

Yusef Bushara

Dr. Gunaratne

Writing Disaster: Literature, Trauma, Memory

Monday, December 12th, 2022

Paper 3, Lens Essay

Black men are refused the luxury of being outlived by their stories. This results in their life expectancy often getting to be longest on the page. Jesmyn Ward's "Men We Reaped" invites the reader to consider the labor she endures in creating meaning in the aftermath of four deaths. She implores the reader to understand how imperative this work of creating meaning is, despite its insufficiency in bringing the dead back, or encapsulating their fullness. Imperative because the stories (not in the fabricated or fictional sense) must live on somewhere beyond her grief. Ward is wary of using writing as a tool to accomplish this work, but knows that by putting herself in proximity to her memories of Demond Cook, Charles Joseph Martin, Ronald Wayne Lazana, and Joshua Adam Dedeaux, she can recover an interiority lost in their deaths. She can make their stories live beyond the grave. In representing their interiority throughout this memoir, she immerses herself in the rawness of their lives; she inhabits the 'truth' about these men and uses this access to humanize them. Their humanization brings them out of obscurity and insulates them from the misportrayal and erasure brought on by time's passing. When Ward is read in concert with Toni Morrison's "The Site of Memory," we see more clearly how proximity comes into play, informing a kind of "literary archeology," as Morrison coins it.

When I say 'proximity', I'm referring to the distance between Ward and her grief. I'm referring to the impossible smallness of this distance. Secondly, I refer to the very real, the very tangible quality of Ward of having been physically close to the men in the book: in long car rides across the bayou, blunts in hand; in the woods behind the family homestead; in any

close space. The proximity Ward had to these men aids what Morrison calls the process of bringing the 'image to text,' which is why the blunt detail matters along with all of the other ostensibly trivial visuals included throughout the memoir (Morrison 94). The details help bring a sense of realness to Ward's telling. Moreover, it's of interest to discuss how we measure the first distance between Ward and her grief. The relevant passage reads, "I knew the boys in my first novel weren't as raw as they could be, weren't real," A confession, but what does it imply for the portrayal of the boys in this memoir? She continues, "I knew they were failing as characters, because I wasn't pushing them to assume the reality that my real-life boys experienced every day (Ward 240). The battle Ward confronts in "Men We Reaped" is the one she lost to in her first novel, the battle of making her boys raw. She discovers that proximity, the pursuit of rawness, comes in part from a willingness to believe that her boys' stories carried enough significance to be told. Even the men themselves had an intuition about the literary richness of their lives. Maybe they knew the majority of their legacy was destined for the pages, but Ward didn't, and she had to arrive at a point where she felt that she could be honest about their interior lives by writing in spite of her grief. In an exchange with Ward, Demond says with a confidence, a coolness, "You should write about my life," and Ward, almost disbelievingly, offers up a "I should, huh? (Ward 69)" It's only after Demond's death that she realizes that most of the men in her life, like Demond, had stories worth telling. This was true inherently, but also in light of the erasure and misportrayal we were speaking of. If black men die with their stories, and if there isn't somebody there to write down their truth, what forces are there to stop them from drifting into obscurity?

I define obscurity in the context of this paper as the space where one or more of the following things are true: where black men are seen as enablers of their own death and not as victims of the circumstances which lead to it; it is the space wherein the writer forgoes the hard work of recovering the black man's interiority, their inner-lives; obscurity, lastly, is a

space defined by the writer's refusal to rely on the image. The image is memory. The image is also the touchpoint of the imagination and memory. Moreover, when we use Morrison's theory of the image as a lens, we can recognize how it's this dependence which sets Ward nearer to her grief and in proximity of the truth. Morrison's reliance on the image engenders accounts of these men that are humanizing. Which isn't to say perfect, but it is to say that Ward works hard to keep each of these men out of the first category of obscurity. There's an overwhelming sense that in talking about their death, Ward is highlighting the way in which these men approached life with an immense spirit of living. They humanized themselves. Ward transcribed. She uses the image and the precise intricacies of the image to give shape to the lives of these men. But her grief has her bound up in the sentiment that even the reliance on the image is no counter for the burden of grief. She laments, "This grief, for all its awful weight, insists that he matters," speaking of her brother Joshua (Ward 243). "This story is only a hint of what my brother's life was worth...It is worth more than I can say (243)." Death forfeits Ward's chance to convey the meaning of these men's lives. Meaning that Demond was convinced was worth writing about before he was dead. Despite her proximity to the legacies of these men, even the work of humanizing them, doesn't bring them back to life. I've looked for Morrison's response to this hopelessness, to see if there's a grander literary meaning. I've found nothing. Morrison lets us understand, however, that even in death, fragments of the departed straddle the writer like a broken vase. And there's a force of justice compelling the writer to find these scattered pieces and remember how they once fit together. In this vein, Morrison writes: "'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering."

As we continue to define the key parts of this analysis, one of the more elusive concepts to deconstruct is 'time,' especially in relation to the misportrayal and erasure of Demond, CJ, Ronald, and Joshua. We've briefly explained how Ward humanizes these men

by writing of her closeness to them; how this process grants her access to their interiority. The reason we stress their humanization so vehemently is because we're operating with the sociological knowledge in mind that black people in the United States live in the gloom of racial abuse, and at any moment can be taken by the brutality of violence, misportrayal, or erasure. These states of brutality aren't intrinsically different, because there can't be erasure without violence, misportrayal without the erasure of the truth, and violence without some effect of either. That said, Ward sees time as a function of violence that disproportionately hurts black people. She sees it as an unsurpassable force that wedges distance in between her and her memories of Demond, CJ, Ronald, and notably, Joshua. Time affects their portrayal and provokes erasure by virtue of it condemning everyone to eventually forget: who these men were and the complex lives they led. It distorts the meaning Ward seeks out in the work of remembering, the labor of finding meaning. Time is an obstacle in this work: "We tried to outpace the thing that chased us, that said: *You are nothing*. (Ward 249)." The passing of time, coupled with the deaths of Ward's loved ones, tears open a vacuum of meaning that can never fully be stitched whole again. This is seen here on page 249, "When Joshua died, he took many of our stories with him...I write these words to find Joshua, to assert what happened *happened*, in a vain attempt to find meaning (Ward)." At the very least, Ward records the stories of the men, in proximity to her memories of them, in order to affirm the truth: that what took them was something incomprehensible, "vast and large," and unconcerned by the search for meaning.

Morrison explores how other writers grapple with the death of loved ones. Where they look, or what techniques they employ in their grief, to seize meaning from death. For Ward, this isn't possible, but does that mean it's impossible absolutely? Simone de Beauvoir describes the emotion which ran over her at her mother's funeral. In recounting her mother's life, she makes a remark about language that disagrees with Ward's sentiments, saying that

“words brought her to life; they summed up her history (de Beauvoir as quoted in Morrison 94).” In some ways, Ward and de Beauvoir use words to honor the lives of their loved ones, but where de Beauvoir believes in the justice of language in commemorating the dead, Ward writes for the necessity of it. Ward writes to insulate these men against misportrayal and erasure. Because without writing, without being compelled by her proximity, who is there to assert that what happened *happened* (Ward 249)? Morrison then goes on to share with the reader Frederick Douglass’ treatment of his grandmother’s death. Douglass is wary of overindulgence, and refrains from inhabiting the details of her life. He even apologizes to the reader, and refuses to do the work of bringing the image to text. He keeps his narrative to facts by necessity, because he was disadvantaged by a disbelieving readership. He was pressured to establish a colder version of the truth, even in matters of death, because a pouring of emotion from a black man was expressly prohibited, interpreted as dishonesty. In contrast, Ward doesn’t stave off emotion; she embraces the embeddedness of these men’s deaths in her own life and, as a result, weaves their stories into her own narrative. One can use whichever writerly techniques they need to in the aftermath of death in order to make sense of its incomprehension, but what Douglass teaches us about Ward’s work is that there is always an audience which, to some degree, gets to dictate how one delivers their story. The last author Morrison invokes is James Baldwin. He describes his fixation with ‘meaningless’ artifacts which belonged to his father after his death, how they stood before him like “empty bottles waiting to hold meaning (Baldwin as quoted in Morrison 94).” Baldwin used his writing in *Notes of a Native Son* to fill those bottles with meaning (94). The thread that unifies all of these authors is time. No matter their approach to grief, they all had to confront how time affects how they choose to remember their loved ones.

The meaning Ward finds in writing about the deaths of her boys has a threshold, and at that mark, she’s confronted with a painful dilemma. By writing “Men We Reaped,” she

enters the world of these men's infinities. She realizes that no anecdote, no venture into their interiority, can begin to encapsulate who they were, yet all that she can do is try. All she can do is "say." As the line goes, "And there's my dilemma, because all I can do is say (Ward 243)." The other part of the dilemma we've already outlined. If Ward doesn't dare to *say*, the infinities of these men fall by the wayside. This passage opens with a beautifully painful reminder of the power black men hold over narratives that aren't only their own. Ward writes, "When Joshua died, he took so many of our stories with him (243)." The work of forging meaning, the work of interiority, is also Ward trying to recover her own story, because her story is wrapped up in the fold of her brother's, of all her departed friends. However, it's not quite certain whether Ward can recover more of her own infinity than she can of Demond, CJ, Ronald, and Joshua's because she's alive, nor is it certain that she knows the stories which have been lost in their death. Maybe that's why she interspersed her story with theirs. Maybe there's no way to meaningfully distinguish the parts of herself that have been lost with them, her boys, who have been lost. Part of the rawness of "Men We Reaped" is that Ward, in locating the interiority of the boys, does the same for herself.

Morrison teaches us that imagination can console the writer who has experienced loss. In Morrison's case, her ancestors were forbidden from writing their own stories, their own truths. She had to use imagination in order to know who her people were, to get a glimpse into their infinities. And she criticizes those that claim this act of imagination makes writing untruthful. I don't wish to mince her words. Here's what she said: "On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply (Morrison 92)." This is the act of literary archeology. Ward's dilemma could partially be addressed with Morrison's imagination. I don't wish to imply that what Ward has lost in the deaths of her friends, can simply be recovered by imagination. What I'd like to inquire about is whether imagination as

Morrison sees it, as a tool to travel back through time, can assist Ward in describing more explicitly who these men were. Take the example of a married couple of 35 years. They would've spent enough time together to faithfully imagine most reactions the other would have to various stimuli. They can reach into their experiences and with reasonable confidence predict how the world around them will make the other feel. This is an act of imagination that isn't categorically untruthful. It's also an example of a different type of proximity. By putting herself near to the imagined, Ward can perhaps recover some of those small details about the men she's lost.

In the wake of death, Ward flees for the memories she has of Demond, CJ, Ronald, and Joshua. She sits among the pieces of their departure; she wanders into their infinities. She writes and she writes, but knows that writing is insufficient. At the end of the day, "Men We Reaped" isn't a how-to guide on how to exit from grief, it's Ward's expression of how troubling it is when you're indefinitely there. Immeasurably close to the memories you have of the dead, but still too far to make them alive again.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *The Site of Memory*. Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston, 1987, pp. 85–102.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Men We Reaped a Memoir*. London [U.A.] Bloomsbury, 2014.