Gender, Race, and Mississippi Landscapes: Ecological Symbolism in the Fiction of Eudora Welty and Jesmyn Ward

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fiction of two prominent Southern women writers, Eudora Welty and Jesmyn Ward, and their respective descriptions of Mississippi's natural environment. This project traces Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946) and Ward's *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017) and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) to extrapolate how each Mississippi woman writer employs the natural world to critique different facets of racialized and gendered Southern ideology. In so doing, I argue that Ward's and Welty's representations of nature within their novels demonstrate the ramifications of unnatural social systems of inequity that are enmeshed within the soil of the Southern U.S. and continue to determine the lived experience of residents of the region.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction **1**

Chapter Two: "Too Much Dirt": The Relationship Between Earth, Labor, and Race in *Delta Wedding* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* **12**

Chapter Three: Depictions of Water in Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Welty's *Delta Wedding* **31**

Chapter Four: The Wedding and The Storm: The Culminating Events of *Delta Wedding* and *Salvage the Bones* **51**

List of References **69**

Vita **73**

Chapter One: Introduction

Any project interested in examining southern literature today requires a consideration of the way that, historically, the burden of justifying a critical return to southern literature has fallen on the shoulders of a few ambitious critics, interested in challenging the perception of the South as a cultural monolith. As I began my own research for this project, I felt compelled to defend not only my own comparative analysis of two prominent southern women writers, Eudora Welty and Jesmyn Ward, but also to rationalize a larger examination of the South and its fictionalized representations that recognizes, rather than glosses over, its history and construction. I thought, why should we consider these women writers and their portrayals of the South here and now? And, more specifically related to the aims of this thesis, what could we learn from a comparison between a twentieth century, white southern woman writer and a contemporary, Black woman author writing about the same region? While I will introduce my reasoning for placing Eudora Welty and Jesmyn Ward in conversation with one another later, I would like to begin with an example from modern pop culture that speaks to the kind of artistic and cultural achievement produced by a return to the works of twentieth-century southern artists.

Released in 2025 and having collected a whopping fifteen Oscars nominations from the most recent Academy Awards, Ryan Coogler's massively successful *Sinners* has quickly become one of the most noteworthy depictions of southern race relations and the Jim Crow era in recent history, with film critic Andrew Lawrence heralding it as "the most culturally important film of 2025" ("How Sinners Became"). Set in the 1930s Mississippi Delta, *Sinners* stars Micheal B. Jordan and blends the realities of white supremacy with a supernatural metaphor in what NPR's Sheldon Peirce calls " a reimagining of the Southern Gothic vampire" that "conceptualizes the terrors of the Jim Crow South's social construction as a figurative sundown town" ("In 'Sinners'"). In itself an accomplished commentary on the

experience of African Americans in the U.S. South, it is the aesthetic origins of the film that I would like to highlight as a symbol of the continual relevance of the works of southern women. In a recent interview about her Oscar nomination for *Sinners*, cinematographer Autumn Durald Arkapaw names Eudora Welty's photography as one of her primary inspirations: "That was my biggest draw . . .This woman was walking around, she was a short-story writer in the 1930s, it was all there for her. It was happening before her eyes" (1:05:14-1:05:55). In naming Eudora Welty's photography as one of its most important cultural and visual reference points, *Sinners* and its immense level of success shows us the kind of fruitful discourse generated through thoughtful examinations of twentieth century southern women, like Welty, by artists in the twenty-first century.

Coogler's *Sinners* is not the only successful more contemporary work about the South that draws on Welty as a frame of reference. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Jesmyn Ward opens her award-winning novel about race and Mississippi cultural history with the following nod to Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983):

> "The memory is a living thing- it too is in transit. But during its moment,
> all that is remembered joins, and lives-the old and the young, the past and
> the present, the living and the dead" (Ward n.p.)

With this epigraph, Ward opens her examination of racial injustice and generational trauma in modern-day Mississippi with a reference to a prominent twentieth-century woman writer who also wrote almost exclusively about the region, but from the perspective of a white, middle-class upbringing. In so doing, the beginning of Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* invites a consideration of the way that both Mississippi women writers undertake place and history in their fiction. What follows Ward's initial reference to Welty in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a mesmerizing genre-blend of supernatural and historical fiction that follows one African American Mississippi family and the way that institutionalized racism continues to literally

and metaphorically haunt their lives. In pointing towards Welty's ideas about the power of memory as a helpful means of understanding her own project, Ward's 2017 novel asserts Welty's ideas as being useful in aiding the generation of powerful perspectives on racism and injustice in Mississippi from a previously underrepresented point of view. Arkapaw's aesthetic inspiration for *Sinners* and Ward's incorporation of Welty in *Sing, Unburied Sing* together imply an ongoing conversation between the twentieth-century southern woman writer and contemporary, fictionalized depictions of Mississippi and American history more broadly.

As I mentioned above, some southern literary critics have also recently called for renewed investigations of southern literature that counter previous structures and present new, meaningful avenues through which to interpret this genre and the complexities represented therein. In regards to the prior construction of southern scholarship, David McWhirter in "Rethinking Southern Literary Studies," argues that, having so long been "subsumed into a unitary narrative" the region has "only recently and reluctantly been allowed to differ from itself" (2). The "itself" that McWhirter refers to here is the South's turbulent history of racialized violence and oppression that exists alongside its idyllic landscapes and aesthetic natural features. Southern authors have long portrayed and been defined by this juxtaposition between presentation and lived reality in the South, that was forged through the region's reliance on Indigenous dispossession and chattel slavery to cultivate its agricultural industry and pastoral appearance[1]. As McWhirter elucidates, the critical tendency has been to understand most of canonical southern literature as an unquestioning appreciation of the region and its ideologies, rather than as a place to read nuance and implied resistance to these incorporated structures.

[1] See Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* and Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden : Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*.

More difficult still has been signaling for a critique of southern literature that pays individualized attention to southern women writers and their fiction. Carol S. Manning addresses this gap in scholarly intrigue and posits that the "scant attention" paid by southern literature critics to women writers "implies they find the women not much interested in" the kind of cultural examinations "they locate chiefly in the works of white males" (6). This disregard, Manning explains, comes from previous scholars "[l]inking the origins of the Southern Renaissance to tensions in the South that surfaced after World War 1" and assuming "the women in fact ignored the so-called larger cultural, racial, and political themes" (6). Southern women writers have, in effect, been too hastily relegated to the margins of the southern literary tradition, in favor of the mythologization of their white male counterparts. As such, there exists a troubling lack of application of what McWhirter calls a "rethinking" of southern literature, in which the complexities of the construction of the South is foregrounded, to southern women writers on the whole. Patricia Yaeger, across her works but most perhaps most notably in *Dirt and Desire* (2000), makes great headway in insisting upon the consideration of southern women writers as a genre. She contends that the "recurrences of the grotesque and repeated tales of dirt and desire" make clear "a sense that whenever you're riding through the lake of southern culture, some confederacy of water moccasins awaits you" and, as such, that we should "turn up the volume on southern studies by providing a new set of categories for examining southern women's fiction" (8,11). Yaeger's work within southern studies makes a compelling case for analyzing the critically under-examined field of southern women's writing by reading the frequency of monstrosity and filth represented within their fiction as a method of understanding the layers of history, violence, and turbulent race relations in the region. Yaeger's criticism was, and remains now, centrally important in promoting interpretations of southern women's work that appreciate the ways in which it challenges or complicates romanticized ideas about the South.

In the nearly twenty-six years since the publication of *Dirt and Desire*, though, there remains a noticeable drought in this kind of scholarship about southern women's fiction as a whole. Therefore, as I began this thesis that surrounds two prominent women writers, I felt the weight of not only what McWhirter calls the previous "unitary narrative" about southern studies, but also the gap in critical attention since Yaeger, devoted to southern women writers. With the epigraph in *Sing, Unburied Sing* and the origins of *Sinners* in mind, it is my contention that there remains much to be said about the work of southern women writers and the way that their works speak to the complicated, troubling history of the region and continue to actively influence our modern examinations of the South. It is my aim, with this project, to advance one example of what we can learn from a deliberate examination of both Welty's and Ward's respective portrayals of life in Mississippi. More specifically, my focus centers on the way that each author employs descriptions of the environment and the Mississippi landscape that envelops the events of their novels. I argue that the vivid settings of each author's works reveal a larger commentary on the social and political construction of the South and the way that traditional ideologies manifest within the lived experiences of people in the region.

Ecocriticism, as a field of study, is still relatively new. However, advancements like Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) and Daniel Spoth's *Ruin and Resilience: Southern Literature and the Environment* (2023) demonstrate a burgeoning critical attention to ecology and offer two promising examinations of the environment and its connections to human belief systems that I would like to draw from. While Nixon's work does not center solely around the U.S. South, his analysis of "slow violence" against people and the environment foregrounds the particular invisibility of systemic injustice and how it impacts humans' interactions with the natural world that I find especially relevant to the South and its legacy of racialized exploitation and agricultural

exploitation. Nixon explains, “By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (14). Slow violence, then, refers to the kind of discrimination that becomes embedded within a region, observable within the landscape itself, as a result of historical disenfranchisement. This unique kind of violence manifests not as directly inflicted harm, but as, what Nixon calls, “ecological and human disposability” that “fracture[s] along fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation” (15, 16). In this thesis, I apply Nixon’s framework to Welty’s singular novel-length work, *Delta Wedding* (1946), and two of Ward’s novels, *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017) and *Salvage the Bones* (2011), in order to contend that each Mississippi woman writer renders the environment within their fiction to foreground those disproportionate impacts to vulnerable populations that Nixon refers to, but specifically in connection to the South’s history of racialized violence and the plantation economy. Despite writing across two different time periods and authorial backgrounds, both Ward and Welty use the natural landscape that surrounds the events of their novels to symbolize the persistence of racial and social inequities in Mississippi and how the implementation of these ideologies continues to dictate how people in the South encounter and experience the environment.

Ward and Welty describe the Mississippi landscape in such vivid detail that their writing transcends mere setting and, instead, provides a description of the Southern ecology that makes clear the enduring, complicated relationship between humans and nature in a region so deeply marked by historical and racialized violence. Both Ward’s and Welty’s treatment of land as an avenue for understanding the convergence of past, present, and observable landscape, corroborates what Spoth argues for in his discussion of southern writers and how we critically examine the often damaged and warped natural world within their works. He says:

> "[W]e must take account of the seemingly incalculable losses inherent in southern history in terms of human and non-human nature, but not mistake ruination for an end-point. On the contrary, ruin depends on resilient readers to make sense of its narrative, and resilience requires ruin in order to face the future of the region, as complex and problematic as it might be" (45).

Spoth calls for a consideration of southern literary ecology that includes a deliberate acknowledgement of the realities of southern ideology and how those systems have led to violence and destruction against both human beings and the environment. It is my contention, then, that Welty's and Ward's depictions of twentieth and twenty-first century Mississippi offer an unflinching critique of racial and social stratification in the South through their characters' interactions with and reactions to southern waters and fieldscapes.

Writing backwards from 1946, Welty's *Delta Wedding* takes place in 1923 and, as such, implies an examination of past, present, and future in the region. Welty's novel, in following the domestic goings-on of the Fairchild family on their plantation, explores how the South's cultural memory and legacy of agricultural labor persisted into the twentieth century via wealthy white families like the Fairchilds and their continued capitalistic endeavours. Through depictions of threatening waters that punctuate the Fairchild plantation, lush, abundant cotton fields cultivated by the unacknowledged labor of African Americans, and symbolic ecological representations of the novel's namesake event, *Delta Wedding* turns a critical eye towards the beneficiaries of racial disenfranchisement in Mississippi and how the belief systems responsible for the enduring plantation economy become enmeshed and observable within the Southern environment. The ecological imagery of *Delta Wedding* illustrates how, even after the abolition of enslavement, the deep South relied on the exploitation of natural and human resources and the persistence of these damaging structures.

Ward's fiction also turns a critical eye towards the South's past, but does so through an examination of its effect on the present, and the ways in which environmental and racial injustice, rooted in the practices of the plantation economy foregrounded in Welty, continues to impact Black, rural Mississippians. Ward's depictions of water, land, and ecology at large in *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are woven throughout the novels' explorations of communal and familial identity for African Americans in the South. Just as Welty's deliberate representations of ecology in *Delta Wedding* play a crucial role in generating a critique of Southern belief systems, the portrayals of nature in Ward's texts feature prominently alongside her thematic focus on the lived reality of Black people and Black upbringing in the South. An ecocritical reading of Ward's fiction, in turn, unveils the intricacies and generational implications which exist between African Americans and nature in the South.

Ward, in *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* uses the environment as an illustration of the complicated relationship between Black folks and the region, the way that violence against Black people and the environment continues to leave minority communities more susceptible to poverty and a fractured relationship with nature as a result. It is my aim with this project to place Welty's and Ward's illustrations of southern nature and the lingering impacts of systemic injustices in conversation with one another and examine how each southern woman writer employs the natural world as a means of understanding the reality of class and racism in the South and how those inequities disenfranchise human beings and corrupt their surroundings. Over the course of this thesis, I explore how Ward's and Welty's similar treatment of the environment in their novels presents an ecological throughline within their fiction that, when investigated, provides us with new avenues by which to consider southern women's fiction. I examine what their comparable portrayals of southern landscapes, that span across time periods and author backgrounds, can tell us about

the ongoing discourse between past and present southern women writers and how these authors utilize environmental imagery to depict the culture and history embedded within their place of origin.

In the first chapter, I investigate the role of cotton production and the plantation economy in *Delta Wedding* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I begin with *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in an attempt to disrupt a traditional, chronological reading of a canonical author's influence within a contemporary work. Instead of looking for Welty's imprint within Ward, I begin with Ward's depiction of the cotton farm and the infamous Parchman prison and how these portrayals signify not only the way that African Americans are disproportionately policed and monitored in the South, but also how the generational trauma produced by Richie's and Riv's time in on the prison plantation becomes inextricable from the cotton fields in which they were forced to labor. After focusing on Ward's depiction of cotton agriculture in the South, and how it continues to limit African Americans and their families, I shift to Welty's discussion of the cotton on the Fairchild plantation and the ways in which it awards the Fairchilds their prosperity and security. The novel complicates the seemingly limitless amounts of white cotton produced on the plantation with a few deliberate references to the African Americans actually responsible for the cultivation of the crops that, taken together, critiques the way that the plantation economy rewards wealthy, white landowners like the Fairchilds while simultaneously dehumanising Black people and dictating the way that they interact with the natural world. In investigating Ward's and Welty's respective illustrations of cotton agriculture, I contend that each author employs descriptions of the plantation economy as emblems of the kind of exploitation the South relies on and its subsequent consequences.

The second chapter of this project centers around the aquatic spaces throughout *Delta Wedding* and before the devastation of hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* and how they

make evident each character's positionality within the culture of the South. In *Delta Wedding*, the treacherous rivers and whirlpools that threaten the women characters of the novel represent a gender-based critique of traditional Southern ideologies and how they pose a literal and metaphorical danger to women in the South. In *Salvage the Bones*, the waters that the Batiste family encounter in the lead-up to Katrina are markedly different, and serve as a place of recreation and reprieve for the family, rather than danger or risk. The waters that the Batistes enjoy indicate the kind of amiable relationship between nature and humans that becomes possible without the constraints and imposition of human ideologies. With an exploration of these contrasting depictions of water in Welty and Ward, I posit how each writer uses these spaces of water to demonstrate the lasting consequences of racial and gender attitudes in the South and how they continue to impact the relationship between human beings and nature in the region.

Finally, in the third chapter, I examine the ecological imagery surrounding the concluding events of *Delta Wedding* and *Salvage the Bones* as evidence of the continuation and reification of exploitative southern ideologies. At the end of the novel, Welty employs charged descriptions of the environment surrounding Dabney Fairchild's and Troy Flavin's wedding to illustrate the way that the plantation economy persists through marriages like theirs and is transferred from generation to generation, ensuring the continued exploitation of the southern landscape and African American people. In the conclusion of *Salvage the Bones*, Ward's rendering of the destruction of Hurricane Katrina reveals the way that minority communities, in light of the continued racial injustice in the South, are made more vulnerable to the consequences of ecological disasters like hurricanes. In this concluding sequence, nature transforms from a place of sanctuary to a place of perilous danger for the Batistes and their surrounding community and, as such, illustrates the way that structural injustices linger in the South and continue to victimize people of color and disproportionately shape their

experiences with nature and the southern environment. With these respective depictions of ecology at the end of their novels, both Ward and Welty use the natural world to signify the consequences of racialized and gendered ideologies in the South and critique the ways that these belief systems endure.

Chapter Two: "Too Much Dirt": The Relationship Between Earth, Labor, and Race in *Delta Wedding* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

In pursuit of tracking an ecological throughline between Ward's and Welty's employment of the natural world in their fiction, I would like to begin with an examination of their respective depictions of dirt, labor, and race dynamics in the Mississippi Delta region. Though each of Ward's and Welty's works place a heavy emphasis on location and the surrounding, Southern landscape by proxy, the novels that deal most directly with the after effects of the South's hallmark plantation economy and racialized agricultural practices are Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946). Each narrative, set in the Delta, turns a backwards eye towards the racialized systems of the South, and the ways that white, agrarian ideology ordered both land and human beings in the Mississippi Delta. Ward, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, includes vivid descriptions of the tilled soil surrounding the infamous Parchman prison farm against her characters'experiences of incarceration and cyclical violence to demarcate how, imbued with the legacy of enslavement, the South continues to extract both the natural resources of the region and the labor of African American individuals. Welty, in *Delta Wedding*, also focuses on the reification of the cotton plantation by placing glimpses of the land surrounding the Shellmound plantation against the unacknowledged labor of the Black servants and farmhands to illustrate how the abundance enjoyed by the Fairchild family depended upon a kind of racial and agricultural exploitation so engrained within the culture of the region that it became unremarkable to its white beneficiaries. In so doing, both authors use the worked earth and the remnants of the plantation economy to ground their critique of racism and racial hierarchization in the modern South. In this chapter, I apply an ecocritical lens to each author's representations of tilled soil and argue that Ward's usage of worked, Mississippian earth both resembles and contrasts Welty's description of Black labor and agriculture in Mississippi during the early twentieth

century. I contend that both novels employ the continuation of the cotton plantation to critique the type of racial exploitation produced and maintained in the Mississippi Delta by the institution of enslavement and its aftereffects.

When examining two authors writing about the same region from different time periods and backgrounds, it might seem prudent to begin with the earlier author, Welty in this case, and work forward in time towards the contemporary author and time period, in this case Ward. However, the risk in a chronological analysis of this sort lies in the critical tendency to read solely the influence of a canonical author within the more modern work. While this kind of interpretation is certainly useful in helping us to understand how earlier authorship continues to inform the creation of modern fiction, the objective of this chapter is not to merely trace the imprints of Welty in Ward, but rather to examine how each Mississippi woman writer employs the natural world to denote different facets of racialized Southern ideology. Moreover, both Ward and Welty use their own cultural understandings to write retrospectively about Mississippi history, Welty from post-World War II 1946 to 1923 and Ward from 2017 to the early twentieth century. In doing so, each writer critiques how the systems of the past endure and persist within the region. Following that same strategy, this chapter begins with Ward and turns backwards to Welty, not to refute the existence of Welty's influence on Ward, but to focus instead on the ways that the texts speak to each other and, when examined through an ecocritical lens, contribute to our understanding of the significant connections between labor, land, and race in the Mississippi Delta.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the worked earth functions as a site of potent generational trauma, grounded in the South's turbulent, racialized history and the ways in which that past continues to literally and metaphorically haunt our present. In fact, the title of the novel itself immediately evidences its consideration of the meaning and the power of things buried, whether in the past, or in the earth, or both. Beyond the title, Ward's novel goes on to

interrogate the ways in which, long after the formalized ending of enslavement and the plantation economy, those systems of exploitation continue to haunt Black residents of Mississippi. Evidenced through the arrival of Richie's ghost during Jojo's visit to the current-day Parchman Farm, and the slow explication of River's lasting, inward turmoil leftover from his own time at Parchman as a dog runner, Ward's illustration of the fields of the Mississippi Delta against the continued impact of the Mississippi State Penitentiary on the novel's characters, provides a method by which to examine the complex relationship between Southern land and those, who were, and continue to be, forced to till, sow, and reap from it. In placing Parchman, and its agricultural land populated by incarcerated laborers, at the precipice of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward demarcates not only how the U.S. prison system has usurped many of the qualities of enslavement, in which African American individuals were held captive and forced to labor without compensation, but also the ways in which this violent, persistent, and compulsory labor of the land continues to fissure present-day Black Mississippians and impact their own personal and familial identities. For Jojo and his family, the physical and spiritual return to the cotton plantation of Parchman prison at once anchors the story and evidences the continuation of the institution of enslavement through unpaid, primarily Black, prison labor and the type of generational trauma and haunting that that system perpetuates.

Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946) takes place nearly one hundred years before the events of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and, other than a similar Mississippi setting, appears outwardly different from Ward's fiction in many notable ways. Welty's *Delta Wedding* follows the white, affluent Fairchild family on their cotton plantation, named Shellmound, during the seven days preceding their eldest daughter's marriage. Centered primarily around the interpersonal relationships and goings on of the Fairchilds, a cursory reading of the novel seems to corroborate what Frabricant describes as, "a well-to-do family in a leisurely agrarian

world reacting to the approaching twentieth century modernism" (51). However, punctuated throughout Welty's investigation of the domestic are peripheral descriptions of the land of the Delta itself and the natural world surrounding Shellmound that complicate the themes of the novel. On the edges of the narrative description of Shellmound and the Delta are scenes of Black servants are not, then, a traditional pastoral narrative, replete with quaint characters and echoes of the South's "idyllic" agrarian history. Rather, Welty's singular novel-length work employs strategic descriptions of the Mississippi Delta surrounding the Fairchild residence that disrupt the busy, almost dizzying, domestic events of the Fairchilds' lives. Representations of the Shellmound Plantation in its expanse, coinciding depictions of the Black laborers who till it, and the white characters who occasionally traverse it, periodically interrupt the week long lead-up to Dabney Fairchild's wedding to Troy Flavin and, in turn, reveal not a wistful invocation of the Old South, but a shrewd scrutiny of the racialized systems of oppression that occur and are perpetuated as a result of the continued plantation economy. Both novels, then, use the worked earth to explicate the South's lasting reliance on Black labor. In Welty's narrative, that systematic oppression rewards white decadence and corrupts the surrounding landscape, while in Ward's novel, those echoes of enslavement on the Parchman farm, in memory and in the narrative's physical present, represent the ways that forced agricultural labor continues to affect Black Mississippians generationally.

Sing, Unburied, Sing, though set in the fictionalized, Southern Mississippi town of "Bois Sauvauge," centers around thirteen-year old Jojo's trip with his mother, his mother's friend, and his baby sister to Parchman prison in the Mississippi Delta to meet his father, Michael, upon his release from the state penitentiary. Interspersed throughout this main plot of the narrative are flashbacks from Riv, Jojo's maternal grandfather and father figure, about his own time in Parchman with his brother Stag and the twelve-year-old he befriends, Richie. In concentrating so directly on Parchman, in which incarcerated individuals were, and are

still, required to till fields of cotton with no compensation, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* employs the worked earth of the Delta as evidence of the reanimation of the racialized systems of enslavement and of the Jim Crow era and the ways in which racial hierarchization continues to harm and deplete both human and environment in the Mississippi Delta.

The Parchman farm functions as an apt setting to centralize this critique of race and its connection to southern agricultural labor because, as David Oshinsky writes, "Parchman was a powerful link to the past—a place of racial discipline where blacks in striped clothing worked the cotton fields for the enrichment of others" (143). Parchman, as a plantation style prison farm, with mostly African American inmates, persisted as a way for white southerners to control the actions and labors of Black people through legal means, after the Emancipation Act. Oshinsky goes on to describe, "Many [Black incarcerated individuals] had worked on the huge Delta plantations near the penitentiary, where sharecropping was the rule" (149). Parchman, then, not only served as a strong connection to the past and the institution of enslavement, but as evidence of its legal continuation in the modern South through stripped Delta fields, tilled, just as they had been, by uncompensated and interned Black individuals. Parchman's invocation of the South's history of racial enslavement, its lingering, disproportionate impact upon the African American community, and its continuance of the charged relationship between Southern land and Black labor becomes immediately evident upon Jojo's initial impression of the penitentiary, where he observes a now empty field, still haunted by the remnant presence of men like Riv and the work they were forced to do: "I look out at the fields but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second I see men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows" (Ward 125). Jojo looks out and sees immediately a potent legacy of racialized violence connected to the extraction of natural resources from Southern soil. Jojo's perception here, not of the actual "fog rolling, wisping over the fields that stretch out endlessly," which he

describes moments later, but of the men's ghosts "plucking" cotton from the ground as crows pluck meat from bones, allegorizes the way that African Americans under the plantation economy, and plantation-style prisons, were forced to extract yields from the land, which they would never reap the benefits of, while their own labor was exploited (Ward 126). Moreover, in regarding these ghostly forms as a "murder" of crows, rather than the men themselves, Jojo observes the way that the African American inmates of Parchman were unjustly convicted, often of murder, to legally justify their racial subjugation and forced labor of the Delta fields.

Riv's own descriptions of his time at Parchman with Stag and Richie, also shrewdly demonstrate the way that the prison farm worked as a by-product of enslavement in twentieth century Mississippi and how being forced to reap from the earth reified the charged connection between Southern land and Black labor extracted for white benefit. Slowly extradited throughout the course of the novel, Riv's traumatic remembrances of his time at Parchman as a gunman and dogrunner illuminate not only the continued, forced relationship between Black Mississippians and cotton agriculture after enslavement's pronounced ending, but also how that perpetuated racial violence endures throughout subsequent generations and becomes synonymous, for its victims, with the very land itself. Riv's explication of his trauma from Parchman, where he was imprisoned at just sixteen, begins prior to Jojo's own journey to the Delta as he explains to his newly thirteen-year-old grandson the circumstances of his imprisonment. He tells Jojo, "When all them White men came to get Stag, they tied both of us and took us up the road. You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is going to Parchman" (Ward 19). This passage speaks to the way that the Parchman prison farm extended and upholded the racial dynamics produced through enslavement in the U.S. South and Mississippi in particular. The unnamed White men in this passage, who capture Riv and Stag,

are not official law enforcement officers, yet they feel empowered to condemn and incarcerate African American men like them because of the precedent set by chattel slavery. Lena Zuckerwise explains, “Prisons were, at their core, intended to sustain the racial status quo after Emancipation, rather than simply serve the instrumental purpose of providing nonwage labor to states or private businesses” (30). The sequence of events that River relays to Jojo, then, reveals how Parchman, as a prison and a cotton plantation, facilitated the perpetuation of racialized violence and unjust policing of Black people, especially men, by white people and institutions into the twentieth century. Moreover, the rhetoric that the white men use to justify taking River and Stag, describing their incarceration as an opportunity to “do right by the law of God and man,” demarcates the covert enmeshment of white supremist ideology within religious teachings and legal doctrines of the time. Parchman, to the men like Riv’s captors, was both a legally and religiously justified means of controlling African Americans and enforcing their continued, unpaid agricultural labor for the benefit of wealthy, white individuals.

If the cultural significance of Parchman and the circumstances under which River initially becomes imprisoned symbolize the persistence of white, racial ideology through the modern carceral state, it is his and Richie’s vivid descriptions of the physical soil they are forced to till that symbolizes the physical and emotional tolls that racialized exploitation produces and reifies. River describes his work in the fields of Parchman to Jojo, and the hopelessness that it engendered within in him, and, in doing so, highlights the inescapability of the racial structures of the South and the ways in which, for folks like River and Richie, that bleak reality of racial violence becomes inseparable from the land itself. River, in his second flashback, describes the openness of the Parchman fields, and how seeing the land without barriers gave him a a false sense of hope: “You see them open fields we worked in . . . the way they cut them trees so flat so that land is empty and open to the ends of the earth

and you think, I can get out of here if I set my mind to it" (Ward 22). For Richie, that sheer expanse of the cleared land serves as an agonizing reminder of the freedom he cannot enjoy. A view that, for a free person would elicit perhaps an appreciation of the beauty of nature, for Richie symbolizes his own confinement. Dib describes this type of dichotomy in Ward's work as a commentary "on the aesthetics of equality and freedom: what is beautiful to some, or what is justice for the few, is imprisonment and ugliness for others" (15). I would like to push this insightful analysis even further and contend that, in addition to demarcating the different cultural interpretations of Parchman itself, this sequence denotes a particular relationship between Southern land and personal agency for African Americans. For River, it is not only the appearance of the ability to escape the prison that contributes to his feelings of desolation, but the efficiency by which the plantation owners have excavated the soil to be worked that solidifies the futility of escape. River observes not a naturally occurring break in the landscape, but an eerie, man-made baring of the Delta wherein the absence of any trees gives the appearance of land "open to the ends of the earth" (Ward 22). This ability to make the Earth itself seem vulnerable indicates to River the power of the racialized systems working against his agency. The apparatuses responsible for clearing such lush, fertile land so completely are also responsible for Riv's incarceration. The susceptibility of the Delta fields, then, mirrors his own subjectivity and victimization within the continued racial oppression of the 1940s and reminds him that, against a system powerful enough to bring the earth to heed, his attempts at escape would be just as futile.

River goes on to explain the way that, in addition to being a constant reminder of his captivity, working in the plantation-style farm transcended a physical, embodied punishment and resulted in devastating mental anguish for each incarcerated man. In linking this overwhelming mental deterioration directly with descriptions of their work in fields, the natural world in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* again becomes a powerful site for Ward's critique of

the perpetual relationship between labored earth and race relations in the Mississippi Delta. Prompted by Jojo for another installment of his story, River describes, “From sunup to sundown we was out there in them fields, hoeing and picking and planting and pulling . . . That was our whole world” (Ward 69). Here, River describes how the back-breaking, monotonous agricultural labor dominated more than just his waking hours, and eventually overtook his and his fellow prisoner’s entire identities during their time in the prison. The working of the earth, then, serves as both an indication of the profound impacts of the structure of the plantation economy on the individual level, stripping each man of their individuality, and as an allegorical representation of the way that racial ideology, like the kind employed in Parchman, continues to envelop the South and erase Black identity and autonomy. In illustration of the kind of overwhelm produced by the structures of the plantation economy, River says, “A man get to a point like that, he can’t think. Just feel . . . Feel his head packed full of cotton and know he want to sleep.” (Ward 68). Just as the forced planting becomes River’s entire world, the cotton fills his head, preventing him from thinking or experiencing anything beyond what is dictated for him. The cotton reduces River’s ability to think, essentially stripping him of his humanity and, as such, serves as a metaphor by which to understand the dehumanization produced through white supremacy and the racialized structure of the plantation economy. Sven Beckert explains:

> “Cotton demanded quite literally a hunt for labor and a perpetual struggle for its control. Slave traders, slave pens, slave auctions, and the attendant physical and psychological violence of holding millions in bondage were of central importance to the expansion of cotton production in the United States.” (110)

What River experiences, then, is the persistence of that continual grapple for power in the Mississippi Delta and the way that that quenchless demand for cotton commanded not only the lives of African Americans but also their very thoughts and experiences as human beings.

In addition to River's articulation of his relationship with the cotton fields surrounding him throughout his incarceration, Richie's experience with dirt during and after Parchman further explicates the kind of enduring trauma engendered through racialized violence and exploitation in the U.S. South. Richie, in both his human and ghostly form, describes repeatedly being unable to escape the dirt of the plantation and, in doing so, demarcates his inability to leave behind the events of his incarceration because the violence he endures becomes intertwined with the very land surrounding him, infusing the clinging Southern terra with traumatic meaning for Richie. In the final piece of Riv's story before Jojo's arrival at Parchman, Riv recollects Richie's desperation during his final days at Parchman:

> "It's too much dirt," Richie said. His teeth was chattering, so his words came out in stutters. "It's everywhere. In the fields. Not just my back, Riv. It's in my mouth so I can't taste nothing and in my ears so I can't hardly hear and in my nose, all in my nose and throat, so I can't hardly breathe." (Ward 126).

Here, after Richie is whipped by the sergeants for the minor infraction of breaking his hoe, thoughts of the dirt threaten to engulf him entirely as he reels from the open wounds in his back. Like the cotton in River's head, the dirt permeates Richie's consciousness, revealing the impacts to his body and psyche that being forced to work the plantation has left him with. Martyn Bone regards the violence that Richie endures as evidence of how "Parchman reinforced plantation-style discipline and punishment" and contends that witnessing this kind of punishment "constitutes a kind of compressed neo–slave narrative" (143). If the wounds to Richie's back invoke an immediate association between the mid-century Parchman farm and enslavement, it is Richie's insistence that the dirt threatening to strangle his life force extends far beyond his open wounds that fully elucidates that connection and its implications for African American men in twentieth century

Mississippi. Richie impresses upon River that the dirt is "not just [on] his back," but rather enveloping the entirety of his being. The dirt, here, functions as a metaphor for the racial ideology heldover from enslavement. In professing that this contamination is not relegated solely to his visible wounds, which carry an evident association to enslavement, but also covers his mouth, eyes, and ears, Richie illuminates how white supremacy results not only in the continuation of physical, observable wounds like whipping scars, but also in emotional and mental damages that, while invisible to the naked eye, are just as detrimental. With Richie's bleak conversation, Ward again employs the earth of the Delta as a lens through which to examine how African American men were and are defined against white, Southern institutions and interests.

While Richie's and River's respective descriptions of the natural world around Parchman denote the continued subjection of Black men through exploitative prison labor practices and a return to racial violence akin to enslavement, it is Micheal's articulation of his time working the Parchman Farm that fully reveals these practices as a means to police and control Black men, rather than convicted criminals at large. Michael, who is also incarcerated at Parchman well into the twenty-first century, speaks about his time in the penitentiary in a way that exposes an immediate, marked difference between his time served and Riv's and Richie's nearly fifty years earlier. Rather than endlessly tilling the soil under the scrutiny of an overseer and the threat of guns and lashing, Michael spends his time "looking after dairy cows and chickens" and "tending to some vegetable patches" (Ward 144). Michael, unlike River and Richie, is not marked by the labor he performs while on the Parchman farm. The Parchman farm, for Michael a white man, does not carry the same associations with centuries of servitude and trauma that it does for Richie and Riv as Black men. Michael, in describing his labor as "tending" and "looking after" the land and animals, rather than being consumed by it, Ward demonstrates the physical weight and

emotional significance that forced agricultural labor carries for African American men in the South. Though Michael is the only one out of the three characters who spend time in Parchman with a legitimate conviction, his time served is obviously the mildest. The stark contrast of Michael's time at Parchman does not end with a distinction in the type of work he completes. He goes on to proclaim finding enjoyment in the labor, rather than immense feelings of devastation, horror, and dread. He says, "Can't nothing bother me when I got my hands in the dirt" and "Like I'm talking to God with my fingers" (Ward 145). Swartzfager explains this disparity between Michael's experience and River's and Richie's by arguing, "[Michael] does not feel that he is a victim of the institutional machinations that target people like Pop and Jojo, men of color who do not have the social or economic resources to protect themselves" (321). More than a mere protection from Black subjectivity, Michael, as a white person, actively benefits from the racial strictures which tormented Black men like River and Richie and continue to influence racial attitudes in present-day Mississippi. Therefore, he does not experience the same threat of being suffocated and erased by dirt he works in but embraces the labor as an alignment with "godliness," or a restoration of racial order similar to the one that empowers the white men to initially capture and imprison River and Stag. Just like the racism that grounds the Parchman plantation, the earth that Michael works with has no negative effect on him and, as a result, further illustrates how the continued, forced labor of the Delta land is meant only to reinforce the racial dynamics of enslavement rather than administer punishment in the name of justice. Michael's description of the solace he finds in the Parchman soil, contrasted with the anguish that River and Richie feel in relation to the same substance, demonstrates Ward's poignant employment of the Mississippi land as indicative of the residual effects of slavery and how those racial ideologies continue to protect white people, innocent or guilty, and concurrently traumatize and dehumanize African Americans.

Published in 1946, Welty's *Delta Wedding* also features a Delta Plantation imbued with racialized significance and profound commentary on the hierarchization leftover from the Old South. Rather than using the fertile soil to explicate the impacts of the plantation economy on people of color, though, Welty directs her critique to the white benefactors of those systems who benefited most directly from the unacknowledged labor of African Americans. Strategically woven throughout the week-long lead up to Dabney Fairchild's wedding are subtle but shrewd representations of the Fairchild's abundant lifestyles and their apparent obliviousness towards the Black laborers, working sunup and sundown in the surrounding cotton fields and the domestic corridors of the home, to create and maintain it for them. In framing the Shellmound plantation and the Fairchild family as profiting directly from the exploitation of African American bodies, Welty, like Ward, uses representations of the cotton-filled fields of the Delta to criticize the racial ideology produced and maintained through the agrarian culture of the South. Set in 1923, Welty's narrative takes place well after Emancipation; however, the general structure of the cotton plantation, including the "employment" of primarily African Americans to harvest their crops persists. Plantation owners after abolition were motivated to retain the human labor that they previously relied on during enslavement and, as a result, formulated a way to retain that labor. Charles Aiken explains, "One method by which former slaves could be reintegrated was to continue the work system of slavery which employed gangs of blacks under the direction of the owner, a white overseer, or a black driver" (17). I contend that these descriptions of the workings of the Delta plantation, combined with the Fairchild family's belief in the mundanity and normalcy of African American servitude, together critique the way that the racial attitudes of the South relied on the oppression of African American agency and autonomy to award and reify white opulence and privilege.

Delta Wedding begins almost immediately with a commentary on the vast expanse and apparent impressiveness of the cotton fields of Fairchilds, Mississippi that denotes the affluence of the leading family and the influence awarded to them from their plantation ownership. Laura McRaven, arriving via train for the preparations for her cousin Dabney's wedding, observes, "In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky. The clouds were large . . . larger than anything except the fields the Fairchilds planted" (Welty 3). Laura's perception here gives the impression that not even the sky, which, unimpeded by large-scale structures or indicators of modernity, takes up enormous space within the Southern landscape, could compete with the gargantuism of the Shellmound plantation. The size of Shellmound speaks to not only the success of the Fairchild family, but also the continued prevalence of the broader plantation economy in Mississippi into the 1920s. Not quite the haunted landscape Jojo witnesses at Parchman farm, the expanse Laura renders still harbors an unnerving, less-than-natural quality akin to the one River describes. This "perfectly flat and level" landscape resembles the deforested land surrounding the Parchman farm in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Welty 3). I argue that Welty's treatment of the land here functions similarly to Ward's and, as such, denotes the particular kind of dominion over land and humans wielded by powerful, white families like the Fairchilds.

In addition to Laura's initial observations, Dabney's traversing of the Shellmound plantation and subsequent detailings of the surrounding environment also delineate the lingering structure of enslavement and the privilege it awards the Fairchilds. Welty describes Dabney's brief notations of the cotton-covered expanse of the Delta and the people at work in the fields and, in turn, explicates how the plantation economy results in physical and metaphorical white abundance. Welty writes:

Here and there and far away the cotton wagons, of hand-painted green,

> stood up to their wheel tops in the white and were loaded with white, like cloud wagons. All along, the Negroes would lift up and smile glaringly and pump their arms- they knew Miss Dabney was going to step off Saturday with Mr. Troy. (Welty 37)

The swaths of cotton, in this scene, seem commonplace for Shellmound plantation, as does the presence of what appears to be numerous African American laborers. However, more than a simple indication of the source of the Fairchild's wealth and the structure of Shellmound, Welty uses the description of the mounds of cotton on the farm and in the wagons as an opportunity to comment on the means by which the Fairchilds enjoy their wealth: the unacknowledged and unpaid labor of Black people. Wilson dubs Welty's depiction of the Fairchild's cotton industry in connection with the laborers responsible for its success "the *sensual omnipresence* of cotton" that "brings the African American workforce straight into the plantation household" (117, emphasis original). Coupling the presence of the cotton with the reality of its harvest disrupts the idyllic view of the pastoral South and foregrounds the kind of racialized exploitation that the South's agricultural economy depended upon. Moreover, the blanket of cotton, placed against the labor of non-white folks, allegorizes the kind of white dominance produced through enslavement and its twentieth-century continuation. Just as the dirt in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* envelops the African American men incarcerated in Parchman prison as a representation of their subjectivity, the cotton in Shellmound cloaks the Delta fields as a symbol of the permeation of white supremacy within the U.S. South's agricultural industry.

Dabney's subsequent encounter with a field worker who greets her in passing further demonstrates Welty's employment of the worked earth as a meaningful critique of the belief systems produced by enslavement and its residual impacts. Dabney, upon witnessing Man-Son raise his hat towards her, automatically thinks, "How strange- he

should be picking cotton" (Welty 43). The briefest of cessation in Man-Son's physical labor constitutes to Dabney a noteworthy strangeness. Her curt reaction towards his gesture illuminates just how out of the ordinary it is for her to witness an African American on the plantation not performing routine, taxing physical labor for her family's wealth and profit. The Fairchilds' reliance on racial and agricultural exploitation is so engrained that they only acknowledge when it stops. In being unable to comprehend the break in Man-Son's labor, Dabney reveals how the racial ideology of the Southern plantation collapses the individuality and identity of people of color, reducing them to human machinery working only for the benefit of white wealth. Dabney, being immersed in those belief systems from birth, regards Man-Son as first and foremost as a tool essential for the continuation of her lifestyle. It is the humanity of his actions that startles her. Yeager explains that "southern whites may encounter African Americans as landscape, background" (22). Man-Son's departure from the background allows Welty to render Dabney's kneejerk reaction to his being "out of place" and, in turn, elucidate the way that racist ideology seeps into the unconscious of those who benefit from it, transforming any semblance of agency from Black people or other people of color into an inherent disruption or threat to the stability of the established and, to them, invisible racial order.

Welty, like Ward, also employs a bird metaphor to describe the African American labor occurring on the Fairchild plantation. After Dabney's encounter with Man-Son, Welty describes the work in the fields resuming once more and, in doing so, utilizes a natural allegory to highlight how far removed the lived reality of the Black servants and fieldworkers is from the Fairchild family, and how, even though the laborers award the family their wealth and influence, they exist only as an assumed backdrop. After commanding Man-Son to get back to his work, Dabney observes, "The song of distant pickers started up like the agitation of birds" (47). In unifying the removal of the songs

from Dabney's earshot with the imagery of a natural process like bird song, Welty evidences at once how the agricultural work of the Shellmound plantation persists so relentlessly that the Fairchilds regard it as normal and, as such, fail to even acknowledge it. Not the murder of crows Jojo perceives on the Parchman farm, which immediately foregrounds for Jojo the history of racialized labor and injustice at the South, the noise and apparent bird-like work at Shellmound exist detachedly from the Fairchild family and, as such, reveal the way that the plantation economy depended on both the continued exploitation of African Americans and the complacency of plantation owners like the Fairchilds. In describing the apparent normalcy of the ongoing work of the Shellmound plantation, Welty uses the natural world surrounding of the Delta to critique the concurrent oblivion and abundance enjoyed by the Fairchilds and the ways in which the extraction of land and labor continued to define the plantation economy into the twentieth century.

Welty further evidences the privilege and security that the cotton plantation affords families through Dabney's own descriptions of the fields during her late night contemplations of her impending marriage to Troy. Dabney equates the existence of the abundant cotton-fields with clarity and her own future stability and, in doing so, highlights again how the worked Delta earth awards families like the Fairchilds financial prosperity off the undercompensated and unappreciated backs of workers of color. Welty writes, "[S]uch clarity there was in everything. The cotton like the rolling breath of sleep overflowed the fields" (119). In having the overfilled cotton fields signify, for Dabney, certainty and assurance, Welty critiques how the racialized systems leftover from enslavement and the cotton plantation industry continued to benefit white land owners and their descendants while simultaneously subjugating African American individuals. Dabney looks out and pays no regard to how the cotton is grown, reaped, and harvested. Instead, she only recognizes the fortune and stability that its existence means to her and her family.

After her connecting “She would walk on the clear night . . . for under her foot would offer the roof, the chimney, the window of her husband, the solid house” (Welty 119). Here, Dabney imagines stepping out onto the vast expanse of cotton field and encountering not the physical earth, but the security and promise of domestic security that it symbolizes for her. The Delta cotton, for Dabney, is such a constant in the trajectory of her life, and results in such ongoing privilege, that she does not have to acknowledge where it originates or how it is grown. Dabney can only observe what the Delta fields represent to her and, as a result, neglects to recognize the types of denigration that her own prosperity relies upon and perpetuates against African Americans. Welty, in placing descriptions of the cotton plantation of Shellmound against the apparent omnipresence of African American labor and the unacknowledgement of that labor from the Fairchilds themselves, employs the worked Delta earth as a poignant criticism of white, Southern agrarian society and the ways that their capitalistic endeavours necessitated white oblivion towards the lived experience of Black Mississippians and their inability to secure freedom in the wake of enslavement and into the twentieth century.

Christopher Lloyd regards Mississippi as being a significant literary setting, firmly rooted within the tumultuous history of the U.S. South, writing, “Mississippi’s place in the deepest of deep Souths makes it an especially charged site of national and regional imaginaries” (162). Both Ward and Welty, in their respective *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Delta Wedding*, deftly utilize that importance and use two different cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta to ground their powerful criticisms of the racial dynamics of the South and the ways in which those ideologies linger in the earth and continue to impact humans and land. The reliance on the Plantation economy in *Delta Wedding* and the volume of white cotton combined with the Fairchilds’ racial attitudes elucidates how, even after the abolition of slavery, white affluence in the Delta depended on the exploitation of

natural and human resources. Ward in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, then, uses tilled dirt and soil to examine how the perpetuation of the plantation continues to physically and psychologically traumatize African American men through unjustified incarceration and enslavement-era violence. Despite the gap in time between the publication of both novels, both Welty and Ward employ the natural world surrounding Delta Plantations as revealing indicators of the lasting ramifications of harmful racialized systems.

Chapter Three: Depictions of Water in Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Welty's *Delta Wedding*

Just as Welty's and Ward's invocation of the worked Delta earth as a representation of the South's racialized systems and their lingering impact, both Mississippi woman writers also employ vivid descriptions of water in their fiction as further evidence of the relationship between physical Southern landscapes and the invisible, though consequent, social systems of gender, class, and race that saturate the region. This chapter examines the function of the bodies of water in Welty's *Delta Wedding*, set in the seven days preceding Dabney Fairchild's wedding, and in Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), set in the week leading up to the devastating events of Hurricane Katrina for the Batiste family in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage. Both authors depict different spaces of Mississippi water alongside the domestic occurrences of each family's lives as a powerful signifier of the continued social stratification in the South and the way that this ordering of nature and human beings impacts residents of Mississippi. For Welty, the dangerous pools and river near Shellmound and the continued threat of drowning for the women characters of the novel demarcate the material and metaphorical dangers that result from the antiquated systems upholding the Fairchilds' way of life. For Ward, the Batistes' experiences of community and reprieve within the waters of the Gulf Coast and the pond on their familial property, named "the Pit," denote an amiable relationship with nature that persists in spite of the generational disenfranchisement perpetuated against Black people and families in the deep South. In their respective descriptions of water in the natural environment surrounding their characters, each author uses interactions with Southern aquatic space to explore the charged intersection between human and nature that lingers in the South as a result of its turbulent history of oppression and exploitation. In this chapter, I investigate each Mississippi woman writer's treatment of water within their respective works through an ecocritical lens to extrapolate how their descriptions of these flooded spaces highlight

the impact of Southern ideologies of race, class, and gender from the plantation economy into the modern era.

Welty, in *Delta Wedding*, strategically deviates from depictions of cotton and its abundance on the Fairchild family plantation to include detailed representations of swirling whirlpools and rushing rivers interspersed throughout the property and the Fairchild's busy and numerous interactions. Just as the scenes of cotton and labor on Shellmound represent the enduring plantation economy and its impact on white affluence and unacknowledged Black labor, the bodies of water within the text also evidence the consequences of the Fairchild lifestyle and the ideologies of the South. The water in *Delta Wedding* serves as a portal for the female characters to consider their racialized and gendered status within the region. While there are several references to water throughout the course of the novel, the most significant experiences with turbulent waters occur with Dabney Fairchild, the bride-to-be, and Laura McRaven, a girl cousin visiting from out of town to attend the matrimony. Both Laura and Dabney, on the cusp of maturity, encounter dangerous bodies of water and near-drownings that at once represent how the structure of the Old South systematically strips individuals of their autonomy, fixing them within their station, as well as how the agrarian dependence on routine, mechanized exploitation of natural resources and labor makes the untamed environment seem ominous and threatening because of its unpredictability. In depicting these threatening pools alongside Laura's and Dabney's maturation within the South, Welty unites a gendered critique of the patriarchal requirements of the plantation economy with a scrutiny of the distorted perceptions of untamed nature generated by the Fairchilds' desire to dominate and possess the Mississippi landscape to further their wealth and influence. The water in Welty contrasts with the descriptions of the manicured cotton fields and serves as a naturally- occurring symbol of the perils of southern ideologies and the way that they swallow agency and individuality.

Ward, in *Salvage the Bones*, also employs representations of water along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi to demonstrate the continued consequences of the social stratification of the South. *Salvage the Bones* follows fifteen-year-old, newly pregnant, Esch Batiste and her close-knit male friends and kin as they navigate their relationships in Bois Sauvage and prepare for Katrina to make landfall. Though much critical attention has been paid to Ward's treatment of water during the devastating floods of Katrina in the end of the novel as an indication of the enduring impacts of environmental racism in the South.[2] I would like first to examine the purpose of the watery spaces readers encounter before the hurricane's arrival. Ward employs moments of recreation and escape within the water for the central characters of her novel alongside their experience of poverty and tragedy. In turn, these bodies of water illuminate how the racialized past continues to impact Black residents of Mississippi like the Batistes, and their connection to the Southern land in which they reside, well into the twenty-first century. Unlike Welty's social critique embedded within the threatening pools of *Delta Wedding*, though, the water that Esch and her family encounter before the floods of Katrina constitute, for them, places of reprieve, community, and freedom. This uncontentious relationship with water, despite the Batistes' generational disenfranchisement, contrasts dramatically with the one between the affluent Fairchild family and the unruly pools beyond their plantation. The Batistes' experience with the pre-storm water signifies a tolerant relationship between nature and human, one that allows for coexistence rather than strain, force, and exploitation. Taken together, the lagoons of Shellmound and the Gulf ponds of "the Pit" constitute two different manifestations of the complicated relationship between people and environment in the South: one that emphasizes both Southern women's initiation into the patriarchal structures

[2] For a more thorough overview of the human and environmental consequences produced by racist structures, see Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

of the plantation economy and the implications of that system on the surrounding landscapes and one that accentuates the Gulf waters as a space of ownership and resilience for Black Mississippians like the Batistes before Katrina's disaster.

In the first chapter, I examined Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* before Welty's *Delta Wedding*, as a way to avoid a chronological reading of the two authors, centered solely around Welty's twentieth-century influence on Ward's contemporary, southern fiction. This departure from the traditional way to analyze authors writing from different time periods was made particularly easy by the flashbacks to mid-century Mississippi incorporated into *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The history embedded into the plot of Ward's 2017 novel removes the need to revisit the past before analyzing the contemporary moment, as history unfolds concurrently with the events of the present throughout the novel. Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, however, takes place entirely during the year 2003 and, as a result, does not contain that same amount of integrated historical context, necessary for a thorough investigation of the structural systems in the South. With this difference in mind, I will begin this chapter with the 1923 setting of *Delta Wedding* before turning to Ward's depiction of 2003 Mississippi landscapes and subsequent response to the history embedded within the land and nature of the region.

Seemingly completely isolated from the events of the outside world, *Delta Wedding* relies heavily upon the happenings of the domestic sphere and encounters with contained geographies surrounding Shellmound to center its critique of the social systems persisting in the South. Sultzbach regards Welty's incorporation of nature within the novel as "embodied treatment of the environment" that "uncovers the tensions and lurking violence inherent in 'the southern problem' of racial inequity" (89). I would like to take Sultzbach's astute analysis of the function of nature in the novel and apply it directly to Laura's and Dabney's significant experiences with dangerous water and the way in which each scene

denotes the material and symbolic dangers of Southern ideology, its distortions of the untouched earth, and its ultimate inescapability for young, white Southern women. I argue that, in *Delta Wedding*, the water symbolizes a hazardous space in nature that forces certain characters of the novel to reckon with their positionality within southern society and the way that southern ideologies swallow and engulf individuality. While the fields of the Shellmound Plantation, "charged with life, endlessly exploited," indicate the Fairchilds' greed and capitalization of human labor, the representations of water in the text suggest a more abstract threat, reflective of the loss of agency that can occur in these traditional systems for the profiteers and the victims of those structures (Welty 256). In discussion of the name of the flowing river surrounding the domestic sphere of Shellmound, India, another of the Fairchild daughters, explains, "Yazoo means River of Death" (Welty 256). This translation of the name of the river foregrounds the physical danger the river has always posed to humans in the area. It is Shelley the eldest daughter, though, who connects the implied threat of the river to the perils to the personal dispossession that can also occur in the South:

> "'River of Death' to Shelley meant not the ultimate flow of doom, but the more personal vision of the moment's chatter ceasing, the feelings of the day disencumbered . . . River of the death of the day the Yazoo was to Shelley, and their bayou went in and out of it like the curved arm of the sleeper, whose elbow was in their garden. Then Shelley ran along the bayou. Oh, to be beyond all this! To have tonight, tomorrow, over!" (Welty 256).

In this sequence, Shelley unites the presence of the Yazoo river with the cessation of possibility. To her, the proximity of the flowing water marks the boundaries of her agency. Despite her desire to "be beyond" the events of the plantation and the domestic preparations for her sister's wedding, gazing upon the "River of Death,"

Shelley recognizes that she cannot traverse the rushing waters nor the societal limitations placed upon her (Welty 256). With this merging of Shelley's discernment of her lack of possibility with the tangible danger of the Yazoo, Welty grounds her critique of the loss of agency in the South within the flooded landscape that encircles Shellmound. In turn, the water in the Delta becomes a symbol of both material and ideational danger that they are unable to traverse or overcome.

Dabney's significant encounter with water occurs during one of her journeys over the vast Fairchild plantation and similarly denotes a naturally-occurring danger alongside an imminent threat to autonomy. In this instance, Dabney pays a visit to the abandoned Marmion house, which she is set to inherit and inhabit upon her marriage to Troy, and, upon her return, is moved inexplicably from her path towards a swirling whirlpool: "She rode by the thick woods where the whirlpool lay, and something made her get off her horse and creep to the bank and look in" (Welty 161). The draw that Dabney feels towards the pool in this scene resembles a previous pull towards water that Partheny, an African American servant for the Fairchild family, experiences. Being found on the bank of the Shellmound Bayou after her sudden disappearance, Partheny recounts, "I were looking in de river. I were standing on Yazoo bridge wid dis foot lifted. I were mindless, didn't know my name or name of my sons. Mr. Troy Flavin he were by my side . . . Don't you jump in dat river, make good white folks fish you out!" (Welty 101). In remembering her contemplation of the river, Partheny also describes the absence of her own personhood and identity, comparable to the way that the racialized agricultural practices of the Old South erased the individuality of Black people, reducing them to human machinery. The river, for Partheny, symbolizes the systemic diminishment of agency she endures as part of the cotton industry. More than an avenue for her to realize her subjugation, the Yazoo river in this sequence also becomes indicative of the way that those harmful systems are

perpetuated. Before Partheny has the chance to escape her circumstances by jumping in the river, the plantation overseer and Dabney's intended, Troy Flavin, prevents her from acting. While Troy's interruption presumably preserves Partheny's life, it also ensures her return to servitude at the plantation and the continuation of her disenfranchisement. Like Partheny, Dabney ultimately escapes the whirlpool without being submerged, "gallop[ing] back into the fields;" but similarly returns to the bounds of Shellmound and its societal expectations (Welty 161). Here, just as Dabney is powerless to evade her impending marriage and her place within the legacy of the Fairchild family's exploits and cotton production, she is also unable to thwart the invisible force that moves her from her own intended path towards one of imminent, bodily danger. The nameless power that moves her and Partheny, then, is the same inanimate force that propels the workings of the plantation South and the continuation of white, patriarchal ideations by proxy. Placed against Partheny's escape and recapture, the tug Dabney feels suggests her subjective status and the way that the traditional systems of the South draw people in and ultimately restrict their agency.

The whirlpool scene again highlights the inescapability of this antiquated, racialized way of living as Dabney recalls the many deaths that have occurred previously in the pool. In remembering the quantity of these drownings and their victims, Dabney emphasizes how residents of the Mississippi Delta, regardless of race or gender, are submerged into and negatively impacted by the systems of the region. Dabney remembers, "[A]ll the stories since childhood of people white and black who had been drowned there, people that were dared to swim in this place, and of boats that would venture to the center of the pool and begin to go around and everybody fall out and go to the bottom" (Welty 161). This passage is integral to my interpretation of water's significance in *Delta Wedding* because each facet of Dabney's recollection speaks to a different component of the

inherent threat to individual autonomy present within traditional Southern expectations and the way that those norms inform the complex relationship between individuals and environment in the South. In specifically naming the pool's danger to white and Black people in the Delta, Welty highlights how the South's history of racialized violence and white capitalist greed ultimately deluges both its victims and beneficiaries. The adage of "been drowned" rather than simply drowned also seems significant here as it again implies some outside force contributing to the multitudes of submersions within the pool. Like the external factors that remove Dabney from her desired course, the previous swimmers in the whirlpool also succumb to their deaths at the hands of something or someone outside of themselves. These intangible forces driving Dabney and the other victims to this menacing whirlpool mirror the forces of systemic injustices in the region that are so established and protected, they affect each person regardless of their race, gender, or personal desires. Further, the presence of the boats and the daring swimmers signify an attempt to dominate and traverse the treacherous landscape, despite its implicit hazard. In having the individuals who taunt the strength of the naturally occurring environment ultimately drown, Welty parodies the attitudes of white landowners in the region whose desire to dominate the natural world results directly in the loss of individual autonomy, especially for minority populations. Finally, the circling waters of the pool, in which the submerged people and boats "go around" and eventually "disappear" from view, signify the cyclical nature of the ideologies of the old Southern plantation economy and the way that, without a clear end point, these strictures of racism and patriarchy persist in exploiting and submerging those who reside there.

If Dabney's initial approach of the whirlpool and her memory of its preceding victims highlight seeming inevitability of structural ideologies of wealth, race, and class and the way those attitudes generate a further desire to control and wield the land for

profit, it is Welty's description of the water itself that reveals its function for Dabney as an impending initiation into traditional expectations of Southern femininity and marital responsibilities. Welty writes, "She saw how the snakes were turning and moving in the water, passing across each other just below the surface, and now and then a head horridly sticking up" (161). The nest of thick, writhing snakes here immediately invokes a sexual overtone that foregrounds Dabney's forthcoming marriage to Troy and her subsequent transition to adulthood[3]. Sarah Ford interprets this scene as an "Edenic imagery of snakes" that "hints at how submersion here could be a 'fall,' a transition from innocence to experience" (126). More than a representation of the kind of sexual maturity approaching Dabney, though, I contend that the snake-infested waters here demonstrate Dabney's impending loss of agency and installation into womanhood. Danielle Fuller regards the function of matrimony more broadly in Welty's texts as an act that "sanctions and 'normalises' heterosexual sex" and, alongside "the social class and geographical origin of those involved," determines the participants' adherence to pre-determined social customs and expectations (295). Dabney's solitary observance of the whirlpool, her "last chance to look before her wedding," constitutes her recognition of her inability to escape the requirements of marriage, sexual and otherwise, that define her and Troy's union. Dabney discerns how "[t]he vines and the cypress roots twisted together more thickly than any roots should grow" as well as the way "some roots too moved and floated like hair" (Welty 161). Dabney's witnessing of the apparently unnatural, even animate, roots concurrent with the bed of snakes does not, as Fuller suggests, normalize the requirements of heterosexual marriage. Rather, in representing the elements of the pool as horrible and uncanny, Welty uses the watery landscape to critique the social institution of betrothal in the South and the way that it conscripts or, in this case, drowns women within expectations of femininity,

[3] See also Louise Westling's *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*.

separating them permanently from their dreams and desires. The roots that appear as "hair" in this scene symbolize that metaphorical submersion into white Southern womanhood and its concurrent sexual requirements and enforced compliance within the tradition of the South's troubled, racialized history. Welty cements this commentary on the threat to personal autonomy inflicted upon young girls as they transition between childhood to wifehood with Dabney's involuntary pulling towards the menacing deep: "[a] beginning of vertigo seized her, until she felt herself leaning, leaning towards the whirlpool" (Welty 161). Dabney, like the other victims of the swirling water, is powerless to resist the social forces around her and, as a result, destined to also ultimately surrender to external familial and social expectations. As a case in point to Welty's illustration of the power of Southern social systems to strip female autonomy through aquatic imagery, Dabney leaves the site of the pool "and gallop[s] back into the fields, the Deadening, Far Field, Mound Field, back to Shellmound" (161). Dabney escapes the pool with her physical life, but even upon observing the waters symbolic of her own place within Southern society, she flees back to fields of her familial plantation where her wedding and its assurances of the perpetuation of laborial and agricultural extraction will certainly continue.

Laura McRaven, Dabney's younger cousin from Jackson, Mississippi, also experiences a near-drowning in the rushing water of the Yazoo River[4] in the days leading up to the wedding. Unlike Dabney's close call with the waters of the whirlpool, Laura is actually plunged into the waters of the Yazoo by her cousin Roy. Similarly to Dabney's experience, though, Laura's immersion into the water also solidifies her initiation into

[4] In *This Delta. This Land*, Mikko Saikku gives a compelling overview of the history of the Yazoo River and its relationship to the cultivation of Delta agricultural practices and cotton production. Saikku explains that one of the only boundaries separating the Delta lands from being the most desirable and prosperous destinations for cotton plantations was the Yazoo River's tendency to flood extensively semi-annually: "It became evident that with adequate flood control, the Delta could turn into the envisioned garden" (145). The Fairchilds' presence on the floodplain comes as a direct result of hundreds of years and tremendous amounts of capital invested in flood-prevention systems.

Southern girlhood through a baptism within the ideological foundations of Shellmound that subsequently deprives her of any access to identity outside of traditional familial and gendered expectations. Critics have paid thorough attention to Laura's status as an interloper[5] within the Shellmound plantation and the events of the novel, as she "was nine years old" and "was on her first journey alone" to "visit her mother's people" (Welty 1). I contend that Laura's situation as an observer is what prompts her violent confrontation with Southern water. Laura, a McRaven rather than a true Fairchild and an outsider looking in on the proceedings, offers a unique perspective on the occurrences of the plantation that causes contention within the world of Shellmound. So deeply felt is Laura's separation from the rest of her Fairchild kin that she "generally hesitated just a little in every doorway" and "felt like a little country cousin when she arrived" (Welty 69). Despite being from the capital of Jackson, Laura quickly feels overshadowed by the Fairchilds' vast influence and is reluctant about her own experience in relation to that of her cousins, aunts, and uncles.

It is Roy's realization of his and Laura's gap in experiences that prompts him to ultimately push her into the river and remove her association with modernity and female agency. During their impromptu excursion to Marmion, Laura tells her cousin, "The only place I've ever been in the water is in the Pythian Castle in Jackson with water wings. Tar drops on you, from the roof" (Welty 234). With this remembrance of her time in Pythian Castle, Laura reveals to Roy her knowledge of the world beyond Fairchild, Mississippi, and her existence within non-domestic spaces. Moreover, the imagery of the tar falling from the roof in drips and drabs within the urbanized setting of Jackson symbolizes the threatened ending of the Delta as an agricultural superpower and cotton facilitator through the slow, but accruing, imposition of modernization in the region. Distinct from the

[5] See Sharlee Mullins Glenn and Atsushi Marutani.

metropolitan capital of Jackson, the Delta region that readers encounter in the novel is unmarked by seemingly any signifiers of modernity, paved roads included. The tar that infiltrates Laura's memory of her time spent within the Pythian Castle, signifies the impending presence of modern technology and the way that urban development is beginning to transform the South, moving it away from its agrarian dependence. As if to negate both of these possibilities in one fell swoop, Roy exclaims, "*What?*" and "dragged in the oars, got on his feet, and threw Laura in the river as if it were all in one motion" (Welty 234, emphasis original). Roy's immediate impulse to dunk Laura in the Yazoo, a significant marker of the triumph of the Southern cotton industry by its ability to prevail even in frequently flooded conditions, immerses her physically and metaphorically in the history of the agricultural South and its ideologies. As Mikko Saikku explains, "It was the relief from flooding- a natural phenomenon of the floodplain- that made the development of agriculture, infrastructure, and industry possible in the lowlands of the Delta" (13). Shellmound's close proximity to the river indicates the somewhat subdued threat of frequent flooding, made possible by the agricultural cultivation of the region and the resources invested within it. The Yazoo river, once a threat to the prosperity of the plantation economy in the Delta, marks, in this case, the achievement and robustness of the cotton industry. With Roy's assistance, the waters of the Yazoo erase Laura's prior association with both independence and social change in Jackson and situated her within the more antiquated expectations and exploitation of resources that the Fairchilds rely on and perpetuate. This change becomes immediately evident upon Laura's removal from the water as Roy's hands "took her by the hair and pulled her up like a turnip" (Welty 235). No longer the threat of change that Roy initially perceives, the Yazoo transforms Laura into an inanimate object, as inconsequential to the legacy of the Fairchilds as the yields from their garden.

Just as the whirlpool symbolizes, for Dabney, the consequences of her impending marriage, Laura's near-drowning in the river also impacts Laura's participation in the festivities, solidifying the removal of her previous separation from the Fairchilds and her newfound station within traditional Southern girlhood. Laura, upon her return from the river with Roy, is offered the position of flower girl in her cousin's wedding, a role previously unavailable to her because of her mother's recent passing. In placing Laura's new involvement in the wedding immediately after her plunge into the water, Welty again employs the flooded Mississippi landscape as compelling evidence of the way that young women in the South are initiated into Southern ideologies to the direct detriment of their individuality and freedom. Apparently unperturbed by her cousin's attempt to drown her, on learning of the previous flower girl's illness, Laura thinks excitedly, "Then she won't be the flower girl! and I can!" (Welty 237). Still "dripping wet" at the time of the last-minute change, Laura's violent submersion leads to her becoming not only an insider within the Fairchild family, but a willing participant within the continuation of the structures of the Old South through Dabney's marriage to the plantation overseer (Welty 236). Laura, in this water-logged sequence, loses touch with her identity as a McRaven from Jackson and becomes engulfed by her participation within the Fairchild realm. This inauguration into the Yazoo, while successful in uniting Laura with her maternal kin, ultimately demarcates her separation from selfhood and autonomy. Combined with Dabney's trip to the whirlpool as a symbol of the widespread consequences of Southern conceptions of racial and social hierarchy, both Laura's and Dabney's respective encounters reveal Welty's treatment of water in *Delta Wedding* as an emblem of the cyclical permeation of the plantation economy and the way that it continues to impact attitudes towards untamed nature in the South and concurrently prevent women's access to self-actualization.

Ward's *Salvage the Bones* also relies heavily on watery imagery to comment on the connection between people and land in the South. However, unlike Welty's usage of water to look backwards on the South's history and its lingering impacts, Ward invokes water to represent the lived reality of Black Mississippians in the twenty-first century. The waters that the Batiste family swim in before hurricane Katrina in their rural town of Bois Sauvage present an avenue towards fulfilment and meaningful land ownership for the Batiste children that stands in defiance to their generational disenfranchisement. Fifteen-year old Esch, over the course of the story, recounts two central encounters with water before the storm breaks at the end of the novel: her mother catching and cooking a shark during one of the family's beach excursions before her mother's passing and Esch, her brothers, and their friends enjoying the pond on their familial property to escape the brutal Mississippi heat, the expectations of their everyday lives, and the threat of Katrina's impending destruction. In highlighting the family's enjoyment of the Gulf waters, Ward foregrounds the Batistes' ability to benefit personally from the Southern land on which they reside, despite the historically charged relationship between African Americans and land in the region. To borrow Christopher Clark's words, "Ward's descriptive language evokes a natural yet romanticized and almost mythologized landscape that is at the same time deprived, injured, and hurting" (344). Ward's romanticization of the waters of coastal Mississippi, combined with her commentary on environmental and racialized injustices that have hitherto defined the region, together generate a nuanced representation of nature and its significance in the South. While the next chapter focuses on the water of the hurricane and the destruction it brings, I would like to first acknowledge the charged depictions of aquatic space incorporated into the beginning chapters of the work and the way that these scenes contribute to a nuanced understanding of Southern water. In this section, I linger on the pre-storm waters of *Salvage the Bones*, specifically "the Pit" and the Bay of

Angels, and examine how Ward employs these bodies of water as a signifier of community, connection, and resilience for the Batiste family. With these delineations of her characters' interaction with water before Katrina, Ward presents a relationship with nature that denotes safety and possibility, rather than threat and captivity.

Ward's first description of the Batistes' relationship with water comes in the opening pages of the novel, where Esch explains how the small pond on their residence, "the Pit," initially formed. With this recollection, Esh elucidates how the pond came as a result of her grandparents previously selling the dirt of the Pit to white homebuilders for extra income and, in doing so, reveals both the continued exploitation of earth and Black people in Mississippi as well as how land ownership has provided the Batistes with a natural space to enjoy and rely on. Ward writes:

> "Papa Joseph let [the white men] excavate the side of a hill in the clearing where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond." (14)

On the one hand, the formation of the pond elucidates how the Black experience in Mississippi, especially in connection to land and natural resources, is still determined by the desires and requirements of white people. William Cunningham argues that the creation of the Pit functions as a space in "which black culture is enunciated, outside (or adjacent, underneath) the purview of dominant white culture" (53). In the selling of the natural clay in the Pit, the Batistes lose their ability to reap corn from their own land, and their surrounding environment becomes physically reflective of white capitalistic endeavours. So evident is the impact of this greed and exploitation upon the characteristics of the Pit, that the diverted water begins to actually threaten the existence of the property in

its entirety: “Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money” (Ward 14). In ceasing to sell the land for profit only after the strength of the water threatens to engulf the residential portion of the property, Papa Joseph’s actions demonstrate the family’s financial desperation. Though Papa Joseph ultimately decides when to begin and end the removal of the soil, suggesting a form of agency, in resorting to selling the land literally out from under his family, his actions signify the continued disenfranchisement that African Americans experience in the South and the lengths those individuals are required to go to in order to experience financial prosperity. Papa Joseph’s utilization of the earth for financial gain, combined with the way those exploits observably changed the landscape of “the Pit,” reveal a complicated dynamic between the Batiste family and the land, ultimately indicative pervasiveness of white culture and the way it continues to dictate the African American experience and the extraction of natural resources.

In addition to denoting the continual commodification of nature and dispossession of African Americans, though, the pond’s inadvertent construction also provides Esch and her family a place of their own to relax. Esch recounts, “When there’s good rain in the summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it” (Ward 15). The Batistes and their tight-knit social circle take advantage of the gap in the earth left by the extraction of the clay and rely on the waters as a means of entertainment and connection with one another. As Katrina draws closer, Bois Sauvage receives the “good rain” Esch refers to and we see the exact kind of exuberance that the pond allows the Batistes and their friends. As her older brothers begin to enter the pond to wash, Esch thinks, “Where my brothers go, I follow”(Ward 53). For Esch, submerging into the water with her brothers represents a sense of familial unity, a relationship deeply integral to her. The water, then, becomes an

avenue to reify that important kinship with her brothers. Moreover, the water-filled pit allows Esch's brothers and their friends to forge a sense of brotherhood without onlooking or the imposition of masculine expectations: "[Manny] runs and dives into the water and comes up behind Randall and tackles him so that they both sink. They wrestle, giggling, looking like fish yanking against a line" (Ward 53). In the safety of the pit, Manny and Randall can touch and giggle with one another. Their joviality seems so natural and unburdened by external expectations, in fact, that Esch observes them as a native part of their aquatic surroundings, rather than humans intruding upon it. Marquis and Big Henry also seem at home in the waters of the pit. Esch observes how "Marquise is swinging from a rope that hangs from a high tree, and Big Henry is moving through the water with a slow stroke, his hands cutting in so straight they don't make any splash" (Ward 53). In this aquatic space, the teenagers' actions are genuine and uninhibited. They have, in the water, the space for play and self-expression that is often prevented by pressures of financial insecurity, gendered expectations, and racialized systems. Cunningham regards this space in *Salvage the Bones* as a "built environment that resists dominant narratives" (56). I would like to push this insightful analysis even further and contend that in addition to allowing the Batiste children and their friends a space to resist imposed ideologies, their relationship to the water also denotes a particular connection between human and environment, one that is not threatening or dangerous but instead tranquil and coexistent. As further evidence of this uncontentious cooperation, Ward reveals the venomous snakes also present in the pit as fellow inhabitants of the pool rather than a direct threat to the novel's central characters:

> "Randall slips away from Manny, swims over to Skeetah, who has been treading water off by himself.

‘Watch out. You know they got water moccasins under that brush,’ says Randall.

‘I’m all right. They ain’t studying me.’”(Ward 54)

Skeetah’s awareness of the water moccasins’ presence and his subsequent confidence that they pose no danger to him indicate a sense of mutual trust between him and the other creatures enjoying the pond. Unlike the snakes in Welty, whose presence indicates a threat to feminine autonomy and the imposition of patriarchal ideologies, the snakes in the pit are benign to Skeetah. His coexistence with the moccasins represents a certain familiarity with and understanding of nature: Skeetah is able to recognize the moccasins and, at the same time, understand that they are not seeking to harm him. This unusual reaction to the snakes in the Pit, in turn, signifies an uninhibited relationship between human and nature. In portraying the non-threatening snakes alongside the way that the water itself fosters community and belonging within the teenage characters, the pond becomes a space for the Batiste family to enjoy their surrounding environment that was shaped by racialized systems, without demanding or extracting anything from it in return.

The second central experience with water in the novel, prior to the events of Katrina, comes with Esch’s childhood memory of swimming in the Bay of Angels in the Gulf with her parents, and her mother catching and frying a baby shark for them to enjoy together. In her recollection, Esch details the coastal water in combination with powerful memories of her parents and, in turn, depicts the Mississippi Gulf Coast water as a strong reminder of her mother’s presence and a signifier of the way that the Mississippi water facilitates the Batiste’s enduring familial connection. Esch recalls, “Daddy used to take us swimming there when we were younger, in a little cove. . . .We dug up oysters, threw them out farther away from the cove” (Ward 85). The water in the Bay of Angels represents, for Esch, a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness. She describes how the “[m]arsh grass waved at

the edges" and how, at the conclusion, of these peaceful days, "the sunset turn[ed] through the sky behind [them] like a top" (Ward 85).Ward's description of the water here again contrasts significantly to Welty's, as the Bay of Angels presents a certain calmness and serenity rather than inherent danger the reanimation of harmful belief systems. In this sequence, similarly to the times they swim in the pit, the Batistes are harmonious with the watery Mississippi landscape. The water facilitates for them a kind of dual solidarity among themselves and between themselves and the natural world. This sentimental, idealized aquatic space becomes an avenue for Esch to consider the surrounding nature as well as her own. Esch remembers her parents' unrestrained connection in the Bay of Angels and how, in this body of water, her mother swam freely, "circled Daddy and his friends," and "laughed at their jokes" (Ward 85). Here again, the hydrology the Batistes' encounter invokes a sense of joviality and kinship that seems unobstructed by the external expectations of their lives in Bois Sauvage. The water provides, for them, a place of fulfillment so meaningful that it remains imprinted in Esch's memory for many years afterward.

Crucially, Esch also connects the Bay of Angels with an example of her mother's nurturing and her reliance on the untamed environment in order to do so. Esch describes, "She was the one that caught a baby shark; it was the same color as the water, as long as her arm and strong" (Ward 85). Esch's mother, despite being surrounded by grown men, is the one who garners the prized catch, evidencing how the bay water allows for authentic embodiment outside of traditional feminine expectations. Moreover, the catching of the shark represents the Baptistes' ability to rely on the water for sustenance. Ward writes, "She cooked it in butter that night, soaked it in buttermilk to take the wild out of it. When we ate it, it was tender, sea salty, and had no bones" (Ward 85). Masslich notes that, in this scene, " the water of the bay entertains and nurtures" (62). Esch's vivid memory of the

sensory experience of eating the shark alongside the way her mother lovingly prepares it, correlates the provisions of the ocean with her mother's nourishment and care. With this depiction, the water in the Bay of Angels becomes a site of sustenance, a reminder of maternal concern, and a unifying place of connection and possibility. Combined with the pond on the pit, the calm waters in the opening section of *Salvage the Bones* demarcate kinship and coexistence within the Batiste family and, at the same time, reveal and resist dominant ideologies and the perpetual impacts of the racialized history of the South.

Both Ward and Welty use vivid water imagery in their fiction to delineate the complex interrelation between humans and nature in Mississippi. In *Delta Wedding*, the water that threatens Dabney Fairchild and baptizes Laura McRaven represents an uncomfortable ushering into community and culture in the 1920s. In *Salvage the Bones*, the watery coast of Mississippi also delineates the continued impacts of racial and environmental injustice. However, Esch Batiste's experience in the pond of her familial property and her memory of her time spent swimming in the Bay of Angels also reveals water as a space of rare respite, enjoyment, and escape. These two respective employments of aquatic imagery and symbolism together provide a compelling throughline of the way that water cuts through Mississippi landscapes and brings with it representations of the way human belief systems continue to determine and order our relationship with the environment and with each other. In tracking Welty's 1920s delineation of water in the Mississippi Delta alongside Ward's descriptions of aquatic place in the Gulf of Mississippi in the days leading up to Katrina, we can observe the way that each Southern woman writer employs water to highlight a different facet of culture in the U.S. South. By placing these two Mississippian authors' powerful water symbolism together, we can extrapolate how their fiction, situated nearly a century apart, use the flooded environment to identify spaces of peril and resistance, and of isolation and community, in the region.

Chapter Four: The Wedding and The Storm: The Culminating Events of *Delta Wedding* and *Salvage the Bones*

In the previous two chapters, I focused on Ward's and Welty's treatment of land and water in their fiction as both literal and symbolic representations of southern ideology and its continued impact on the residents of Mississippi. In this final chapter, I take the same ecocritical approach and apply it to the concluding events of *Delta Wedding* and *Salvage the Bones*: Dabney Fairchild's wedding and the fictionalized portrayal of Hurricane Katrina. While the wedding and the storm, on the surface, may seem without much similarity, I contend that these respective occurrences function similarly within each story as an indication of how the racialized and gendered systems of the South persist and become reified. Both Ward and Welty end their novels with a pivotal event, inextricable from the southern environment, whose aftereffects stretch beyond the family of primary focus to suggest a broader commentary on the social and environmental construction of the region. In *Delta Wedding*, Welty details the wedding of the Fairchild family's eldest daughter to the plantation overseer, Troy Flavin, with vivid natural imagery and symbolism that signifies the consequences of the continuation of the plantation economy and the way the traditions of the Old South endure through legal unions like Troy's and Dabney's. In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward represents the destruction that the floodwaters of Katrina bring forth for the Batistes and their rural Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage to denote the ways that racialized systems of injustice continue to fracture the relationship between African Americans and nature in the South. Each author, in the culminating sequence of their novel, uses ecology and environmental symbolism to investigate human-constructed legal and infrastructural systems and the way that those systems cyclically perpetuate harm in the twentieth-century Mississippi Delta and the Mississippi Gulf Coast of the early two-thousands. In doing so, Ward's and Welty's natural descriptions of the final events of their novels emblematize the enmeshment of southern ideologies and southern nature and highlight the physical and metaphorical

consequences of that inextricability. At the end of both *Delta Wedding* and *Salvage the Bones*, these powerful descriptions of nature reflect the persistence of problematic Southern ideologies and how those beliefs manifest within the culture and land of Mississippi.

The namesake event of Welty's *Delta Wedding* is not, in itself, a noteworthy ecological event. However, in detailing the matrimony, Welty uses environmentally-charged language and deliberate references to the cultivation of the surrounding landscape that, when examined ecocritically, foreground the significance of this kind of southern union and its relationship to human agency and the perpetuation of exploitative agricultural practices. In this section, the wedding serves as a culminating signifier of the particular connection forged between human beings and nature in a region so marked by history and violence. Through water-based descriptions of Dabney and her bridesmaids, the flowers that ornament the day, and the restoration of the abandoned Marmion property for the newlyweds to live in, Welty's rendering of the Delta surrounding Dabney's wedding transforms the event from an idealized happy ending into a complex portrayal of the way that white plantation marriages ensure the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals and racial hierarchies. In centering this final critique around the legal union of the Fairchilds' oldest daughter and the plantation overseer, Welty uses natural depictions of the environment to both accentuate how their marriage ensures the reanimation of traditional racialized and gendered systems as well as the implications of that persistence on the people and the landscape of the South.

Like *Delta Wedding*, the ending of *Salvage the Bones* also surrounds a pivotal, though much more physically destructive, event that emphasizes the relationship between nature and racialized infrastructure in Mississippi. At the conclusion of the novel, Katrina makes landfall within the town of Bois Sauvage as an ecological disaster of monumental proportions. As the storm breaks, the flood forces its way inward, decimating the surrounding area and causing the Batistes to swim through treacherous water to safety. In representing the devastation of

Bois Sauvage and the turmoil inflicted upon the Batiste family, Ward's fictionalized depiction of Hurricane Katrina illuminates the kind of detriment that the storm meant for rural communities of color. Cut off from major news sources and without the funds or resources to evacuate, Esch and her kin are forced to not only experience the full impact and danger of the storm, but also reckon with the extensive damage immediately afterwards. With this ecological disaster, nature transforms for the residents of Bois Sauvage from a peaceful place of reprieve into a perilous threat, indicative of the continued disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South. Taken together, the culminating events of Ward's and Welty's novels both rely on intense environmental symbolism that foregrounds the way that nature and human belief systems influence one another in the South. In Welty's work, the ecological descriptions of Dabney's wedding metaphorize the legacy of the plantation economy and how it continues to hinder women's agency and autonomy. In Ward's novel, the environmental disaster of Hurricane Katrina exposes the continued racial and class stratification of the South and how those hierarchical systems continue to dictate how minority communities experience nature in Mississippi.

Nature in Dabney Fairchild's Wedding

The preparations for Dabney's extravagant wedding at the end of Welty's novel are replete with considerations and manicured inclusions of the natural world. From Aunt Mac's "corsage of red roses and ferns" to Dabney's own contemplation of the plantation on the morning of her wedding, where "[t]he sun, a red ball down East Field sat on the horizon" and "[f]aint bands of mist . . . rose to the dome of clear sky," nature remains close at hand for the duration of the wedding sequence (Welty 277-281). Appropriately, then, lush flowers and references to the gardenscape frame the descriptions of Dabney and her bridesmaids before and after the ceremony. The flowers that embellish the bridal party and that the bridesmaids

themselves resemble during the ceremony do not, as one would expect, highlight the romanticized beauty of the wedding and its decorations. Instead, Welty's strategic incorporations of flowers and floral imagery in connection to the bridal party complicate the exterior elegance of the event and suggest the consequences produced by white plantation marriages. In the lead-up to the big day, Dabney receives "princess baskets of pink and white Maman crochet roses" and "Cape jessamines" to fill her opulent bouquets and floral arrangements (Welty 268-269). These decadent floral arrangements, more than simply lush decorations, foreground the wealth and privilege awarded to the Fairchild through their plantation ownership. The kind of opulence that these flowers represent becomes evident when they are shipped specially to the wedding via train: "The Memphis flowers had come down just right, on the Yellow Dog that morning" (Welty 262). Dabney's flowers, in being expeditiously imported from another state, demonstrate the kind of extravagance that the Fairchilds can afford from their cotton production and their reliance on African American labor. By using the wedding flowers to mark the Fairchild's wealth, Welty's description of the natural elements included in the wedding accentuates the event as a pronouncement of the Fairchild empire.

The floral descriptions also extend to the bridesmaids themselves and, like the physical flowers, complicate the portrayal of the wedding by highlighting the event's connection to the broader plantation economy and the limitations it places on human beings in the region. Specifically, the floral imagery surrounding the bridal party serves as an indication of the ramifications of traditional marital expectations for women in the South: "[D]eep to pale, dark to light in their pairs, fading out to Shelley . . . Their crooks they held seriously in front of them in their right hands, each crook crowned with Memphis flowers tied on with streamers" (Welty 278). All ornamented with imported flowers, the vibrancy of each bridesmaid dress fades from youngest to oldest girl, suggesting the order of their marital

readiness as well as their placement within the transition from childhood freedom to conventional femininity. Here, the natural hues of the dress fabric alongside the special floral bouquets represent the way that marriage and womanhood in the region often means an end to a woman's own identity or selfhood. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw would call this lack of autonomy a "damaging result of the codification of subservience as the essential requisite of the lady" (78). In depicting each girl in increasingly paler colors, Welty relies on floral tones to evidence how, though hallmarked for their daintiness and femininity, southern women, as they age into adulthood, are often washed of their vibrancy and installed within traditional roles that help perpetuate the existence of white, southern aristocracy. Shelley herself, the second-eldest Fairchild daughter and the one wearing the palest bridesmaid dress, seems to recognize the disempowering implications of her status as a bridesmaid, primed for a traditional marital arrangement. During a moment of inward reflection after the ceremony, Shelley thinks:

> "But Dabney's marriage, ceasing to shock, was like a door closing to her now. Entering into a life with Troy Flavin seemed to avow a remote, an unreal world- it came nearest to being real for Shelley only in the shock, the challenge to pride. It shut a door in their faces." (Welty 290)

In being so closely involved in Dabney's matrimony, Shelley realizes the end to possibility and autonomy that marriage signifies. Kelsey E. Moore argues, "For Shelley Fairchild, [the wedding] creates an awareness of womanhood beyond the wedding, allowing her fears about sex and childbirth to rise to the surface" (137). Moore illustrates the revelatory function of the event for Shelley and her ideations about her own future. Welty's rendering of the entire group of bridesmaids, dressed in gradually dimming flowery tones and embellished with evidence of the Fairchild's vast wealth, demonstrates her further incorporation of the natural world to critique the wedding and its aftereffects. Upon observing Dabney alongside her

wedding party, Aunt Tempe thinks, “And they all look dead, to my very observant eye, or like ragdolls- poor things! Dabney is no more herself than any of them” (Welty 281). Here, the presentation of the female participants in the wedding causes Aunt Tempe to consider what being wed symbolizes for southern women: the loss of their agency. Rather than appreciating the bridal attire at face value, the vivid to blanched colors and manicured flower arrangements prompt Aunt Tempe to consider the gravity of the institution of marriage and the way that it removes women’s ability to resist or defy normative expectations. In using the natural world to substantiate the limitations placed upon women by traditional, southern belief systems, the nature that Welty incorporates to illustrate the bridal party highlights the way that Troy’s and Dabney’s wedding reanimates traditional ideologies and perpetuates the practices of the Old South.

The floral imagery surrounding the bridesmaids is not the only ecological metaphor employed at the end of the novel to signify the consequence of the extravagant wedding and the way that it reifies harmful, misogynistic structures. Upon her return from her honeymoon, Dabney appears once more lifeless and weak, as if dipped in water. Welty writes:

> “In catching sight of love she had seen both banks of a river and the river rushing between- she saw everything but the way down. Even now, lying in Troy’s bared arm like a drowned girl, she was timid of the element itself” (323).

Here, Dabney’s previous experience with the dangerous waters of the whirlpool comes full circle. She, on the cusp of entering adulthood, again faces the threat of being drowned within the ideologies of her environment. This time, though, rather than being able to escape the pull of the water, Dabney does not evade her marriage to Troy and subsequent immersion within the requirements of womanhood. On her honeymoon, Dabney realizes “everything” that being a married woman entails, socially, sexually, and otherwise. With this recognition, Dabney

also understands that, in entering into this permanent union, she has also entered deep waters, without a clear "way down" or out. As Sarah Ford contends, in this sequence, "Dabney becomes the "drowned girl," now confined within the script of her role as southern White lady" (127). Dabney's new role as the overseer's wife, like the force of a river, is inescapable and evidences her broader loss of autonomy within southern society. As Prenshaw notes, "The role of the lady was thus viewed not merely as genteel refinement but as integral to the aristocratic social structure" (76). Dabney's drowned appearance subverts the expectation of a radiant new bride and instead invokes ecological symbolism to demonstrate the way that plantation marriages, like Dabney's and Troy's, result in limitations to human autonomy and agency. In comparing Dabney's marital initiation to a violent submersion and employing floral imagery to represent the significance of marriage for each of the bridesmaids Welty's utilization of natural symbolism foregrounds the way that marriage, especially in the plantation South, can strip women of their individual ideations in order to ensure the continuation of such traditional systems. Dabney's symbolic drowning, then, suggests her own relegation to the role of proper womanhood alongside her new positionality within the fabric of the plantation economy.

In addition to utilizing ecological symbolism to denote the impact that marriage has on women in the South, the conclusion of *Delta Wedding* also features purposeful depictions of the actual Mississippi environment surrounding the events of the wedding that reveal Troy's and Dabney's union as a reanimation of the racial and agricultural exploitation that the Fairchilds built their wealth upon. While waiting for the newlyweds to return home from their honeymoon, Dabney's father, Battle, tasks the African American laborers of the plantation to restore the abandoned property of Marmion for Dabney and Troy to live in, demanding, "Men clear off and clear out, women do sweeping-and so forth" and warning them, "Don't you go falling through [the roof] and skittering down the stairs, haven't got time to fool with any

broken necks, Miss Dabney wants Marmion *now*" (Welty 299, emphasis original). Here, Dabney's and Troy's wedding serves as a catalyst for the Fairchilds' continued commodification of Black people and the environment. In the midst of a traditional marital celebration, Welty deviates from describing the event itself and refers to the cultivation of the environment and the demands placed upon the African American servants as a result of the celebration. In doing so, Welty's description of the festivities disrupts expectations of an idealized wedding and instead uses the expansion of Shellmound for Troy and Dabney to signify the consequences to human and nature that this kind of wedding results in. When Roy and Laura visit Marmion a few days earlier, the property is completely overgrown and devoid of human life, appearing more as a fixture of the natural landscape than a signifier of Shellmound's success. Laura observes, "an old drive, made of cinders, shaded by cedar and crape-myrtle trees which the clematis and the honeysuckle had taken" and "a hedge that went up from the landing, higher than anybody's head, with tiny leaves nobody could count" (Welty 229). Left to disrepair, Marmion's unchecked weeds and bushes contrast greatly from the manicured fields and curated exterior that defines the rest of the Fairchild land. In prompting the reclamation of Marmion from the overgrown earth, Dabney's and Troy's union signifies not only the continuation of the Fairchild plantation's cultivation of the southern land but also the expansion of their capitalist endeavours beyond the Shellmound home. Observing her new place of residence, Dabney sees how "[t]he sun lifted over the trees and struck the face of Marmion" and how "all the tints of cypress began to shine on it, the brightness of age like newness" (Welty 159). Here, Welty (literally) spotlights Marmion as a promise of wealth and security for Dabney, one so important to her that "[s]he would not leave Marmion, having once come to it" and that makes her exclaim, "I will never give up anything!" (158, 159). When Dabney looks at Marmion, the surrounding ecology seemingly recedes, making it appear almost new to her, rather than decrepit. This momentary

transformation foreshadows the later restoration of the property that occurs after her wedding and removes Marmion from its overgrown surroundings. The change Dabney observes in her mind's eye also prompts her to assert that she will never give up control of Marmion after she and Troy take up residence there. In connecting the receding influence of the environment to Dabney's promise to never relinquish control of the property, the Marmion's transformation turns the property into a new, permanent stronghold of the Fairchild plantation that evidences the renewal of their wealth and agricultural practices. Dabney's and Troy's installation into Marmion removes one of the last places of lingering wildness within the bounds of the plantation and, in turn, demonstrates the burgeoning strength of the Fairchild's cotton production, forged through the betrothal of the family's oldest daughter to the overseer of the fields.

In addition to accentuating the marriage as an emblem of the Fairchilds' extending domination of the Delta earth for their own benefit, the excavation of Marmion from the natural world also illustrates the plantation economy's perpetual reliance on undercompensated and unacknowledged Black labor and how that racialized structure is passed from generation to generation. While Dabney and Troy are away, Battle requires his African American employees to not only renovate the entire property in a span of three days, but also be mindful not to "go falling through" the decrepit structure during the process, in order to maximize the allotted time (Welty 299). Battle's interests, in this scene, lie entirely with the prompt renovation of his daughter's future residence and the expansion of the reach of his plantation, rather than with the physical well-being or best interests of his servants. His unrealistic demands upon the employees after the wedding demonstrate the way that the plantation economy cyclically dehumanizes Black individuals. Fixing the Marmion property provides Battle Fairchild an avenue to justify further overexertion of the African Americans working on the plantation in order to secure his familial legacy. More than a representation of

Battle's own imposition of the racialized structure of the Old South, though, Marmion's restoration also demonstrates how consequent marriages like Troy's and Dabney's can ensure the generational perpetuation of this kind of exploitation. Instead of presiding over the preparations himself, Battle concludes his instructions by delegating the management of the task to his 14-year-old son, Orrin, telling him, "Orrin, you go stand over this" (Welty 300). This designation of the management of the plantation laborers to Orrin suggests the eventual transfer in ownership of the Fairchild plantation from father to oldest son. The expansion of the Fairchild's agricultural stronghold through Dabney's and Troy's union allows Orrin the opportunity to begin taking over responsibility for the plantation and its laborers, foreshadowing his eventual complete ownership. Orrin's management of Marmion's restoration, then, emblematizes the way that the agrarian Fairchild family will continue its tilling of the southern earth and reliance on African American labor via the family's younger generations. In causing the removal of the Marmion property from its envelopment within the last bit of wild ecological surroundings and suggesting the endurance of the plantation economy and its racialized practices, Dabney's and Troy's wedding highlights the way that Southern belief systems are enacted and protected by legal institutions. Taken with the naturalistic descriptions of Dabney's and her bridesmaids' symbolic lack of agency, the ecological language Welty employs to render the novel's concluding event represents not a pastoral depiction of the oft idealized southern landscape, but a scrutiny of the broad human and environmental consequences of the cotton plantation system.

The Nature of Katrina

Ward, at the end of *Salvage the Bones*, also employs vivid imagery of natural storms, in this case hurricane winds and storm waters, that illuminate the continued impact of southern history on the residents of Mississippi and their experiences with nature. In Ward's

novel, the events of Hurricane Katrina play a much more tangible, though equally symbolic role, indicative of the racial stratification of the South and the way that it continues to victimize minority communities and dictate their embodied relationship with the natural world around them. In delineating Katrina's impact on the Batiste family and their surrounding rural community, the floodwaters at the end of the novel lay bare the structures of systemic racism that not only still exist in the twenty-first century, but actively contribute to the disenfranchisement and loss of life of people of color by amplifying the impacts of ecological disasters on their communities. Throughout the eleven-day lead up to the storm, readers encounter brief, clipped references to the incoming storm that create a sense of foreboding and, at the same, illustrate the Batistes' lack of resources and Bois Sauvage's broader history of being impacted by strong gulf storms. As the novel progresses towards Katrina's landfall in Bois Sauvage, the family receives static reports of the storm's progress from the first one, informing them, "The storm is currently a category one . . . could weaken . . . . could change" to the last report, given second-hand by their father, "'It's a category five,' Daddy says. 'Woman on the news say it's a category five'" (Ward 135, 213). These updates, relayed in bits and pieces with crucial information missing, work to destabalize the reader, preventing the formation of a coherent picture of the storm's magnitude. This disjointed representation of Katrina's movements and progression places readers within a similar position to the Baptistes and illustrates how their updates on Katrina were, like the reader's, received sparingly and in the background. The chaotic, confusing way that the Batiste's receive information about Katrina parallels the way that real victims of the storm, in rural spaces, were cut off from necessary news and media coverage, leaving them unprepared for Katrina's severity until it was too late. Ward, as a survivor of Katrina herself, notes this barrier to news coverage as a significant contributing factor to the way she and her family experienced the storm: "At home we'd had very little access to news, and the news that we did

have access to through a little rabbit ear antenna was the local station in Mississippi, and they are notorious for being really conservative" (Hartell 215). In this fictionalized portrayal of Katrina, the way that the Batistes gather knowledge of the storm's magnitude resembles the way that real victims and survivors in rural Mississippi, like Ward and her family, were underprepared for the category five hurricane through insufficient, politically biased reports that minimized Katrina's impact on communities of color. Ward goes on to say that the conservative media "weren't even covering what was going on over in New Orleans" and that "[she and her family] didn't realize what was going on there until [they] were in Michigan" (Hartell 15). In recounting her experience, Ward makes clear how the right-leaning news outlets in her area neglected to report on the full extent of Katrina's on the people of color left behind in New Orleans, making her and her family completely unaware of its detriment until well after they had been forced to evacuate. Ward's own inadequate updates about Katrina, combined with the way that the storm progresses for the Batistes, in turn, reveal how poor communities were disproportionately impacted by the storm's destruction by being deprived of necessary, relevant information about its severity.

In addition to accentuating the erratic way that the Batistes learn of Katrina's strength and intended path, the portrayals of the hurricane also highlight the Batistes' lack of disposable income as a factor in their inability to adequately prepare for the storm and as a wider indicator of how southern wealth stratification made poor Black Mississippians more susceptible to being victimized by ecological disasters. The day before the storm breaks, attempting to quell his son, Randall's anxieties about potentially running out of the minimal food they purchased in preparation for the storm, Esch's father assures him, "FEMA and Red Cross always come through with food. We got that much" (Ward 195). Here, unable to afford the appropriate amount of food for a family of five in the aftermath of a hurricane, the Batistes are forced to rely on the prospect of governmental aid to prevent them from starving

or running out of resources. In being forced to depend on assistance from FEMA and the Red Cross, the Batistes are made inherently vulnerable to the storm's impact, being without the means to provide for themselves. Moreover, the father's confidence in receiving aid from these organizations, assuring Randall they "always" arrive, signifies an established history of hurricane devastation in the community. In addition to the Batistes' reliance on governmental aid, as the storm builds, Esch recalls the stories told to her about the destruction of Hurricane Camille that further evidence the susceptibility of poor neighbourhoods of color to ecological disasters and how the inequitable wealth distribution amplifies the impacts of these events. Esch remembers, "[Mama] said the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, and the woods . . . She said she and Mother Lizbeth walked miles for water from an artesian well" (Ward 218). Here, the corpses produced by Camille reveal not only the storm's strength, but also the sheer number of individuals who were unable to evacuate in advance of the storm and forced to endure the hurricane in its entirety as a result. So many without the means to evade Camille were victimized by the storm and their bodies, unceremoniously strewn throughout the community, became physical markers of the way that communities like Bois Sauvage are ravaged by these ecological events as a result of their lack of wealth. Moreover, Esch's mother and grandmother being forced to travel great lengths to find any drinkable water illuminates how even the survivors of the storm were harmed tangibly by Camille and had to take their survival into their own hands. In rendering the physical destruction of Camille, Ward uses the environment in the storm's aftermath to demonstrate how the structure and hierarchization of the South leaves certain populations repeatedly damaged by ecological events. This past of being continuously victimized by and unable to evacuate or prepare for these Gulf storms corroborates what Troy D. Allen describes as "the enduring legacy of systemic and structural racism that has resulted in a disproportionate number of African Americans mired in poverty" (466). While the Batistes' economic status

and belief in governmental aid, and Esch's recollection of Hurricane Camille, introduces the intersection of wealth and race in the South and how it leads to rural areas, mostly comprised of people of color, being more susceptible to being victimized by disasters like Katrina, it is the storm itself that cements, for Esch, society's abandonment of herself, her family, and her community.

Despite her father's previous confidence, Esch looks out the window and realizes during the onslaught of the storm that none of the promised help is coming:

> "There is something long and dark blue between the trees. It is a boat. Someone has come to save us. But then I squint and the wind lags clear for one second, and it is not a boat, and no one has come to save us. It is Daddy's truck. The water has picked it up, pushed it from the Pit. The snake has come to eat and play." (Ward 227)

In this sequence, the Pit, a previous place of reprieve for the Batistes, seemingly betrays the family, as its boundless waters now animate the truck and cause it to appear to Esch as a threatening snake. As I explored in Chapter Three, the Pit is ordinarily a place of safety and security for the family. As such, this jarring comparison of the metal truck to a nefarious predator, primed to enjoy its kill, actually points towards the unnatural quality of Hurricane Katrina and the way its aftereffects were enhanced for marginalized communities in particular. As Cameron Leader-Picone explains, Hurricane Katrina was "anything but a natural disaster" as it made visible "decades of investment in industry that weakened storm protection, the lack of investment in infrastructure to protect cities, the entrenched poverty, inequality" that was and is "produced by a structurally racist education and economic system across the South" (68). The truck's presence in this scene, as a human-constructed object artificially positioned within the water of the Pit, signifies the wrongness of Katrina's devastation and the way it was made possible by human negligence and an established history

of inequality in the U.S. South. Esch's misplaced hope for rescue, followed by her recognition of the truck as a leering serpent, ready to strike, denotes human nature, rather than Mother nature, as being responsible for their inability to evade the full extent of Katrina's power. As a threatening intrusion upon the Batiste's place of protection and refuge, the truck that at first awards Esch a sense of false hope, ultimately symbolizes the way that racial hierarchies, engrained within the infrastructure and legislation of the South, relegate poor people of color to endure ecological disasters more frequently and without proper support.

If the obstacles the Baptistes face in becoming fully prepared for Katrina, combined with Esch's observation of the truck on top of the floodwater, demonstrate the way that African Americans are, through persisting systemic injustices, disproportionately vulnerable to environmental disasters, the decimation of Bois Sauvage and the surrounding area that the children observe after the storm recedes highlights how humans and landscapes are persistently harmed by these embedded belief systems. As the Batistes emerge from the wreckage of their home, Esch grapples with the way that Katrina has permanently altered her community: "The storm had plucked the trees like grass and scattered them . . . the trees I had known, the oaks in the bend, the stand of pines on the long stretch, the magnolia at the four-way, were all broken, all crumbled" (Ward 242). Indiscriminately "broken" and "crumbled," the trees seem to have suffered a fate similar to the human residents of Bois Sauvage who endured the storm. The destruction of the trees that Esch is so familiar with reveals how the environment itself becomes entangled within human politics of race and hierarchization. Richard Crownshaw argues, "In effect, the environment has been coopted in the perpetration of systematic and institutionalized racism, to which southern black bodies in particular are subjected" (229). More than a representation of the way that the natural world is implicated within the perpetuation of problematic belief systems, though, I contend that Ward's representation of the damaged trees also signals the way that racial ideology continues

to dictate how African Americans engage with and experience southern nature. Katrina, an emblem of the presence of racist ideology within government infrastructure and legal systems, destroys facets of Esch's surroundings that she had known and enjoyed since childhood. In demolishing these mainstays of Esch's environs and memories, Katrina represents how people of color are barred from their enjoyment of ecology in the South by the enduring consequences of the region's racialized history.

The depictions of the stormswept Bois Sauvage also further evidence the way that marginalized communities had been, and continued to be, disregarded by the U.S. government and populace. Towards the end of their survey of Katrina's damage, Esch observes, "People stand[ing] in clusters at what used to be intersections, the street signs vanished, all they own in a plastic bag, waiting for someone to pick them up. No one is coming" (Ward 250). Stripped of their homes and belongings, the nameless individuals Esch sees have nothing left to cling to, besides a belief in their imminent rescue. The imagery of the demolished streets here is apocalyptic in nature, but illustrates the very real desolation experienced by the victims of Katrina after being abandoned by their government. Henry Giroux argues that Katrina "revealed the emergence of a new kind of politics, one in which entire populations are now considered disposable" and "an unnecessary burden on state coffers" (174). While the fictional victims of Katrina in Ward's novel certainly embody Giroux's notion of disposability, as Esch reiterates several times her realization that no one is coming to save them, Ward's representation also works to highlight the impact of the storm as a feature of an established pattern of racialized injustice, rather than the creation of a novel kind of discrimination or the result of an unpredictable, unpreventable "natural" disaster. During the days leading up to Katrina, Esch recalls each of her family members prior experiences with hurricanes, as well as her own, which despite being only fifteen, are numerous. As the storm hits, Esch reflects, "The first hurricane that I remember happened when I was eight, and of the

two or three we get every year, it was the worst I've ever been in" (Ward 217). Esch's repeated exposure to hurricanes throughout her childhood speaks to the prevalence of hurricanes in the region and the way that she and her community had to, several times throughout the year, take their survival into their own hands. Furthermore, after Esch's father informs her that the storm has now become a category five, she thinks to herself, "Daddy has faced a category 5, but we're too young to remember the last category 5 hurricane that hit the coast: Camille, almost forty years ago. But Mama told us stories about that one" (Ward 213). Esch's memory here illustrates how, despite category 5 hurricanes occurring more infrequently than storms of lesser strength, storms of this magnitude still happened often enough and caused enough damage to be remembered by Mississippians only one generation older than Esch and her siblings. In mentioning Camille as a not too distant memory and accentuating Esch's multitude of previous experiences with hurricanes making landfall in Bois Sauvage, Ward's subsequent depiction of Katrina's destruction renders the hurricane as an emblem of the continued dejection of Black people and the environment in the South.

With a final, powerful portrayal of the aftermath of Katrina, Ward invokes Weltian imagery to describe the wrecked Mississippi landscape and the ramifications of enduring racist institutions on the people and landscape of the region. In observing the downed trees closer to the coast, Esch thinks, "[T]hey have been mown down, and there is too much sky . . . Here, there is too much sky" (Ward 249). The ground, once punctuated with trees and foliage, has been bared to the heavens by Hurricane Katrina. This verbiage of there being "too much sky" after the storm strongly resembles Laura McRaven's perception of the Mississippi Delta in *Delta Wedding*: "In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky" (Welty 3). The Delta landscape, overrun by cotton fields, is similarly devoid of trees or other structures to break up the vast expanse of plantation. In both texts, then, the abundance of Mississippi sky critiques the way that racism and racist structures manifest within the ecology of the South. For both

Welty and Ward, the expanse of southern sky speaks to the influence of racialized ideations on the environment and the lived experiences of African Americans, whether within the twentieth-century plantation economy or the reckoning of Hurricane Katrina in the twenty-first century.

In a holistic discussion of American women writers and their documented interest in depicting the natural world, Karen Kilcup posits that "that many women, especially outsidered writers, resisted and circumvented [their] confinement as they delineated their environments" (5). This final chapter has examined, in depth, the way that Ward and Welty, as two Mississippi women writers, employ ecological imagery at the end of their novels to critique the kinds of confinement embedded and perpetuated within the region. Each author unites vivid details of their Mississippi setting with poignant representations of the legal and social reifications of systemic racism and discriminatory ideologies. While this project has attempted to begin closing the gap in critical attention surrounding environmental symbolism in southern literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, further examination of the significance of ecology in southern literature, especially in the works of southern women writers, will help contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the way that these authors interpret and represent their region in their works.

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Vita

Izzy Herring was born in Carrollton, Georgia. After high school, she attended the University of West Georgia where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature with a minor in Women's Studies in December of 2023. As her undergraduate career drew to a close, she decided to pursue further studies in English Literature, with a specific focus in southern woman writers, and attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Izzy completed her Master of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies in May of 2026. After graduation, she will begin her new position as a high school librarian. She is incredibly grateful for the invaluable support of her family, friends, professors, and mentors that helped her realize and achieve these goals.