

BIBLICAL ECHOES AND COMMUNAL HOME IN JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES*

ECOS BÍBLICOS Y HOGAR COMUNAL EN *SALVAGE THE BONES*, DE JESMYN WARD

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Abstract

Jesmyn Ward's second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), offers a literary account of an African American family in dire poverty struggling to weather the horrors of Hurricane Katrina on the outskirts of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. This article focuses on the novel's 'ideology of form', which is premised on biblical models of narration—grounded on a literary transposition of The Book of Deuteronomy—that serves to portray the victimization of African Americans in mythical tones to evoke the country's failed covenant between God and his chosen people. It also brings into focus the affective bonds of unity and communal healing relying on the idiosyncratic tenet of home understood as national space—following Winthrop's foundational ideology. As I will argue, the novel contends that the revamped concept of communal home and familial bonds—echoing Winthrop's emblem of national belonging—recasts the trope of biblical refuge as a potential tenet to foster self-assertion and to rethink the limits of belonging and acceptance.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, African Americans, Bible, Deuteronomy, home.

Resumen

La segunda novela de Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), expone el recuento literario de una familia afroamericana luchando para sobrevivir al horror del impacto

del huracán Katrina en la más extrema pobreza en las afueras de Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. El presente artículo se centra en la forma ideológica de la novela, la cual sigue los preceptos de la narración bíblica —partiendo de la transposición literaria del Deuteronomio— que sirve para ejemplificar la victimización de los afroamericanos en términos míticos con el fin de evocar el pacto roto entre Dios y el pueblo elegido, así como para traslucir los lazos afectivos de unidad y curación comunitaria alrededor de la lectura idiosincrática del hogar como reducto nacional, siguiendo los preceptos fundacionales de Winthrop. Como se demostrará, la novela ejemplifica que la lectura revisitada de este hogar comunitario y de los lazos familiares —como emblema nacional de pertenencia imitando el modelo de Winthrop— refigura el concepto de refugio bíblico para transmutar en un potencial elemento que fagocita la asertividad y repiensa los límites de pertenencia nacional y aceptación.

Palabras clave: huracán Katrina, afroamericanos, Biblia, Deuteronomio, hogar.

1. Introduction

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“Everything need a chance”
Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*

Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans in 2005, was the worst hurricane reported in recent US history. It resulted in over 1,417 deaths and over 75 billion dollars in damage. More than ten years later, the recovery process — physical, emotional, and otherwise— is still ongoing. As 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” (2015: 5). Following Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik’s complaint that in the “ten-year anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina [...] scholars and critics have done surprisingly little in the way of systematically processing [...] creative processings” (2015: viii), it is intriguing to examine how writers have aestheticized the tragedy into fiction. This article focuses on an African American reading of this tragedy in *Salvage the Bones*, the National Book Award-winning novel by African American writer Jesmyn Ward, published in 2011. As Marotte and Jellenik explain, the novel “is representative of a distinct and meaningful body of literature that has emerged following the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, literature that seeks to examine not only the personal lives affected by the storm but also the ways that Americans deal with disasters, both natural and man-made, public and personal” (2015: ix).

Since the impact of the hurricane was far more damaging for the black community than for the white,¹ Hurricane Katrina brought to light much societal unhealthiness

including poverty, racism, debilitating political partisanship, social hostility, and governmental neglect as well as sanitary issues.² Ward's novel shows how deeply Katrina reached into US culture, particularly within the southern African American community. The story brings forth a sense of debacle that reflects a set of cultural and identity issues exposed by the storm. In an attempt to unpack the story, I will focus on the biblical imagery that shapes the novel's narrative. In so doing, I will explain how this literary strategy evokes the social failure of the mythical way in which the country has been historically understood. To readdress this failure, I argue that the novel privileges the affective bonds of unity and communal healing upon the idiosyncratic tenet of home as national space, following Winthrop's foundational creed.

In Ward's conception of the Southern land as reflected through the tragedy of hurricane Katrina, the United States becomes a destructive place and the biblical Eden is turned into a doomed netherworld. The novel's "ideology of form" —to use Frederic Jameson's coinage (2008: 146) to explain typological readings— is therefore shaped by the "religious idea of America", as Nina Baym would put it (1985: 64), that praises individuals before society. Even though African Americans had theoretically been accepted as participants in the egalitarian dream of the US as a nation, their utter exclusion—a reversal of the country's hospitable ethos—is founded on the biblical predicament that suffuses the narrative: "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). In this light, I argue that the novel is rooted in biblical forms of narration as an African American literary form, since the black family's spiritual alienation can be traced and understood through scriptural episodes, allegories, and typologies.

More precisely, as prefaced in the novel's paratext, the story offers echoes from The Book of Deuteronomy, paralleling its literary evaluation of God's covenant with his chosen people as well as the violence and teachings it is suffused with, as Stephen Cook (2015: 20) observes in his literary reading of Deuteronomy, and includes biblical echoes to showcase the mythical nature attached to the family's tragic whereabouts. Moreover, a biblical interpretation of the novel informs the ways in which different readings of hospitality are exposed and aestheticized since a discourse of hospitality and hostility permeates the Bible, as Ana M^a Manzanos and Jesús Benito explain (2017: 4-5). Both in form and in content, *Salvage the Bones* is premised on biblical typology, making the novel a native output that partakes in the critique of the nation's blemishes. Also, this is the framework in which hospitality/hostility and the quest for healing through interconnected conceptions of home are molded and worked upon between the national creed and the characters.

The novel follows the actions of a poor family of African Americans, the Batistes (a distressed black father and his children Skeetah, Esch, and Junior, and their prized pit bull China), in the twelve days leading up to and immediately after the hurricane. Throughout the twelve chapters, each of which chronicles a single day in the lives of the characters, the hurricane builds as an oxymoronic absent presence which remains unnamed until chapter six and unseen until chapter eleven. Premised upon biblical terms, the storm defines the characters' moves and prompts their sense of place and belonging. In this way, Ward offers a blunt account of this family in this particular junkyard of land as the epitome of the social and racial inequalities that have for so long defined the ethos of the US south. Written in sometimes lyrical and sometimes minimal prose, the novel follows a southern literary tradition cultivated by writers such as Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker or Eudora Welty.

By rooting her work in the literature of the southern landscape, Ward openly pays literary homage to William Faulkner. Echoes of *As I Lay Dying* can easily be found in *Salvage the Bones*.³ Both texts share a plot about a family of brothers, one pregnant teenage sister, and a father living in the deprived South and wrestling with the recent death of a mother and wife.⁴ Both fictional families also wind up finding refuge in the land that surrounds their houses. However, Ward's novel departs from Faulkner's by revising what the inner space of home may represent for a family that is torn apart in a geography of disposability. In the hospitable scope of the household, the absence of motherhood allows Esch to capitalize affection and familial bonding as assets that salvage the family from being engulfed both literally and symbolically. Hence, communal affection and parental love appear as national tenets able to recompose the subjectivity of (African) Americans, as John Winthrop envisioned for the colonists. The biblical typology that permeates the novel proposes the possibility of national redemption through an affective transposition of bonding and communal interrelationships.

Rick Crownshaw's reading of Ward's novel as 'post-naturalistic' is appropriate since he affirms that "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" (2014: 161). However, building upon these claims, I base my assumptions on a religious-based reading of the novel to argue that the story is fashioned in biblical modes of narration to provide an explicit account of the social tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on the subjectivity and representation of African Americans. In so doing, the novel participates in the national continuum of the biblical narrative of the nation through a specifically Christian reading of the Scriptures focused on the role of God as a divine father which infuses African American literature from slave narratives onwards. I suggest that Ward's portrayal

of the victimization of African Americans conforms less to naturalistic and environmental practices than to mythical ones. By interpreting the destructive effect of the hurricane on the black characters through a literary transposition of the Book of Deuteronomy and by a biblical reading of concepts such as hospitality and a feminine household based on the workings of affection and love, the novel offers an alternative narrative of national redemption and revisits some tenets that have historically affected African Americans: motherhood, family and national adherence to the country.

2. *Salvage the Bones*: The Bible, Shared Home and Belonging

*For the land is mine,
for you are strangers and sojourners with me*
Leviticus 25:23

In *Salvage the Bones*, caring for property and the alluring warmth of the inner space—as read through Winthrop’s national lens—become central to the process of healing and understanding following affective modes of love and help for survival. In this sense, the right to own property becomes the equivalent of the commendable path towards belonging and acceptance within the premises of affection and fondness in a country in which land—as territory—encapsulates the concept of exclusion and may well turn into a hostile ground. Ward resorts to the real tragedy of hurricane Katrina to recreate and narrate a biblical scenario of natural disaster prone to push African Americans to the edge of dispossession and poverty. Thus, the dichotomy between inner space and the open dwelling becomes firmly established from the outset, and the affection of the protective house is upheld at the expense of the hostile nature of exteriority. In this way, in the novel, to use Levinas’ words, “the openness of space signifies the outside where nothing covers anything, non-protection, the reverse of retreat, homelessness, the non-world, non-inhabitation” (1998: 179). In contrast, the affective relationships around and inside the home as a retreat appear attached to a specific reading of hospitality akin to Derrida’s conception of the term: “for there to be hospitality, there must be a door” (2000: 14). Accordingly, “[t]he image of the door [...] relocates hospitality within the closed shelter” (Manzanas and Benito 2017: 31). Moreover, the concept of home is unrelentingly connected to the land and the inhabitants’ subjectivity, as Bachelard explained in *The Poetics of Space* (1994: 6). Both the act of building and protecting a house—the open door to the family’s affective home—become constant actions that propel the plot.

The feeling of being homeless permeates the narrative, and this fact acts as a catalyst to prompt the black characters to build a shelter where they can feel at home. Indeed, the citation that opens the novel is crucial to understand the family's sense of place and belonging, and will act as the definition of the Batistes' role in the US: "See now that I, even I am he, and there is no God with me; I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand" (Deut. 32:39). The act of shaping the story in biblical modes of narration from its inception establishes the novel's ideology of form and infuses the story with mythical characteristics. The novel purposefully participates in the idea of the American civil religion as a "powerful symbol charged with great cultural meaning" (Howard-Pitney 2005: 3). Drawing on the Puritan John Winthrop's foundational myth of the 'City upon a Hill' (derived from the much-celebrated sermon "A Model of Christian Charity"), which became the paradigmatic text of the nation's exceptionalist cause and ideology, the illustration of a unique socio-religious perfection paved the way for the coming of God's earthly kingdom and served as the cornerstone for the creation of a civil religion based on Protestant civic piety. This civil religion was conceived as a "shared set of myths, symbols, and rituals underpin[ning] American society and seek[ing] to unify its diverse polity into one moral spiritual community" (Howard-Pitney 2005: 4).

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Ward has acknowledged her engagement with the Bible and the mythical understanding of the nation in the making of *Salvage the Bones*. The link between the mythical reading of the nation and my interpretation of the novel's engagement with biblical modes of narration is thus upheld by Ward's own words. In an interview about the novel she declared that "Biblical myth is as integral to the spirit of the South as the heat and humidity. The epigraphs [that open the novel] acknowledge that history" (Hoover 2011). In this regard, the fact that the novel is introduced by a quote from Deuteronomy is an instant declaration of the author's literary intentions. The biblical Book of Deuteronomy presents the words of Moses delivered before the conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. In contrast to the narratives of Leviticus and Numbers, here Moses' words are an explicit allusion to God's wishes for his people. In the Book of Deuteronomy (meaning 'repetition of the law'), Moses delivers his epic farewell discourses to prepare the people for their entrance into Canaan. In them, Moses emphasizes the prominence of the laws that were especially needed at such a time. Thus, the words of Moses come to us from his heart as a vivid example of the covenant that this servant of the Lord had to press on his people. The citation that Ward has chosen speaks about the precise moment in which, through Moses, God is determined to speak to the Israelites in the extremity of their need, to lead them to a better judgement and place, and to grant them victory over their flaws and foes.

In a similar way, the family in the novel is in need of a place where they can feel secure and find their peace of mind. Indeed, the day-to-day journey towards salvation in light of the upcoming tragedy is shaped following God's warning to extol love and survival: "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts" (Deut. 30:15). This typological reading of the story allows Ward to shape her novel with mythical tones and also to follow Deuteronomy's message of how to act towards national redemption in the promised land. Hence, the biblical echoes that pervade the plot work as literary schemes to shape the story and to convey its message. For this reason, the twelve days that chronicle the lives of the African American family are invested with a biblical message from the very beginning. As in the Bible, the number twelve is sacred since it leads to an eventual epiphany and the birth of the Saviour: in *Salvage the Bones* the twelve days leading up to the arrival of the hurricane are premised upon the prophecy that requires commitment and unity: "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19). This also mirrors the land in which God pitched his tent; the place where the African American family in the novel live echoes the pit in which God places the Israelites.

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If the Book of Deuteronomy's purpose was to prepare the new generation of God's chosen people to be the representatives of his kingdom on earth in the land he had chosen for them, in *Salvage the Bones* the covenant is broken since the land itself turns out to be unsuitable for their settlement. In a biblical intertextual exercise, the land where the Baptiste family live was inherited from their ancestors Mother Lizabeth and Papa Joseph, ex-slaves who gained the land after the Emancipation Proclamation. The land acquires the biblical imagery of disposal and displacement and, just as the Israelite people overlook the importance of the land for their survival, in the novel black men disregarded the dangerous situation of the land they obtained from white people. That is why Papa Joseph nicknamed the land the "Pit" —a literary move that mirrors the characteristics of the land in which God placed his tent according to Deuteronomy (21:1)— after he let the "white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses", which eventually left a huge hole where they had excavated the side of a hill (Ward 2011: 14). Thus, the Pit appears as a desolate landscape, the Batistes' house "nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided", a space of "discarded plastic garbage cans, detached fenders" (126). Ward's conception of the land as hostile and exclusionary rebuts the biblical message of Deuteronomy and presents the US South as a location that resists the covenant between God and his people. The Pit is not the land of milk and honey but rather showcases "the ruins of the refuse-laden yard" (18) placed openly "in the dirt" (59).

Recasting the land as hostile in biblical terms revisits the trope of hospitality as proposed in the Bible. Ward takes on a biblical rendering of hospitality to highlight the broken covenant between God and his chosen people, which in the novel is implied by the way in which African Americans were abandoned in the catastrophe of hurricane Katrina.⁵ In Deuteronomy, the workings of hospitality focus on how the stranger is perceived and embraced. It is a law of universal hospitality that “emanat[es] from the biblical injunction to cater to the needs of the stranger” (Manzanas and Benito 2017: 19). Conversely, the novel emphasizes the way in which the approaching hurricane spurs the family’s eventual removal since their presence in the Pit is read in hostile terms. Drawing on such a biblical point of view, hospitality turns from “a discourse of generosity into a discourse of spatiality and displacement, from an interpersonal moral act into a national political issue” (Manzanas and Benito 2017: 19). Therefore, out of the broken covenant, “the house cannot be redeemed” (Bailey 1999: 23). The Batiste family has no choice but to seek shelter to prepare themselves for the destructive storm. As Henri Giroux points out, African Americans “had become an unwelcome reminder of the state of poverty and racism in the United States, and for that they should be punished” (2006: 176), a clear vision that transforms the presence of African Americans into shapeshifters of strangeness within the country.⁶ This conception of the homeless as “intrinsically wandering and exiled on earth is [...] widespread in the Bible” (Manzanas and Benito 2017: 52). In a similar way, the Batiste family is pushed into displacement and unbelonging.

The displacement is evident when Katrina strikes the Pit and the family is forced to leave their house. The episode is filled with biblical imagery since it is fashioned after the flood narrative in Genesis. Following God’s instruction for the upcoming catastrophe: “I set you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” (Deut. 30:15), the family also listens to the government’s warning: “*Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned [...] You can die*” (Ward 2011: 217, emphasis in original). The precariousness of the house and its material instability deepen the sense of hostility that suffuses the Batiste family. Once the hurricane strikes, chaos pervades. As in the biblical flood, there is only one way of salvation: gathering together in a neighbour’s secure home. In the Bible, salvation is through the door of the ark—the door that enacts the act of hospitality—which may be akin to the Christian way of salvation through Christ. Indeed, salvation is achieved through redemption, which is the communal act for Christians by all means linked to hospitality, since it has the holy *communion* as the most important moment to come together as one body in order to remember and celebrate what Christ did for humanity. Likewise, in the novel, salvation is only achieved when

African Americans get together in a communal understanding of nurturing and bonding under the protective shelter of affective homes.

The connections interwoven in *Salvage the Bones* are related to family bonds and to alternative readings of motherhood. When Katrina engulfs Bois Sauvage, the family awaits the opportunity to find shelter at Big Henry's (their neighbour) in their attic, the only spot where they can find refuge. However, once the attic also begins to flood, the family is forced to leave the house in a sort of exile— "*An exile, oh God*" (Ward 2011: 225, emphasis in original). With the house falling apart and "the bones of the ceiling folding so low" (240), Esch is about to be engulfed by the flood. Like Jonah in the Bible, Esch embodies here God's mercy turned into flesh, and her survival signals her and her family's acceptance, thanks to her embracing of family bonds related to God's message in his covenant with the chosen people. In this vein, also as in the biblical flood—in which, through a Christian reading of the Scriptures, life is highlighted over death as a sacred understanding of existence (Pet. 3:20-21) that attests the Christian comprehension of God as a divine father—the ark may be connected to the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection takes the form of the waters burying the old world but raising Noah to a new life— Esch is brought back to life thanks to her brother Skeetah. He rescues her in preference to China and embraces, literally, the act of communal bonding according to Esch's words: "I put my legs to either side of his thighs, scooted up behind him, slid my arms under his armpits, and rested my face on his shoulder" (Ward 2011: 238). The depiction of Esch's salvation—or resurrection in biblical terms— echoes the fellowship alluded to in Deuteronomy's message (22:19), consistent with the Lord's example and words: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity" (Prov. 17:17).

Once the water level has gone down and the family is reunited, the exile comes to an end since they find shelter at Big Henry's home. In the terrible scene of decay and disaster—"the houses clustered, there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees, crumpled trampolines, talking with each other, shaking their heads" but the African American community managed to survive and be "alive, alive, alive" (Ward 2011: 242)— the family manages to persevere thanks to a shared vision of hospitality. Big Henry's illuminating figure is based upon Moses' redemptive ethos in the Book of Deuteronomy. According to God's mission, the prophet should cater for the dispossessed for "there will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11). In a hostile land that excludes the poor, the mythical drive toward community and bonding represents an alternative way to eschew precariousness and abandonment.

In addition, Big Henry's home acts as a surrogate home that embraces the precarious black family and becomes a biblical refuge of sorts (Deut. 32:31). This understanding of home, based on religious grounds, portrays the communal dwelling as a way to dodge national exclusion, since it relates the national ethos of the country to the needs of African Americans. In so doing, Ward's replica of a national and communal home for the dispossessed may be linked to Winthrop's foundational ascription to home and community: "if the place of our habitation be our owne, then no man hath right to come unto us" (2003: 145). Indeed, Winthrop's foundational idea relies heavily on the comfort of home to "strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort each other" (1630). In order to reunite a sundered community, Ward echoes Winthrop's Christian emphasis on mercy that bespeaks the prospects of sustaining a sense of being through communal love: "If one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoyce with it".

By interconnecting such religious and foundational rights to a home with survival and belonging, the novel contributes to a divergent characterisation of Americanness by offering possibilities for African Americans to resist the covenant's national betrayal. Certainly, Ward has acknowledged that home and community have a decisive hand in the family's survival. Explaining the closeness of the word savage with the title's salvage, she emphasizes that "[a]t home, among the young, there is honor in that term [savage]. It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope" (Hoover 2011). Yet, it is only in the community that "you resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: you survive. You are savage" (Hoover 2011). The savagery of this ethos explains the name of the community where the Batiste family live — Bois Sauvage— and the title of the novel: to survive, to salvage is to be savage.

As Lloyd further observes, "[t]hat Sauvage etymologically derives from wild and wood roots Ward's observation into the rural landscape that she is describing and that the Batistes inhabit" (2018: 163). Accordingly, "[s]alvaging is thus not simply a personal condition rooted in precarity, but also a way to transform a vision of communality, collectivity, and region in the face of catastrophe" (Lloyd 2018: 163). In this mythical reading of the novel, the title also conjures up Winthrop's ideological rhetoric that couples God's mercy and national attachment. Thus, if for the Puritan leader love comes from God and "it works like the Spirit upon the dry bones" (1630), the novel's title carries the echoes of "a Model of Christian Charity" and avows America's destiny and promise of erecting a social model that "must be knit together" (Winthrop 1630)—those "dry bones" that shall be salvaged: "Bone came to bone" (Ezek. 37:7). It should also be noted that in the Bible the concept of 'salvage' is also linked to both communal survival and resilience (Amos 3:12).

In this light, Raymond Malewitz submits that the novel “bases its sense of region on what persists in spite of the hurricane’s destructive power: the bonds that still hold the family and the larger community [...] together” (2015: 717). As stated before, the nature of such bonds relies on an alternative vision of motherhood. At the very beginning of the story, we learn that the mother of the family died whilst giving birth to Junior, the youngest of the siblings, and also that China, Skeetah’s pitbull, is giving birth. The primeval act of mothering —whether present or absent— modulates the relationships among the Batistes. Skeetah’s protection towards the little puppies, Junior’s fascination with the birthing, the father’s initial indifference —later turning into tender moments when it comes to taking care of the pets— and Esch’s mimesis with the act of giving birth, since she is pregnant with Manny’s child, not only reunites the whole family but also displays the collective trauma derived from their mother’s death and prompts an alternative vision of motherhood.

In a full circle that links motherhood from the beginning of the story until the end, the novel finishes in the aftermath of Katrina read in feminine terms and infused with maternal characteristics. In Esch’s mind, Katrina is “the mother that swept the Gulf and slaughtered [...] left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies [...] She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother [...] comes” (Ward 2011: 255). Motherhood is complicated in the novel and is far from the nurturing prototype of the caring and suffering mother that the Bible depicts. Although the Bible never states that every woman should be a mother, it does say that those whom the Lord blesses to be mothers should take the responsibility earnestly. Biblical mothers have a unique and crucial role in the lives of their children. Motherhood is not a chore or unpleasant task but a divine mission of unconditional love and commitment, as Kirk-Duggan and Pippin have pointed out in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest: Biblical Mothers and Their Children* (2009: 1-2).

However, rather than the memories of her mother, the tangible exemplars of motherhood for Esch are China and the myth of Medea. Like China and Medea, she envisions herself as able to sacrifice her baby (Ward 2011: 205). Hence, Esch’s fascination with the story of Medea is unrelentingly attached to the upcoming hurricane and equates maternity with a myth embroiled in death, tragedy and separation. Since Medea killed her own children, and China also wound up killing one of her puppies and losing the fight, Skeetah forced her to battle with a view to protect her honour as a mother, Esch’s sense of motherhood is openly in need of alternative models of nurturing, as Stevens (2018: 164) and Henry (2019: 74) explain. China’s sense of motherhood is invalidated since it is paired with the family’s mother and therefore appears as doomed to failure from the very

beginning. China's relationship to the Batistes is familial, as Esch recognizes when she describes the kinship between the dog and her brother Skeetah: "He has turned from lover to father. She is his doting daughter" (Ward 2011: 98). Esch herself also compares China to her mother: "She had shook like China, threw her head back" (93). Accordingly, by killing her puppy, China embodies the perfect mixture of the family's mother and the mythical Medea and therefore offers a precise model for a mythical motherhood which Esch is unable to live up to: "I try to read the entire mythology book but I can't. I am stuck in the middle" (154).

Unloved and rejected by her lover and her child's father, Esch turns to communal bonding for support. This alternative model of motherhood falls into the category of *othermothering*, as proposed by Stanlie James. For James, othermothering is "the acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (1999: 45). The concept of othermothering derives from the familial instability of slavery and was used to furnish bonds between the communities of slaves to provide parental figures. However, it only applies to women since "[c]ommunity mothering and othermothering also emerged in response to Black mothers' needs and served to empower Black women and enrich their lives" (O'Reilly 2004: 6). This concept of othermothering is also found in the Bible, where there are different examples of women raising children other than their own, such as Tamar (Gen. 38), Miriam (Exodus) or Jehosheba (Kings 11:2-3). In the novel, Ward also offers an alternative—a counteralternative—to othermothering by presenting men able to play their part in the process of nurturing an upcoming baby. Thus, *Salvage the Bones* offers the possibility to veer from othermothering to otherfathering. This is clearly seen when, after the outcome of the hurricane, Esch confides to Big Henry, a sort of honorary member of the family, her concern that her baby "don't have a daddy", to which Big Henry responds: "You wrong [...]. This baby got plenty daddies" (Ward 2011: 255). Not only does this response legitimize Esch as a different mother to the models that she was familiar with; it also expands the concept of motherhood to include otherfathers as a renewed familial act of communal bonding and healing. This move again recalls Winthrop's rendition of *humanity* within the covenant: "we must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own" (Winthrop 1630, emphasis added). What is more, Big Henry talks about "this baby", a move that consciously reinstates the subjectivity of Esch's child within the perimeters of otherfathering in a process of total assertion, as she is finally able to proclaim: "I am a mother" (Ward 2011: 258). In this sense, Moynihan aptly refers to "mutual responsibility" (2015: 559) as a term that includes otherfathering within the "multiple role models for children" (Wane 2000: 113) reorganized to chip in with the foundational creed—an idea which follows Winthrop's aforesaid conception of familial bonds as the way to "preserve and comfort each other" (1630)—in

order to “nurture both themselves and future generations” (Wane 2000: 113). Interestingly, the communal nurturing and otherfathering takes place inside the rehabilitated space of Big Henry’s house. Consequently, if the Batistes’ dirty and somber home was doomed to disappear in the face of precariousness —“The house is a dying animal skeleton” (Ward 2011: 58)— once the black family and their community have managed to survive and rethink their present marked by this past precariousness but not locked into it, Big Henry’s house embraces communality —“we got plenty of room” (Ward 2011: 257)— breathing flesh to new opportunities through bonding and communal affection. So if, as Ursula K. Heise explains in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, a house might represent “local autonomy and self-sufficiency” (2008: 29), the novel’s ending demonstrates Blunt and Dowling’s statement that “[h]ome is much more than a house or the physical structure in which we dwell. Home is both a place or physical location and a set of feelings” (2006: 254).

Out of this conception of the communal space as a place for bonding and healing, Big Henry’s house departs from the idea of the house as a skeleton to a house that takes “human shape” (Ward 2011: 257) where “the scattered bones” (Winthrop 1630) are knitted together. This specific place of abode appeals, at once, to the biblical representation of hospitality. In this depiction, the concept of shelter —being and feeling homed— “refracts the inherent instability of the grounds of hospitality” and signifies a “space capable of welcoming while at the same time underlining its own vulnerability” (Manzanas and Benito 2017: 25). This concept of home that the novel displays —as sanctuary and a sacred abode— equally comes from Deuteronomy which has been called the Magna Carta of the home that guarantees the well-being of the family (6:4-10). This link with Deuteronomy also applies to the final episode of *Salvage the Bones* since it connects the principles of the sacred home —which, again, resonate in Winthrop’s idea of national belonging— to the fulfilment of God’s glory through the perpetuation of faith in the Lord from generation to generation, as Esch’s future offspring attests. It is within the communal space of home that God’s people “through the perseverance [...] of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

In this context, Esch’s acceptance of motherhood under the roof of community, bonding and the intrinsic potential of otherfathering gives her the endurance to hope for China’s return and, with her maternity values reinstated, the young girl’s final assertion resonates with complete comfort: in the hypothetical case that China may be alive to come back, “[s]he will know that I am a mother” (Ward 2011: 258). Thus, the story’s final words hint at a rethinking of the assumed but broken covenant that lurks behind the biblical shaping of the novel by revisiting the typological vision of John Winthrop’s idiosyncratic reading of the United

States as a country in which, in times of despair, the “degree of loyalty required was not fundamentally contractual or political in nature; it had to be familial” (Anderson 1990: 1), as *Salvage the Bones* forthrightly evinces.

3. Conclusion

God is the builder of everything

Hebrews 3:4

Salvage the Bones is a multi-layered novel that offers a literary account of the tragedy of hurricane Katrina and its effects on African Americans. The story is focused on a poor African American family which manages to survive the catastrophe, poverty and exclusion. The novel’s ideology of form is articulated following biblical modes of narration to shape the story in mythical patterns rather than in naturalistic ones, and to point to the shortcomings of the foundational covenant when it comes to including African Americans. In doing so, Ward resorts to the Bible and to its mythical ethos to inscribe the novel into canonical traditions in the national discourse that view the typological narrative of the US as a covenant between God and his chosen people. The novel is prefaced by a quote from Deuteronomy which acts as a starting point to consider the story as a literary retelling of Deuteronomy’s ethos —understood as literature (Cook 2015: 5)— and which at the same time facilitates a wider biblical interpretation of the whereabouts of the Batiste family. As the hurricane approaches, the African American family’s preparations for the disaster finds full articulation when they reunite in the safety of a communal home they wind up sharing with Big Henry and some neighbours in the black vicinity.

I have studied how the story is primordially premised on the Book of Deuteronomy’s message to showcase the national betrayal represented by the breaking of the covenant between God and his African American sons and daughters. Ward capitalizes on the story of Deuteronomy by adapting its mythical and religious sense and transporting it to the real context of dispossession and precariousness attached to the US South. This mythical reading of the text illustrates the shortcomings of the national covenant, contemplates the ethical and religious boundaries of hospitality/hostility, and explodes the egalitarian ethos of the nation in its treatment of African Americans in the aftermath of the tragedy of Katrina.

Advocating the typological message of Christian charity in Deuteronomy, *Salvage the Bones* mythicizes the story to offer alternative possibilities of belonging and survival. Within a frame of reference that favours unity, Esch offers a renewed

familial act of communal bonding and healing, suggesting a fresh discourse on motherhood. Her eventual understanding of motherhood is assumed by means of including the men from the black community in a shared act of fathering—or rather otherfathering—that not only rethinks the act of mothering toward inclusiveness but also reaffirms the affective bonds of community as a feasible way to resist dispossession and exclusion and also to rework the shortcomings of God’s crippled covenant.

The novel suggests that the rehabilitated concept of this communal home, which echoes Winthrop’s emblem of national belonging, recasts the trope of biblical refuge as a potential tenet to foster self-assertion and to rethink the limits of belonging and acceptance. Ward’s characters dwell in isolation and despair in scenes that recreate their alienation from the national discourse and reveal the corruption and abandonment that white America inscribes on black Americans. To overcome this twofold tragedy—the national and the atmospheric—the novel draws from the Bible and its mythical recounting in favour of unity and communal bonding to narrate and reclaim resistance to the historical legacies of dispossession and exclusion associated to African American subjectivities.⁷

Notes

¹. See Kenneth Nunn’s chapter “‘Still Up on the Roof’: Race, Victimology, and the Response to Hurricane Katrina” in *Hurricane Katrina: America’s Unnatural Disaster* (2009).

². As Alyssa Robillard contends, among the ills that sprung from Katrina it is also worth mentioning “an implicit disregard for the health and well-being of a people whose health was already severely compromised. Every individual directly touched by the hurricane has, in all likelihood, experienced health consequences as a result. These consequences range from minor cuts and bruises to pervasive post-traumatic stress disorder to the greatest of all consequences, death. The notion of health, for many individuals, is a ubiquitous yet often suppressed concern, until it becomes too great to ignore. Before, during, and after the storm, residents faced unparalleled health challenges, and this is especially true

for African Americans. Their health needs remain too great to ignore” (2009: 132-133).

³. Sinead Moynihan’s article “From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*” (2015) studies this intertextual relation in detail.

⁴. Previously, Esch gets ready for a summer with her brothers whilst reading and commenting: “After my ninth-grade year, we read *As I Lay Dying*, and I made an A because I answered the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*” (Ward 2011: 7, emphasis in original).

⁵. Lloyd states that “African Americans in the US South were not only disregarded in social life before the storm, but revictimized by Katrina’s effect: rendered disposable by the government’s lack of

response to their civil and human rights” (2018: 140).

⁶. This is also Rubén Peinado Abarrio’s contention in his cultural analysis of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina as seen in his article “‘Like Refugees in their Own Country:’ Racial Formation in post-Katrina US” (2012).

⁷. This article results from the Project “Troubling Houses: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature”, funded by the Spanish Plan Nacional I+D+i (ref. FFI201782692-P, 2018-2020).

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