment projects. Thus, this act reinstated the same social structure and identity construction that has been in existence well before 2005.

Karl Seidman’s *Coming Home to New Orleans* acknowledges the tremendous effort of rebuilding in New Orleans after Katrina, particularly by its citizens, and the relative speed with which rebuilding has occurred and is still (presumably) occurring (255). Seidman also examines how rebuilding efforts have been *negatively* affected—how efforts have been slowed or skewed in favor of certain areas or demographics. For instance, governmental aid particularly “favored larger-scale development and was difficult to utilize in New Orleans” (259). Thus, small businesses, those with less money to begin with, were presented with far less of a chance at survival and re-growth. Political and public leadership, such as the BNOB Commission, whose members were appointed by Mayor Ray Nagin, debated over which areas “warranted” investment and rebuilding. Seidman uses the word “viable” to describe areas that would be encouraged to continue with the rebuilding process (23). In effort to heal a physically and emotionally broken
city, city leadership was creating another wound or, at best, attempting to cover a bullet hole with a band-aid. As Seidman says, “[T]he role of white business leaders in the [BNOB] commission, its expert-driven process, and the lack of public education and participation fostered considerable distrust of its motivations and recommendations” (22). Those who were attempting to “fix problems” have been accused of being of the very coterie responsible for the original problem.

White capitalism and greed began destroying the Wetlands decades before Katrina. White capitalism is also responsible for notions like Milton Friedman’s, that tragedies of mass death, displacement, and ruin are also foundations for opportunity. This type of post-Katrina stage-setting is contrary to the hopeful and active waiting involved in Ward, Trethewey, and Saterstrom’s narratives. That is to say, I have not been insinuating that the three literary texts support Friedman’s type of opportunism, for his opportunism excludes Esch, Trethewey’s brother Joe, and Tiger; rather, Ward, Trethewey, and Saterstrom’s texts suggest the “opportunity” Katrina presented was and is a platform for engagement and asking hard questions regarding the very foundation of politics and what it means to be American.

So, I return to the initial question of this conclusion. The trauma process Alexander and his contemporaries lay out in their work might help pin down “where” we find ourselves now. With the disruption of the collective’s sense of identity, there is a

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73 Here I mean the construction of whiteness. While predominantly acted upon in white communities, communities of different races and ethnicities put into practice constructions of whiteness and blackness and what each construction seemingly denotes. For more, see Andrea Smith’s “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing” in Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology, pp.66-74.

74 “Most New Orleans schools are in ruins, as are the homes of the children who have attended them. The children are now scattered all over the country. This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the educational system,” said Friedman in “The Promise of Vouchers,” an opinion editorial published by the Wall Street Journal December 5, 2005.
time of excitation. Meaning-makers and carrier groups fight for their respective narratives; stories get published, heroes and villains established, and group activism set in motion. Then, “once the collective identity has been…reconstructed, there will eventually emerge a period of ‘calming down,’” says Alexander. This reconstruction occurs as a “shift,” and “there will be a searching re-membering for the collective past.” After the reconstruction of identity, “the spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fades.” Additionally, Alexander says, “Charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates, and liminality gives way to re-aggregation. As the heightened and powerfully affective discourse of trauma disappears, the ‘lessons’ of the trauma become objectified in monuments, museums, and collections of historical artifacts” (Trauma: A Social Theory 26-7).

What exactly has Katrina left behind and where do we find ourselves now? According to this process, we might be in the “calming down” moment. We might have exchanged “liminality” for “re-aggregation” and reassembly. There are certainly monuments and museums dedicated to Katrina, such as the exhibit in the Presbytère in New Orleans and the monument in Biloxi that “features an ominous 12-foot tall black slab that represents the height of the storm surge,” the monument featured in Trethewey’s book (RoadsideAmerica.com). The attempt to locate the trauma of Katrina in linear time has been made. I, too, participate in this particular attempt when I talk about the storm’s anniversaries. Yet, questions regarding what the collective past looks like, what has been forgotten, what narratives about the collective past and about Katrina were written and by whom, still haunt the grand narrative of Katrina. Thus, re-aggregation is controversial. If liminality, as a state of potential, which I argued in the previous chapter on Slab, has in
fact “given way to re-aggregation,” then we might consider whether or not that potential was actualized.

The three texts I have examined have suggested three similar, yet distinct post-Katrina moments. In Chapter 1 I argued that Jesmyn Ward’s national award-winning fiction offers structure, resilience, and hope after the destruction of the Mississippi Coast. *Salvage the Bones* deals with a family that is broken from the outset and overwhelmed by the loss of the matriarch. Though Katrina destroys the material possessions of the family, ultimately the storm’s destruction unifies the family and reaffirms the collective strength of the community. Amidst the rubble left by the storm, the Batiste family “will” survive and rebuild, and Esch “will” be a mother. The narrative of Katrina will be told and retold, as will the story of Esch, her brothers, and China as survivors of Katrina and of maternal loss. As a strategy, the first-person narration extends the “we” of the trauma process beyond the book’s physical boundaries. Ultimately, I suggested in Ward’s text the storm becomes a lens through which to confront and address holes left by the initial loss of the matriarch and becomes a measure of proof and assurance of familial and communal strength and resilience. The “dirt” of Bois Sauvage, which at first seems to work against the Batiste family, becomes fertile ground for renewal and re-growth.

My examination of *Beyond Katrina* also dealt with Katrina as a lens through which to confront holes of familial and regional histories. Unlike the inclusive first-person narration of Ward’s more traditional writing, Natasha Trethewey’s hybrid meditation addresses a problematic outsider perspective, which presumes to be familiar with the Gulf Coast, its history, and its woes. Upon digging into the personal and private histories of the region, Trethewey discovers the deeper scars of the Mississippi Coast and
of her own complicit nature in certain prejudices. Via Joe’s story, she challenges media
narratives regarding heroes and villains, and reveals a different kind of villainy—
passivity. Trethewey’s use of multiple literary forms mimics the complexity of what
Katrina brought to the forefront for her and for the country. Though Katrina means
something different to New Orleans folk than to Mississippi folk, Beyond Katrina, via its
investigation into the ongoing destruction of the Mississippi Wetlands in the names of
capitalism, tourism, and greed, asserts that the hurricane’s winds were not the only
culprits of the Coast’s devastation. The poet herself is even implicated. In Chapter 2 I
acknowledged a similarity between Ward’s text and Trethewey’s text—the enduring hope
and determination of coastal residents after Katrina, despite confusion and suffering—but
I suggested Trethewey’s text also seems to demand necessary self-examination and
questioning of one’s own perpetuation of the very prejudices and passivity that made the
Coast particularly vulnerable to the “unpredictable” havoc Katrina wreaked.

Building off the two previous chapters, I argued in Chapter 3 that Selah
Saterstrom’s experimental, cross-genre novel takes the politics of place and identity
presented in Ward’s novel and in Trethewey’s hybrid memoir even further, seeking to
engage more fully with the wound of Katrina and of the American South rather than to
look outward, towards future recovery and rebuilding efforts. The confident “will” at the
end of Salvage the Bones becomes an impudent, challenging “when” in Slab.
Saterstrom’s text engages with the political, economic, and social history of the Gulf
Coast, but arguably does even more than the other two texts to underscore the problems
rooted in individual and collective memories and identity constructions. Via Slab, I
examined the implications of stereotypes like Southern “white trash” and sex workers and
how, in order for true “progress” to occur, the constructions of those stereotyped identities, i.e. how those stereotypes came to exist and how they continue in existence and are legitimized and justified, must be confronted. The wound in all its capacities must be examined, scrutinized, and cleaned thoroughly before true healing can begin. *Slab* seems to suggest the healing process, if it has already begun, is doomed to fail. That is to say, if “healing” has begun, it is not true healing. Furthermore, the text’s form and fragmented narrative structure reinforce the notion that the wound disrupts linear time.75

So, then, has the “spiral of signification flattened out” (Alexander 26)? The trajectory of the texts I have chosen is indicative of what I deem a necessary movement away from discussions of a certain kind of recovery, a “flattening out,” and an improving *economic* state. For, the kind of facilitation of economic recovery—via legislation, investment, and Friedman’s “opportunism”—is not going to help Esch or Joe or Tiger. In this trajectory, the confidence of Ward’s young, pregnant heroine was eventually replaced by the uncertainty and fear of the “beyond unreliable” sex worker in Saterstrom’s book. Perhaps, Esch Batiste exists outside of canonical heroism as a poor, black, young female from a small coastal town in Mississippi, who has an affinity for Greek myths. Nonetheless, Esch is far more locatable than Tiger, who is both actress and survivor-witness, living and dying, performing and not. Formally, the texts move away from a traditional, fiction form towards a “de-categorized,” experimental form. The more recent literature on Katrina takes readers back to the wound—that is, to the patriarchal pillars of capitalism, to the prejudices of sex and race inherent in symbols like the Confederate flag and guns, even to the holes in the physical landscapes that have yet to

75 See Jenny Edkins’s *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, pp. 15-6, regarding the paradoxical relationship of linear time and trauma time.
be rebuilt and to the actual gravestones, another kind of slab, of those persons killed by
the storm or by the levees breaking. Slab leaves readers questioning and is more
concerned with “spiraling” and with “liminality” than with “re-aggregation,” to use
Alexander’s terms.

To understand what is ultimately at stake now in this complicated, post-Katrina
moment requires asking how systems of oppression and power relations are still at large,
enacted and perpetuated in order to maintain what Jenny Edkins, via Giorgio Agamben,
calls “bare life,” that is, life “that can be killed but not sacrificed,” life that matters in so
much that it can serve as part of a mass to gain attention but has no political voice and
thus, in today’s world, exists outside of what we call “human” (Edkins 181, Agamben
168-9). My project has aimed to use cultural trauma theory as an overarching framework
to discuss three texts whose foundations rest on Katrina’s combined physical, emotional,
social, and economic impacts. The texts support “Katrina as cultural trauma,” as Eyerman
argues. They affirm the “tear in the social fabric” and expose the ways in which certain
voices have been silenced and ignored as a result of “routine traumas,” like systemic
racism. Still, via my analyses I argue that even this relatively new study, cultural trauma
theory, is not expansive enough to encompass the complexity of Hurricane Katrina. The
abandonment of discussions of what is unsaid or unsayable—and of the pressures of the
witness to speak out—takes away from a significant part of what makes the trauma of
Katrina so complex, even more complex than the national tragedy that occurred a few
years before. Katrina as a both/and storm, both of natural and unnatural origins,
dismantled the collective identity of black Americans and of poor, white Americans, as

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See Greg Forter’s article “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form”
well as the identity of the country as whole. Its hugeness eludes conclusive answers ten years later.
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- Selected to participate in the 2016 Harding Seminar, “Nonviolent Forms of Social Justice” led by visiting lecturer, activist, and one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza.
- Taylor Medal Recipient, University of Mississippi, 2014
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