

# "Bodies tell stories" : body politics in Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped*

Autor(en): **Kraft, Corin**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **42 (2023)**

PDF erstellt am: **23.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1046385>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

CORIN KRAFT  
(UNIVERSITY OF BASEL)

## “Bodies Tell Stories”: Body Politics in Jesmyn Ward’s Memoir *Men We Reaped*

In Jesmyn Ward’s memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), dead bodies tell the story of what it means to be Black in the U.S. South. Ward’s memoir articulates the racist body politics that is responsible for the five men’s deaths. “Body politics” is a concept that refers to the political power exercised over individuals through their bodies based on physical features. By telling their individual stories and identifying the greater narrative that connects them, Ward turns the deaths into a matter of public concern. Thus, *Men We Reaped* becomes ‘conversational territory.’ It is an empowering medium and a place for cultural critique from which to push back against the discrimination and marginalization of Black people in the South.

Keywords: Jesmyn Ward; *Men We Reaped*; body politics; U.S. South; slavery

### “Children of History and Place”

“Bodies tell stories” in Jesmyn Ward’s literary work (*Salvage the Bones* 83). In her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), dead bodies tell the story of what it means to be a Black person in the U.S. South. The memoir focuses on the violent deaths of five young Black men who grew up and lived in DeLisle, the author’s hometown on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Convinced that everyone is a “child[ ] of history and place” (15), Ward seems to suggest that it was the South and its destructive body politics that killed these five Mississippians over the narrated period from 2000 to 2004. In her memoir of personal loss of family members and friends, she situates these tragic deaths within a wider socio-political context of the U.S. South. *Men We Reaped* depicts southern Mississippi as a place where “the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility” limit the social, material, and political opportunities of Black men (8).

In this article, I argue that Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped*, gives a voice to the five portrayed dead bodies to tell their stories of what it means to be Black in the South. Ward connects these individual stories to a greater narrative that identifies their deaths as present-day variations of the South's slavery past and thus reveals the South's racist body politics. By giving a voice to the ongoing injustice in her memoir, Ward brings to light the discriminating and marginalizing power structures that are responsible for the five men's deaths. By sharing their stories with a wider readership, she turns their deaths into a matter of public concern. Thus, *Men We Reaped* becomes 'conversational territory,' to use Sharon Holland's phrase. It is an empowering medium and a place for cultural critique from which to push back against the discrimination and marginalization of Black people in the South.

In order to support my argument, I examine how the mechanisms of body politics are involved in the deaths of the five Black men whom Ward portrays. I also show how Ward presents the individual stories of these dead men as connected through a greater narrative that goes back to the legacy of slavery. Finally, I consider the empowering function of Ward's memoir in its claim for social justice for Black people in the South.

Other memoirs by Mississippi writers who address the challenges and everyday realities of what it means to be Black and grow up and live as African Americans in the South include Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), as well as Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive* (2020). Ward's writing is also greatly influenced by James Baldwin, in particular by his non-fiction text, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), that contains two essays about race in the 1960s U.S., a hundred years after the abolition of slavery. In response to Baldwin, Ward edited a collection of essays and poems under the title *The Fire This Time* (2016), emphasizing the continuity of the issues of racism and the legacy of slavery in the early twenty-first-century United States.

In a first step, I elaborate my understanding of 'Black body' and introduce the theoretical concept of body politics. I explain some of its mechanisms and point out its potential for protest and resistance. I present a brief overview of key works in the field of Southern Studies and Southern literature that focus on body politics. In a second step, I turn to Ward's memoir to examine the social powers; that is, the body politics of the South, at work in the five deaths portrayed. I then investigate the narrative structure of the memoir. The structure reveals the ubiquity of the South's slavery past in the narrative present. Finally, I explore the memoir's empowering potential regarding social justice.

The two meanings of ‘body,’ namely the “physical form of a person” as well as “corpse” (“Body”), are essential in *Men We Reaped*: The five individuals portrayed are not just bodies, they are *Black* bodies, and it is this particular aspect about their physical form that ultimately turns them into corpses. In my analysis, I use the term ‘Black body’ in the sense used by Thadious M. Davis, as a “body raced as black” (19) to refer to a “raced subject[.]” (18) who is the product of a body politics that reaches back to the institution of slavery.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the ‘Black bodies’ in Ward’s memoir tell the story of what it means to be Black in the South: being subject to a body politics based on race. Ward points out the raced reality of being Black in the U.S. South as follows: “Like all children, [Ward’s parents] were the children of history and place, of southern Mississippi and Louisiana, both their family lines mixed with African, French, Spanish, and Native ancestry all smoothed to the defining *Black* in the American South” (*Men We Reaped* 15, emphasis in original). Ward confirms that ‘Black’ is the defining signifier for people in the U.S. South who are of other than (only) European descent. It is an attribution that goes back to the South’s history of colonialism and the institution of slavery. Ward deconstructs the signified meaning of ‘Black.’ She shows how subsuming such a variety of ethnic origins under one umbrella term is an operation that is closer to squeezing than “smoothing.”

Scholarship on body politics centers around French philosopher Michel Foucault who was particularly interested in the relationship between political power and life. Foucault uses the terms ‘biopower’ and ‘anatomy-politics’ as well as ‘biopolitics’ to describe the power that institutions exercise over life.<sup>2</sup> Since life as such is not tangible to politics, power over life manifests in the regulation of the human body, which is

---

<sup>1</sup> Davis points out that the institution of slavery established “spheres of production that in turn organized social relations and created a language of spatial differentiation that depended upon race” (14). These spheres generated “hierarchies of power and privilege” that were maintained when slavery was replaced with segregation in the early twentieth century (16). The South, according to Davis, “maintain[ed] the separation of the races, of black spaces of inferiority and subordination to white domination” (16–17).

<sup>2</sup> For illustrations of Foucault’s use of these terms, see *Discipline and Punish*, *The Will to Knowledge*, and *Society Must Be Defended*. In “The Birth of Biopolitics,” Foucault defines biopolitics as “the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race...” (73).

“life in its corporeal form” (Campbell & Sitze 14).<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s studies on the relationship between politics and the human body greatly influenced further research on body politics including, for example, Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies,” and Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*. In this article, I refer to political power exercised over individuals through their bodies as ‘body politics’ (rather than ‘biopolitics’ or ‘biopower’) to emphasize the corporeal experience of the individuals whose bodies are regulated and managed by politics. My understanding of body politics is based on the definition of the concept in the *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, as racism plays a key role in my discussion of Ward’s memoir:

The term *body politics* refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body. [...] Individuals and movements engage in body politics when they seek to alleviate the oppressive effects of institutional and interpersonal power on those whose bodies are marked as inferior or who are denied rights to control their own bodies. (Shaw 228, emphasis in original)

Powers of society, such as institutions, the government, the law, or social norms, establish hierarchies and social relations based on bodily characteristics (for example, skin color, gender, age) that regulate groups of individuals who share specific physical features. In order for this to occur, these societal powers establish a rigid system of hierarchized dichotomies (such as black/white, masculine/feminine, old/young) into which they place human bodies (Brown & Gershon 1). These binary hierarchies are power structures that legitimize discrimination and marginalization of minorities; they create groups of individuals whose bodies share characteristics considered inferior according to the logic of the established dichotomies. Consequently, individuals, or marginalized collectives thereof, experience body politics as the freedom granted to them or the restrictions imposed upon them by the powers of society, based on how their bodies are activated, regulated, manipulated, wounded, or even killed.

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Foucault, the regulation of human bodies is based on disciplinary techniques that ultimately govern the autonomy of the individual’s body. In *Discipline and Punish*, he explains these disciplinary techniques by looking at the emerging regulating mechanisms that operate in Western prisons during the modern age.

Body politics not only holds the powers of society to restrict and regulate bodies, but it can also lead to “resistance and protest against such powers” and thus “challenge racism” (Shaw 229). The slogan “Black is Beautiful” played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when African Americans demanded the end of segregation by embracing Blackness—the very bodily characteristic that was used to discriminate against them (229). In this sense, opposing restricting body politics and turning it into an empowering force can only be successful if the rigidity and limitation of the binary dichotomy at work (which is the base for the discrimination and marginalization) is dismantled and deconstructed, and new power relations are claimed by insisting on recognition and inclusion. More than fifty years after the end of segregation, Ward’s memoir, *Men We Reaped*, can be read in the context of the civil rights movement #BlackLivesMatter,<sup>4</sup> a contemporary example of empowering body politics. On their website, #BlackLivesMatter declare that their “mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives” (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc.). Like “Black is Beautiful,” #BlackLivesMatter claim ‘Black’ to reverse the body politics that regulate and restrict their lives based on exactly this physical feature. #BlackLivesMatter protest against instances of police harassment and hate crimes directed at Black people. Moreover, they demand their full integration in society by highlighting their potential in the form of “Black imagination and innovation” as well as “Black joy.” Like #BlackLivesMatter, Ward’s memoir protests present-day racism and discrimination against Black people, refuses to be silent about these crimes, and demands integration for Black people in the South.

In *Haunted Bodies*, Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson investigate body politics in Southern Studies. Houston A. Baker and Dana

---

<sup>4</sup> #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 as a result of the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin who was shot by George Zimmermann, a neighborhood watch volunteer, in Sanford, Florida, on 26 February 2012. Zimmermann claimed that he killed Martin in self-defense, but a prior violent encounter that would have justified the use of deadly force according to Florida’s law could not be confirmed. In July 2013, Zimmermann was found not guilty by the jury, a verdict that enflamed further protests against racism in the U.S. and gave occasion to the foundation of the Black Lives Matter social movement (Britannica).

Nelson, in “Violence, the Body and ‘The South,’” also show the intricate relationship between the body and the South in terms of history, culture, politics, and social structures. The body in Southern Studies is further examined, for example, by Thadious M. Davis, Jay Watson, Christopher Lloyd, Patricia Yaeger, and Christina Sharpe. In the following, I will briefly outline their main contributions to the research on body politics in the South. In *Southscapes*, Thadious M. Davis looks at how Mississippi and Louisiana are shaped by an intersection of space, race, and society. Davis studies the ways in which “raced human beings are impacted by the shape of the land,” arguing that the South is a “social, political, cultural, and economic construct” that is not only an idea, but that in fact has a material reality (11). Similar to Davis, Watson bases his analysis in *Reading for the Body* on the material reality of the South. He asks for the re-materialization of Southern Studies as he finds that the U.S. South has often been “over-intellectualiz[ed]” and “over-idealiz[ed]” by its scholars (21). Based on Louis Althusser’s claim that “[i]deology has a material existence” (165),<sup>5</sup> Watson states that bodies are at the center of the ideologies of the South, and that they are the material into which social, cultural, political, economic, and racial realities have been inscribed (21–22). By investigating the bodies portrayed in the literature of the U.S. South, Watson exposes those ideologies that have shaped “regional and national cultures” (27). In *Corporeal Legacies in the US South*, Lloyd answers Watson’s call for the ‘re-materialization’ of Southern Studies and suggests their ‘re-corporealization’ in order to emphasize the physical reality of the body. Assuming that ideologies in the South are strongly connected to race and racism, Lloyd understands “corporeal legacies” as the continuity of racialized memory that manifests in social or political violence against individual Black bodies (11). In this sense, bodies in contemporary Southern texts become “historical corpora” that “reveal a physical substantiation of the region’s past” (7)—a past that reaches back to the institution of slavery.

All the aforementioned scholars share a focus on bodies that ‘differ’ from the normative body, meaning bodies that are *not* White, male, and unharmed. Patricia Yaeger’s research in particular focuses on bodies that deviate from this norm. In *Dirt and Desire*, she looks at Southern women writers and their “irregular models of the body within an extremely regu-

---

<sup>5</sup> In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser explains that ideology does not merely exist in form of ideas and the mind, but has a material base in the body. Consequently, ideology is realized *in* and *by* bodies through their (re-)actions as well as their behavior.

lated society” (xiii) in order to highlight the “space of political obsession” within which these bodies operate (xiii). Yaeger’s examination of ‘irregular’ bodies<sup>6</sup> allows her to investigate “the way that *bios* is determined by history” (221).<sup>7</sup> Yaeger’s most interesting ‘irregular’ body for my discussion of Ward’s memoir is the “throwaway” body which represents “women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed—who are *not* symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference” (68, emphasis in original). In this sense, ‘throwaway’ bodies are an expression of a “culture of neglect” (67). ‘Throwaway’ bodies in Southern literature expose the existing power structures of the South and thus hold the potential to become a “mode of cultural critique,” as Watson points out (9). This brief review on body politics in Southern Studies demonstrates that scholars have turned to the human body as the material reality (the corporeal) that reveals the body politics of the South; that is, the powers of society that shape the political, social, and economic order in the South as a place. This order is strongly connected to ideologies of race and reaches back to the institution of slavery, as I show in my reading of Ward’s memoir.

### “I Must Give Voice to This Story”: Black Bodies and Their Stories of the South

*Men We Reaped* is constructed as a narrative with two storylines that alternate with each chapter. The first storyline is narrated in chronological order and tells Jesmyn Ward’s family history from “the distant past” (9) to her childhood and youth (1980s and 1990s) to the year 2000 when her brother Joshua died in a car accident. Looking back several generations in her family history, Ward points out that many of her male ancestors were victims of shootings or gang violence, or lost their lives as soldiers in

<sup>6</sup> Yaeger focuses on various other ‘irregular’ bodies, for example, the “captive body” (xiii), “images of monstrous, ludicrous bodies” (4), “broken bodies” (25), “messy, untidy, fiendish bodies” (27), “hybridized bodies” and “disabled bodies” (32).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Irregular’ bodies in Southern literature that shed light on how the region’s body politics works manifest, for example, in the writing of Flannery O’Connor and her depiction of “strange” bodies, Eudora Welty’s portrayal of the female body, Alice Walker’s hard-working bodies, Cormac McCarthy’s accounts of violent bodies, or the neglect of Jesmyn Ward’s “Black” bodies during hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* (Lloyd 5).



Vietnam. She concludes that “[m]en’s bodies litter [her] family history” (14). The second storyline is narrated in inverse chronological order and covers the period from 2004 back to 2000. It tells the stories of five young Black men and their tragic and violent deaths in Ward’s hometown in the U.S. South: Ward’s friend Roger died in June 2004 of a heart attack caused by an overdose of cocaine and pills. Demond, another friend of Ward’s, was murdered before he could testify against a drug dealer in court in February 2004. Ward’s cousin, C.J., died in a car accident that was the result of an unsecured railway crossing in January 2004. Ward’s friend Ronald, in despair over a mix of poverty, racism, and violence, committed suicide by shooting himself in the head in December 2002. Ward’s brother, Joshua, was killed in a car accident caused by a drunk White driver who sped up on Joshua and bullied him off the road in October 2000. As this sad summary demonstrates, being a Black man in the South seems to be fatal. Throughout her memoir, Ward describes the environment of the South, where the five Black men grow up and live, as threatening and discouraging. Ward concludes as follows:

[D]egradations that come from a life of poverty exacerbated by maleness and Blackness and fatherlessness in the South—being stopped and searched by the police, going to a high school where no one really cared if [a young black man] graduated and went to college, the dashed dreams of being a pilot or a doctor or whatever it was he wanted [...]. (*Men We Reaped* 175)

Ward draws a bleak picture of the lives of Black men in Southern Mississippi. They are defined and restricted by socio-economic and political realities such as disrupted and poor families, lack of educational perspectives followed by little to no career opportunities, low income, and discrimination exercised upon them by the authorities. All these issues are, to use Yaeger’s term, expressions of a ‘culture of neglect,’ in which the Black body is discriminated against, marginalized, and devalued. Ward describes her Black community’s fight against these powers of society of exclusion and degradation as follows: “We tried to outpace the thing that chased us, that said: You are nothing. We tried to ignore it, but sometimes we caught ourselves repeating what history said, mumbling along, brain-washed: *I am nothing*” (*Men We Reaped* 249, emphasis in original). Ward draws attention to the historic dimension of being Black in the U.S. South, of being “nothing,” of being assigned zero value. This “nothing” goes back to the South’s slavery past, where the Black body did not count as human being but was reduced to a thing. Thus, the Black body is not

even “no-body,” but is made into “no-thing.” In this sense, “the thing,” the Black community wants to escape from refers to the legacy of slavery that still resonates in the present of Ward’s memoir.

The experience of the past of slavery persists in the present for the Black body, according to Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*. To emphasize the continuity of racism in its various forms in the U.S. over time, Sharpe introduces the term ‘wake,’ echoing “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow” (3). In this sense, ‘wake’ refers to the inevitable trace of slavery that surrounds and follows the Black body like ripples forming on the disturbed surface of water. Being ‘chased’ by the legacy of slavery also means being “a (black) post-slavery subject positioned within everyday intimate brutalities” as Sharpe states in her other book, *Monstrous Intimacies* (26). She draws attention to the repeated violence performed against the post-slavery Black body and claims that the frequent recurrence of these atrocities leads to public indifference (2). The consequence of this indifference is that violence against the Black body becomes normalized, or, even legitimized by the public—precisely *through* their ignorance and inaction. A closer look at the circumstances surrounding the violent deaths of the five young men portrayed in Ward’s memoir reveals that they all become victims of the South’s slavery past in form of its present-day variations that include systemic racism, economic deprivation, as well as social and political neglect. These five young male Mississippians are affected by discriminating and marginalizing powers of society, including physical violence, that are directed against them and their Black bodies. These Black bodies tell the stories of the consequences of being Black in the U.S. South: Roger and Ronald died trying to deal with lack of job opportunities and lack of perspectives for their future through the seemingly only options available to them, namely drug abuse and suicide. Their bodies tell the story of economic deprivation and social neglect as they face “unsteady work, one dead-end job after another, institutions that systematically undervalue [them] as [...] worker[s], [...] citizen[s], [...] human being[s]” (211). C.J. died in a car accident because the authorities did not care to fix a railroad crossing “out in the county in a mainly Black area” (125). His body tells the story of public indifference and political neglect. Finally, Demond’s and Joshua’s bodies tell the story of failures in the justice system. Whereas Demond did not get any protection from his murderer before he could testify against him in court, Joshua’s murderer was “convicted of leaving the scene of an accident”

(234), which is considered a felony instead of “vehicular manslaughter” (233). The bodies of the White murderer and the Black victim firmly set their destinies respectively, as Ward explains, “The drunk driver was in his forties and White. My brother was nineteen and Black” (234). Examining the nature of the five Black men’s deaths in Ward’s memoir reveals destructive social powers directed against Black people (Black young men in particular). The body politics of the South turns the bodies of these five Black men into corpses; one could even say it “throws” them “away.” Thus, the dead bodies in the memoir tell the story of what it means to be Black in the South: suffering from present-day variations of the region’s slavery past, which manifests in instances of public indifference, systemic racism, economic deprivation, as well as social and political neglect.

Joshua’s death is the center towards which the past and the future gravitate in *Men We Reaped*. When the storyline told in inverse chronological order comes to its end and reaches Joshua’s death, which marks the beginning of multiple dead bodies in her life, Ward notes, “This is where the past and the future meet” (213). Telling one storyline forward and the other backward until they cross at Joshua’s death—the key memory of the text—creates the effect of time merging, or even imploding. This traumatic event generates an eternal present that feeds on the past. Ward describes it as follows: “This is where my two stories come together. This is the summer of the year 2000. This is the last summer that I will spend with my brother. This is the heart. This is. Every day, this is” (213). The repetition of and insistence on the phrase “this is,” formulated in the present tense, indicates that the pain and grief are ever present, and that this experience of loss infinitely perpetuates itself and becomes a permanent state: Ward and her family and friends keep losing their young Black men. This collision of the past and the future, the merging or imploding of time, is another aspect of being ‘in the wake.’ Sharpe explains that “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (9). This means that “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (13–14, emphasis in original). The Black body in the South still suffers from the ‘wake,’ the aftermaths of slavery. Considering these constant ruptures of the past that penetrate the present, Ward asks, “[D]id that mean we were living the same story over and over again, down through the generations? That the young and Black had always been dying, until all that was left were children and the few old, as in war?” (68). The experience of perpetual loss in Ward’s community is an instance of being ‘in

the wake.’ It is the never-ending torment of the South’s slavery past, the ripples from the past, that are causing the deaths of their loved ones in the present.

Even though Ward and her family and friends are aware of being ‘in the wake,’ and even though they know that their Black bodies are constantly threatened by the present-day variations of their slavery past, they still cannot save these bodies. On the contrary, the Black community finds themselves in yet another dimension of the ‘wake’ as they hold vigil by the dead bodies. Sharpe explains that “[w]akes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial” (*In the Wake* 21). The Black community in Ward’s memoir is stuck in a continuous state of mourning as their family members and friends continue dying at a frequency that outpaces their capacity to ever leave the state of grieving. In light of this constant exposure to death Ward asks,

Could anything we do make that accretion of graves a little slower? Our waking moments a little longer? The grief we bear, along with all the other burdens of our lives, all our other losses, sinks us, until we find ourselves in a red, sandy grave. In the end, our lives are our deaths. (*Men We Reaped* 127–28)

These “waking moments,” the ritualized forms of dealing with the aftermaths of slavery, are what “sinks [them]”—the survivors—into their own graves as Ward describes it. In a sense, their life *is* death. Telling the stories of the dead bodies, that are the cause of the Black community’s wakes, is an attempt to interrupt the steady flow of mourning. It is an attempt to challenge the ‘culture of neglect,’ where Black bodies become ‘throwaways,’ their deaths are met with public indifference, where their dead bodies become a matter of fact.

By telling the stories of these five young men Ward gives a voice to their Black bodies. In her prologue, she writes: “I wonder why silence is the sound of our subsumed rage, our accumulated grief. I decide this is not right, that I must give voice to this story” (8). “This story” refers to the greater narrative that connects the five young men’s individual stories. It refers to the legacy of slavery and its present-day variations of racism, political neglect, and economic deprivation that Black bodies experience in the South. Driven by her most painful loss, her brother Joshua’s death, Ward expresses the urge to tell the five Black men’s stories in public to draw attention to the injustice surrounding their deaths:

I write these words to find Joshua, to assert that what happened *happened*, in a vain attempt to find meaning. And in the end, I know little, some small facts: I love Joshua. He was here. He lived. Something vast and large took him, took all of my friends: Roger, Demond, C.J., and Ronald. Once they lived. (249, emphasis in original)

“Finding” her brother means identifying the “[...] vast and large [something]” that killed Joshua, bringing charges against it and claiming justice. Telling their stories turns Joshua’s and the other four Black bodies into evidence of the body politics of the South that reaches back to the place’s dark past. Thus, “asserting” the five men’s deaths means making their stories public and by doing so fighting indifference. In this sense, Ward’s memoir foregrounds the existence of these Black bodies and saves them from becoming ‘throwaway’ bodies that do not matter enough—neither to be respected and protected, nor to be granted rights and be remembered. With her memoir, Ward rejects the public indifference towards Black bodies in the South and declares the five men’s deaths as a matter of public concern. With her literary text, she exposes the region’s underlying racial and socio-economic power structures that are responsible for their deaths. By revealing the body politics of the South, *Men We Reaped* becomes an empowering medium to push back against the discrimination and marginalization of Black people. Moreover, the memoir holds the potential to challenge the regulating and restricting body politics as portrayed in the literary text. Through her memoir, Ward grants a voice to the individuals who form the anonymous mass of Black bodies (dead and alive) into which the South has turned them and raises attention to the ongoing injustice. By raising attention, the memoir raises the dead. Raising the dead, according to Sharon Holland, means “allowing them [the dead] to speak, and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story of a death-in-life” (4).<sup>8</sup> Dead bodies need the voice of the living to speak about the experienced atrocities, and to make the dead bodies’ past suffering visible in the present. Ward’s memoir “raises the dead” as it gives them a voice to tell their stories of what it means to be Black in the South. *Men We Reaped* allows Black bodies to articulate their experience

---

<sup>8</sup> Holland bases her concept of “raising the dead” on Toni Morrison’s essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.” In her text, Morrison reflects on the absence of African American authors from the American literary canon and concludes that “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’; [...] certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves” (173). Ward’s memoir centers exactly around the pain that the absence of five young male community members creates.

of being regulated by a fatal body politics and draws public attention to the ongoing social injustice. Moreover, telling the stories of the dead also “transform[s] inarticulate places into conversational territories” for the living and “allows marginalized peoples to speak about the unspoken” (Holland 3–5). Ward’s memoir ends the silence of the living, those who have survived, and it becomes the “sound of [their] subsumed rage, [their] accumulated grief” (*Men We Reaped* 8). In this sense, *Men We Reaped* is ‘conversational territory’ that holds the potential for setting the ground for personal and shared healing of Black bodies by exposing the destructive body politics of the South.

### “We Are Here”: Concluding Remarks

Ward’s memoir is “the narrative that remembers” (251). It remembers the South’s slavery past that in its present-day variations still affects Black people’s lives today. Joshua’s death only marks the beginning of a series of deaths that testify to the fatal character of the body politics of the South. In this sense, Joshua’s and the other four young men’s dead bodies are corporeal evidence—and they tell the stories—of what it means to be Black in the South. Through her memoir, Ward situates the stories of these five Black bodies in a wider narrative—a “history of loss” (251)—which is the legacy of slavery. Present-day variations of this violent past materialize in the South’s body politics and involve discriminating and marginalizing mechanisms such as racism, economic deprivation, and a culture of socio-political neglect. The five men’s deaths are expressions of the body politics of the South. The Black bodies in Ward’s memoir are evidence of the ‘bodily impact’ of the power structures deriving from a legacy of slavery in the South. These bodies are what Yaeger calls, “spatialized ideology” (226). By exposing these ideologies, and with them the underlying powers of society that caused the deaths of the five Black men, the memoir holds the potential of pushing back against the established racist body politics of the South. Ward’s memoir gives a voice to these Black bodies, allows them to tell their stories and claim their place in the South. The very act of telling their stories means refusing that their Black bodies become ‘throwaway bodies’ as their existence is acknowledged and remembered publicly. It allows them to say “*Hello. We are here. Listen*” (*Men We Reaped* 251). In this sense, *Men We Reaped* becomes ‘conversational territory,’ a place of cultural critique where the

deadly socio-political reality for Black people in the South becomes articulated and criticized.

## References

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, edited by Louis Althusser, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 127–86.
- Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. "About." *Black Lives Matter*. blacklivesmatter.com. Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.
- Britannica. *Shooting of Trayvon Martin*. britannica.com/event/shooting-of-Trayvon-Martin. Accessed 13 July 2023.
- Brown, Nadia, and Sarah Allen Gershon. "Body Politics." *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–3. doi:10.1080/21565503.2016.1276022.
- Campbell, Timothy C., and Adam Sitze. "Biopolitics: An Encounter." *Biopolitics: A Reader*, edited by Timothy C. Campbell and Adam Sitze, Duke UP, 2013, pp. 1–40.
- Davis, Thadious M. *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature*. The U of North Carolina P, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Birth of Biopolitics." *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, New Press, 1997, pp. 73–79.
- . *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*, edited by Mauro Bertani et al., Picador, 2003.
- Holland, Sharon. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Lloyd, Christopher. *Corporeal Legacies in the US South: Memory and Embodiment in Contemporary Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018.
- Moore, John Hartwell, editor. *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*. Thomson Gale, 2008.
- Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, pp. 161–97.
- "Body." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2022, oed.com/dictionary/body\_n?tab=meaning\_and\_use#17169605.
- Sharpe, Christina. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Duke UP, 2010.
- . *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Shaw, Carolyn Martin. "Body Politics." Moore, pp. 228–30.
- Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. 2011. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
- . *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. 2013. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.



Watson, Jay. *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985*. U of Georgia P, 2012.

Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. 2000. U of Chicago P, 2009.