

Mary Lihong Peng

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Dear Reader,

In this essay, I investigate into how the identity of Black Southerner is represented in Jesmyn Ward's Memoir *Men We Reaped*. While many Black Southerners might have the shared experience of poverty and racial inequality, the complexity of Ward's life path, where plight and privilege, sorrow and guilt intersect, renders her experience of the Black Southerner identity unique. Through the analysis of Ward's account of life and death, I explore the dynamics between individual identity and collective identity, aiming to explain how Ward achieves personal reconciliation, community representation, and ultimately potential for broader social transformation by presenting her unique personal voice on the elevated social platform of life writing. I do not explicitly mention the phrase "social work" in my essay because I intend to illustrate how different dimensions of Ward's intentions overlap, flow organically from personal to social goals, and ultimately unite in the ambition to create social changes. Tatum, Smith, and Watson are all incorporated into my exposition of identity representation in Ward's memoir. For improvement in the future, I'd love to compare and contrast Ward with other Black literature authors to further explore the nuances and similarities between different representations of the same identity. Thank you again your time. I hope you enjoy my humble take on the topic.

Yours Sincerely,

Mary

Unsilencing The Men We Reaped: The Voice of Unheard Tragedies

“We saw the lightning and that was the guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped” (*The Moses of Her People*)

---Harriet Tubman

It was dead men that we reaped. It was their stories that need to be heard. In *The Moses of Her People*, Harriet Tubman recounts her perilous experiences as a Civil War nurse. Countless Black men died, leaving behind their women to pick up the pieces. Jesmyn Ward borrows this grotesque imagery from Tubman’s story and relives the pain of loss in her memoir *Men We Reaped*. When Black lives are blissfully cast into oblivion, when the outcry of agony is quieted by the lighthearted music at the county park, we should know that something has gone terribly wrong. Ward’s memoir offers a poignant account of the tragedy bestowed upon the Black Southerners in DeLisle, Mississippi, culminating in the heart-wrenching losses of her brother and friends. It is a tale of untold grief. This essay seeks to elucidate how Ward’s individual Black Southerner identity and her resultant emotional granularity in her experience of guilt and longing for internal peace and external change expand public understanding of the collective identity of Black Southerner. The elevation of a unique identity experience from an individual sphere to a public sphere through life writing effectively facilitates the three major accomplishments of Ward’s work---namely personal reconciliation through answer seeking, community representation through unsilencing the unheard, and ultimately the creation of possibility of social changes.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward ventures backward and forward in time to retrace the deaths of her loved ones, eventually arriving at the present reality of racial hatred that connects the seemingly “unrelated deaths” (7) of five black young men. By disclosing the story of the five young men who lost their lives to suicide, drugs, disease, and violence, Ward gives the dead a voice, through which readers are propelled to grapple with the heartache beneath the enduring pathology of racial inequality. Ultimately, Ward writes to provoke and create changes. Through the process of questioning and unsilencing, she illuminates the deep-rooted racial bias that has pinioned many Black Southerners’ lives beneath the morbid reality of racism that induces their personal tragedies. Ward tears off these outrageously obvious yet frustratingly subtle masks that have long concealed many Black Southerners’ true experience of their identity, ultimately calling for a societal paradigm shift on how people understand the manifestation of racial struggle.

Ward’s childhood in DeLisle was punctuated with trauma as she experienced firsthand the cold violence of discrimination in school and the burning pain of loss in

life. However, after she went to Stanford and Michigan for college, she decided to return to Mississippi to raise her family. As Ward explained in a spoken word segment, she returned home because she was “endlessly fascinated by it as she (I) attempted to render it in her (my) writing” (“*DeLisle: ‘The bruised heart of Jesmyn Ward’s literary world’*”). As Ward starts to pen down her memory, DeLisle becomes part of her question, part of her language, part of her identity, part of her answer, and eventually part of her nightmare that she seeks to make peace with. Her childhood experience of attending “a majority White, Episcopalian Mississippi private school” where her white classmates “would often glance at her (me) when they spoke about Black people” (2) dictates that Ward’s initial experience of her Black Southerner identity was one of marginalization and confusion. Discrimination and pain become part of Ward’s identity formula, which sows the seed of Ward’s later desire to expose the injustice that many Black Southerners suffer. Ward’s later achievement in life and success in ascending to a higher social class complicate her sentiment and experience as a Black Southerner. While her loved ones lost their lives to violence and crimes, Ward survived. While many other Black Southerners failed to escape the trap of poverty, Ward succeeded. Ward, therefore, is not simply a victim, but also a victor. Moreover, Ward is a victim and victor of life as much as she is of her interior world. The sense of responsibility, moral righteousness, guilt, sorrow, and hope that arise from her internal victim-victor conflict make Ward a victor who desperately seeks to reconcile with a victim’s past. Ward’s struggle ultimately becomes her source of motivation, which eventually drives her to expose the plight of Black Southerners and give voice to her community as she struggles to loosen her own emotional shackle. Individual agenda thereby evolves into a transformative force on a social level.

Ward is clear that she was motivated to write *Men We Reaped* by her desire to make sense of the deaths of five loved ones that she experienced. Her sister’s boyfriend died in a car accident, a friend of hers was shot, another friend died of a heart attack due to drug overdose, another committed suicide, and her own brother was killed by a drunk driver. They become Ward’s “ghosts” (7), whose stories have become “a list of silence” (7). However, to Ward, “her (my) ghosts were once people, and she (I) cannot forget that” (7). The immediacy and urgency to unearth the roots of the “epidemic” (8) of racial suffering propel Ward to revisit her agonizing past. She seeks to understand the cause of these relentless occurrences of tragedies, and she manages to illuminate the oppression embedded in the history of racial inequality that has perpetuated black people’s cycle of suffering. Through this process of self-reconciliation and sense making, she triumphed as a victim in search for the root of her pain. She found her answer.

Seeking answers and bringing her inquiry into a public sphere become Ward’s means of rebellion against the dominant culture. As Smith and Watson explain in their

1996 book *Getting a Life: The Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, “narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available” (175). These models of identity are subject to the influence of social institutions that cause individuals to “move into, through, and out of” spaces that require them to tell their stories (175). As these narrators enter and exit different social spaces, they are bound to have some specific kinds of personal reactions to the dissonance of identities. Born into poverty and constantly being associated with “the murder capital” and “gang initiations” (2), Ward lived in a social space marked by pervasive struggle against discrimination. Yet, she has had the fortune to pursue education and eventually transcend her inherited identity as she graduated from Stanford and became an acclaimed author. As Ward moves into and out of her different social spaces, she is forced to wrestle with the disjunction between her inherited identity and claimed identity. Aggravated by her grief-stricken past, the experience of social and emotional disconnect prompts Ward to voice against the dominant social space. Ward’s success as a prestigious novelist and scholar affords her a victor’s power to make sense of a victim’s past. Ward’s victor-victim mentality and membership in both the oppressive institutional space and later an acquired prestigious social space sets her identity apart from the common Black Southerner identity. Ward is split between two worlds. However, it is exactly the uniqueness in her identity experience that endows her with such a powerful perspective where she can embrace her personal narratives as a means of rebellion against the injustice of racial inequality in the inferior social space. She bridges the two social spaces and becomes a voice of defiance that upsets the conventional narrative of Black Southern identity. And she does so with the emotional intimacy of utter familiarity.

For subordinate groups, rebellions come at a price. As a Black Southerner, Ward belongs to a subordinate social group who has to constantly confront the pressure from dominant groups. The emotional upheaval that Ward experiences as she pitches her story of loss, inequality, and suffering against the dominant status quo perfectly exemplifies subordinate groups’ experience of rebellion and compromise discussed in Beverly Tatum’s essay *The Complexity of Identity: Who Am I*. As Tatum suggests, “whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing” (5). As Ward exposes her story, she is forced to relieve the pain of her past. The emotional intensity embedded in the concluding remark of the prologue, “hopefully, I’ll understand why I’ve been saddled with this rotten fucking story”(8) speaks powerfully to Ward’s emotional struggle as she seeks answers from the past and battles the indifferent odds of racism.

While Ward embarks on the personal journey to seek answers, her story goes beyond a personal story and serves to break the silence of the Black Southerner

community. As Ward unleashes her own voice of struggle, she unleashes the voice of many of the unheard. She gives voice to the dead in her community. From her brother “Joshua in October 2000”, to “Ronald in December 2002”, “C. J. in January 2004” to “Demond in February 2004” to “Roger in June 2004”, five Black young men Ward grew up with “died, all violently, in seemingly unrelated deaths” (7). These deceased young men, who have been stricken by the full extent of tragedy, are forever bereaved of their voices. Without Ward’s work, the dead outcry against the toxicity of racial inequality that lingers over the life and identity of many members of the Black community would be forgotten. Ward makes sure that the injustice and immediacy of that “brutal list” (7) of deaths are no longer invisible to the public. By uncovering the “history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility” (8) behind the story of relentless deaths, Ward’s work allows the public to hear the untold story of racial struggle and unsilences the true witnesses to the social malady of racism. Absences are not just what there is not, but rather what was there and now is not any longer, or what should be there and yet is not. Ward’s memoir fills the absence of the reality of being a non-privileged Black Southerner, making visible a brutal world and rendering it beautifully somber with her words. By far, Ward has successfully utilized her unique Black Southerner identity as the voice of a wider circle of marginalized and unacknowledged Black Southerners.

Ultimately, the process of questioning and unsilencing allows Ward to provoke a re-examination of racial norms in the public sphere. The dominant culture is accustomed to maintaining the façade of violence and little social worth of Black Southerners. Calling New Orleans the “murder capital”, widespread horror stories about White people being shot while unloading groceries from their cars, and rumors about gang initiations (2) are just a few examples of the dominant groups’ entrenched biases against Black Southerners. Subordinate and dominant racial groups live in the same polity, yet they experience different modes of citizenship ---one of sacrifice, and one of rewards. Society as a whole cannot progress towards racial equality until the unequally shared polity is unstitched and rewoven. The first step is to do so is to expose the unjust rules that police the boundaries between different etiquettes of citizenship. In her memoir, Ward achieves this task by exposing the racial bias that dictates Black Southerner’s difficult lives and thus elucidating how racial divide is perpetuated as a result. Just as the five deceased young men, Black Southern citizens have been forced to acquiesce to the acts of discrimination and violence that enforce social segregation. As Smith and Watson explain, writers can exercise agency by telling their specific stories (*Introduction To Getting A Life* 181). As Ward seizes the occasion to go public with her story and the story of her community, she brings to the public’s awareness many rarely recognized sides of what it means to be a Black Southerner. By telling her own emotional struggle as she wrestles with her conflicted

interior world, Ward exposes the psychological burden that stratified social spaces could inflict on a Black Southerner who attempts to transcend his or her subordinate identities. By positioning the characters in her memoir not only as victims of racism and poverty, but also as victims who possesses little power in overcoming their plight, Ward evokes a sense of debasement and amplifies the sense of vulnerability associated with the identity of non-privileged Black Southerners. Once these previously neglected facets of the Black Southern identity are made public, readers or citizens in the rest of the country have no choice but to reject or affirm it. Ward's memoir forces a choice on its readers and consequently engages the readers' imagination of an alternative social reality. The representation of Black Southern identity is indeed unique in Ward's memoir, however the lack of generalization does not necessarily negate the potential of her work to create social changes. The power of uniqueness here is two-fold. The individuality in identity representation facilitates the reversal of conventional Black Southerners as single-dimensional identities that are merely victims of social injustice as well as amplifies the impact of unsilencing the voice of the unheard. As a result, Ward's memoir destabilizes the old stigma towards Black Southerner identity, thus creating room for new social understanding to be reached. The creation of potential for new accounts of racial norms is a thus major accomplishment of Ward's work.

When memories scar, just like all wounds, they still itch. The itch will never go away, and it shouldn't. *Men We Reaped* peels the emotional scar off a world that so desperately needs to be reminded of the unheard grief of the Black Southerner community. By keeping the voice alive, Ward keeps the itch alive, forcing us to scratch the itch of social ills that have shrouded Black lives for way too long.

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