MY PLACE WHERE I MUST STAND: THE FUNCTION OF MOBILITY IN JESMYN WARD’S MEN WE REAPED

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ABSTRACT

My research grounds itself in the African-American literary tradition of documentation often identifiable at its starting point with Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs. In most recent years, postmodern African American literary studies has turned from urban, Northern spaces back towards the rural South as a “pre-modern” location as the remedy to the problem of urbanity. I argue that contemporary Southern literature writes against a nostalgic and “pre-modern” southern homeplace through its treatment of mobility. Jesmyn Ward’s Men We Reaped, published in 2013, is the book my thesis will focus on. A memoir, it makes the intervention by pointing explicitly towards the material realities of her hometown, Delisle, Mississippi. By rupturing the nostalgic analysis about the rural South among African American literary scholars, Ward forces “home” out of the essentialized, ethereal space that it preoccupies. That mobility is predicated on a recognition of both class and gender mobility, one’s ability to both leave and come back to a place, and how both of those tie to her Southern locale.
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...there existed in the past, and there continues to exist today, an entity within American society known as the South, and that for better or for worse the habit of viewing one’s experience in terms of one’s relationship to that entity is still a meaningful characteristic of both writers and readers who are or have been part of it. Greeson, The History of Southern Literature

Introduction

While defining sedentarist metaphysics\textsuperscript{1} in On the Move: Mobility in the Western World, Tim Cresswell describes the outsider: “…[she has] a “whiff” of elsewhere about her. The drifter, the shiftless, the refugee and the asylum seeker….“ (26). It is the “whiff of elsewhere” that defines the post-Civil Rights generation writing of the South within the age of Obama. This generation complicates the rural Southern homeplace by rupturing the nostalgia prevalent in African American literary studies. However, it is only able to do so because of the liminal space between the working class and a transitioning middle class. This position makes home, and particularly the rural South, a product of rootlessness rather than rootedness\textsuperscript{2} and provides an entrypoint for recentering the conversation around the rural South in postmodern African-American studies.

\textsuperscript{1} Cresswell cites Liisa Malkki who coined the term to refer to the tendency of anthropologists to think of mobile people “in ways that assume the moral and logical primacy of fixity and space”. She argues that there are severe consequences or mobile people in society’s insistence on fixity because they are a threat to the system. Sedentarist metaphysics is a result of “a desire to divide the world up into clearly bounded territorial units.” (26-7)

\textsuperscript{2} Cresswell, On the Move (1)
The southern place in 1970s African-American cultural and literary studies was birthed from a resistance to the industrialization brought by modernity and necessary for a critique of the modern; it is perceived as a “pre-modern” space\(^3\). In “Postmodern Geographies of the US South,” Madhu Dubey further expounds on how the South is constructed in the postmodern imagination:

The region's status as a hinterland left behind by uneven national processes of modernization bolsters contemporary claims that the South constitutes an “elsewhere” to a fully globalized capitalist system. In all instances of southern regionalism, across various disciplines, the South is represented as a nucleus of certain values that are pitted against modern existence: localism or rootedness in place, close-knit racial communities, face-to-face forms of social interaction, and folk-cultural traditions. (351)

This imagined south came to represent a “home” for African-American writers who engaged with a “southern folk aesthetic.”\(^4\) That home became synonymous with the rural South for African-American writers as representative of roots. I use “imagined south” here because of the southern folk aesthetic’s tendency towards nostalgia of the southern homeplace. More specifically, and as Dubey points out in her more expanded dialogue surrounding the South in postmodern imagination, the southern folk aesthetic offers the opportunity to “contest widespread claims about the pathological culture of black city dwellers by affirming strong cultural traditions and communities” (156). In other words, it pushes back against pervading beliefs that the urban underclass of African-Americans

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\(^4\) “…what I have been calling the ‘southern folk aesthetic’ is a construct of a literary criticism that partakes of the broader tendencies of postmodern cultural politics. The literary criticism that is institutionalizing southern folk cultural values as most authentically African American is, in common with other strains of southern regionalism, also reifying an internally diverse region that is in the throes of dramatic transformation.” (Dubey, “Postmodern Geographies” 367)
represents a total African-American community that no longer has “community” as well as against implications about a definitive “black community” in general. Black Authors do not have to force themselves back into this space, however, because this south is naturally inherited according to both Alice Walker and Carol Stack; Stack in particular refers to the “natural right” of writers to speak about this rural South⁵. By allowing every African-American the right to this imagined place, for the imagined place is the one that holds the communal affinity undergirded by race, the use of the southern folk aesthetic harkens back to essentialized notions of blackness.

Postmodern African-American constructions of the imagined South do not consider mobility and its impact on the southern place. The “pure elsewhere” that is birthed out of the “postmodern romance of the residual” south ignores the socioeconomic conditions that make the nostalgia that African American studies suggests impossible (Dubey, 368). My intervention lies in reimagining the static nature of the South through Jesmyn Ward’s Men We Reaped for late twentieth and early twenty-first constructions of the South. I will analyze the text through two poles: racialized class mobility and racialized gender mobility. That is not to say that gender or class are, or will ever be, separate from each other, but for the purposes of this paper, the two will serve as benchmarks for the conversation. Within those two benchmarks, I argue for two steps towards rectifying the theoretical black hole around rural Southern spaces, gender, and class: (1) defining how mobility changes a working class reality in the rural South. (2) nuancing the gender roles rural African American men and women take on in the contemporary moment.

Men We Reaped

⁵ Stack, Carol B. Call to home: African Americans reclaim the rural South. (xv)
A New York Times book review on *Men We Reaped* says that Ward is “eloquent about the gradual escape from the world she was born into.” This statement completely misses the point that the text makes. Ward is not trying to escape the world she was born into—she wants to bring the reader into it. Ward intertwines the traditional form of a memoir with the untraditional form of inserting the stories of five young men throughout her memoir—Roger Eric Daniels III, Demond Cook, Charles Joseph Martin, Ronald Wayne Lizana, and Joshua Adam DeDeaux. These are the “men” Ward reaps. They are African American and they are all dead before thirty within five years of each other. Joshua is Ward’s brother. The importance of these stories can be seen even in the contents of the book where the names of these men are the names of the chapter and are bolded in all capital letters. The chapters that are focused on Ward’s life are not as visually audacious but they also share a similar form. Each begins with the pronoun “We;” the first chapter states “We are Born” while the last chapter, and the one that finally intersects with the stories of the five young men, states “We are Here.” The use of the pronoun “We” is an invitation into Ward’s hometown and community of DeLisle, Mississippi. *Men We Reaped* follows Ward’s 2011 publication of *Salvage the Bones*; an novel about “a girl in a world full of boys” that was also the National Book Award winner for 2011. *Men We Reaped* seems to be the second part of a dialogue begun in *Salvage the Bones* as Ward chooses to focus on men in this text rather than what it means to be a young, black woman in the South. Although men are the focus, the text is still a memoir and Ward is a woman so the reader follows Ward’s journey from childhood to adulthood as she deals with her parent’s divorce, low self-esteem, and move to a private Episcopalian high school and eventual college and Master’s degree. The work of *Men We
Reaped is in its re-writing of contemporary Southern histories about blackness, womanhood and manhood, and the structural forces that drive a working class community.

In function, Men We Reaped is undeniably a postmodern text. Lawrence Hogue describes the postmodern subject and her text accordingly: the literature “consciously exposes those narrative strategies, or the process, which would lead to totality, that would advocate an essence” with a subject that “[possesses] various subject positions” (152). Ward disrupts the common representation of the literary South by providing a story that goes against contemporary African-American studies tendency towards nostalgia of the Southern place in literature. At its core, Men We Reaped is telling a story to tell a story; Ward is deliberate about using her memoir to reveal material realities about the rural South and to advocate against essentialized notions of the rural South. She utilizes her mother, father, brother, sisters, and community to that end. Additionally, Ward’s community provides a backdrop to better understand Ward’s subject position. She is both literally and metaphorically in a liminal space as she negotiates the class position that comes with the educational opportunities she is given. Ward attends private school, thanks to a tuition paid by her mother’s boss (her mother is a maid), goes on to Stanford, and then to graduate school at the University Michigan. All of this she juxtaposes against “home” which is intricately tied to a working class subjectivity that Ward does and does not inhabit. Not only must she negotiate class positions but also gender roles as she centers the text on manhood while still speaking of womanhood, gender roles outside of the heteronormative form, and how her ability to ascend into another class may be closely
tied to her gender position. Her work reveals the complications that must be understood in African American studies’ engagement with the rural South.

In form, Ward evokes a post-modern tradition that also engages with social realism and modernism. Ward moves her story both forwards and backwards, participating in both temporal distortion and fragmentation. Her story moves forward, beginning with her parent’s life, on to her childhood, adolescence, etc, while the short stories of the five young men who die in her community move backwards. We see the most recent young man to die in her community first while the oldest death, that of her brother, occurs last. These anecdotes interrupt Ward’s recollection of her own life as each occurs at the end of a section of Ward’s growth. The final story is where Ward finally intersects the past with the present. Additionally, the text engages briefly with magical realism; a moment that also includes the modernist tendency towards stream of consciousness. Finally, Ward participates in social realism in her novel, as her text uses statistics to support the overarching social conversation that Ward is attempting to have about the material reality of the rural South.

As an object of postmodernism, *Men We Reaped* falls into the more recent literary trajectory established by black women. Dubey more clearly defines what women’s literature does in post-modern African-American literary studies:

Not only was the southern turn initiated and established in African-American women's fiction and literary criticism during the 1970s, but even as it was subsequently elaborated by black male writers, the rural South was associated with a nexus of cultural values that are typically identified with women—home,
cultural origin, maternal ancestry, rootedness in place, tradition, and racial authenticity. (363)

The establishment of post-modern understandings of the South in African-American women’s literature makes room for a continuation of that conversation into the 21st century. Although Ward ruptures many of those cultural values in her memoir, I am particularly interested in intervening around rootedness in place. Nostalgia needs a rooted South, immobile and unchanging, to work in that literary conversation. Accordingly, an incubated rural South stands in opposition to the “worldly” and problematic urban place. However, rootedness does not speak to the post-Civil Rights generation’s mobile body. Utilizing a woman’s mobile body in particular shakes off assumptions about womanhood, maternity, and the home associated with the South. This reshapes the conversation around womanhood, class, and the South considerably. In Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject, Carole Boyce-Davies speaks to the importance of reading black women’s writing as a “series of boundary crossings” rather than “fixed, geographical, or ethnically or nationally bound” allows black women to write away from “exclusion and marginality” (4). This includes writing away from the academic boundaries that have marginalized and misread the South. Men We Reaped offers the opportunity for that consideration because the text itself makes the intervention, the reimagining of a romanticized South, I am arguing needs to happen by directly engaging with the material realities of race, class, and gender in DeLisle, Mississippi.

As the text deals seamlessly with gender, class, and race, black feminist criticism, Southern African-American literary studies, and Critical Race Theory could all serve as a framework for understanding this text. These three methods certainly inform my reading
of Ward’s text. However, by situating *Men We Reaped* in African-American postmodernism my argument can engage with dialogue around the materiality of the text. This includes analyzing print literacy and its continued place and purpose for African-Americans, which is particularly important in a conversation about class mobility.

**The Memoir**

The memoir genre can be most easily defined against fiction as “memoir presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans’ experience” (Couser 15). However, this definition is complicated by terms like biomythography and autobiographical fiction that acknowledge the constructed nature of any written work. Texts that use these terms engage in an “open acknowledgment of the artifice of the text,” an identifier of postmodernism (Couser 13). The acknowledgement of the artifice of the text takes on a different form in African American literature: there is a continued importance of the written word. As such, there is not an interest in the death of print literature but rather a recognition of the class differences that allow who has a say. Furthermore, African American literature asks what of this ability to say. *Men We Reaped* gestures towards these differences.

What is wonderful about Couser’s analysis of the memoir in the contemporary period is that it acknowledges the tradition of the African-American memoir citing Malcolm X, Claude Brown, and Angela Davis as precursors to what is considered a “new” moment in literature. I might even include Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, a memoir that utilizes “biomythography,” as apart of that conversation. It is this autobiographical tradition, one that can be traced back to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglas, that makes the use of memoir at this moment particularly important. Ward’s text is
continuing the long legacy of African-Americans who wrote to destabilize ongoing and overarching narratives.

Although memoir is the preferred term, I would like to harken to yesteryear for an important conversation around literary life writing⁶ and postmodernism. In the 1994 publication of *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, Leigh Gilmore acknowledges that, as a genre, the autobiography falls outside of both fiction and history (6). The “I,” the authorial voice, is meant to be both “the producer of meaning and organizer of knowledge;” she is both novelist and historian (7). The “I,” of course, is predicated on a telling of the “truth” that is unstable and thus creates the possibility for an unstable narrative. Despite this, Gilmore argues that “autobiography draws its social authority from its relation to culturally dominant discourses of truth telling and not, as has previously been asserted, from autobiography's privileged relation to real life” (9). Ward’s use of statistics in her novel point to her recognition of the dominant discourse on history and her attempt to not only enter her text into that discourse, but to do so by accurately engaging with fact.

**Mobility**

This thesis attempts to examine mobility within the framework laid by Tim Cresswell who identifies culture as no longer static but “hybrid, dynamic” and “more about routes than roots” (1). His analysis of nomadic metaphysics and its usefulness in considering postmodern bodies is particularly salient for my reading of the African-American woman’s body placed in the South. Mobility resists hegemonic structures and the easy tendency towards “fixed, bounded, and rooted conceptions of culture and identity” (26). However, these postmodern nomads are “unmarked by traces of class,

⁶ Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir: an introduction.* (9)
gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography” and “appear as entries on a census table or dots on a map—abstract, dehistoricized, and undifferentiated…” (53). Cresswell provides a brief analysis of the postmodern nomad noting that class, gender, and race differences make the “unmarked” nomad impossible (53-4). Utilizing the black woman’s migrancy in memoir to understand the post-modern South in African-American studies engages the critique that Cresswell wields of the post-modern nomad by demonstrating that she can never fully be “abstract, dehistoricized, and undifferentiated.” While keeping Cresswell’s critique in mind, my thesis looks to engage the post-modern nomad as critical to understanding the socioeconomic, political, and racial relationship to the South for a post-Civil Rights African American generation—affected by differences in class, community, and the imagined Other South—through the exploration and defining of the complicated areas that Cresswell has begun the work of clarifying. It is important to sift through those spaces because while the nomadic postmodern subject is useful towards better understanding culture, its usefulness cannot be fully realized until it acknowledges the effects race, class, and sex biases continue to have within culture. I will parse out race, gender, and class in the rural South of Ward’s text through a reading of Men We Reaped that consider racialized class mobility and racialized gender mobility.

Racialized class mobility is shifting the conversation toward the intersection and effects of race and class on mobility. This mobility asks particularly salient questions: How does this black woman move in and out the working class position and why is that important? How does she engage with her liminal class space? What does her move say more broadly about a black middle class and the crisis of community in the post-Civil Rights moment? Similarly, racialized gender mobility focuses on the effects of race and
gender on mobility. It asks: How do gender roles move and shift even as they are so intertwined with one another? What does that mean specifically for the rural South that Ward presents? What can her commentary on the mobility/immobility of gender do for black feminist conversations? What can her commentary do for analyses around black women’s memoirs?

Entering this conversation and answering the above questions with mobility in mind implicitly moves the conversation away from nostalgia, rootedness, and Southern culture as fixed and in place. It continues the work of breaking up essentialized notions of blackness even within African American studies that can stifle the way one understands a particular place and people and thus what historical narrative literary scholars utilize in their readings of the rural South.

A Collective Memory of the South in African-American Literature: African-American Women’s Memoir

Slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement inform the national collective memory of the South.

The centuries of racial injustice in the American South correspond to concerted efforts to cordon off black bodies from whites, and with that separation, to maintain a hierarchy of race-based power. The South, from the introduction of slavery in the seventeenth century through its abolition in the nineteenth century, has structured spheres of production that in turn organized social relations and created a language of spatial differentiation that depended upon race. These spheres of production identified not merely occupation or trade, but fundamentally place, and most often constructed race as well and with it, status. (Davis 5)
The spatial differentiation would directly impact the literature produced in the South produced during and after the Civil War, and which continued into the Jim Crow era. Although the impact of slavery and Jim Crow continued to sway what authors wrote, the way those events were expressed began to change with the end of the Civil Rights movement. For the purposes of my paper, I am interested in charting that impact beginning in 1970, right at the helm of the turn into Southern literature that Dubey identifies. I will begin my analysis with Maya Angelou whose autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1969. In “Black Writers in a Changed Landscape, Since 1950,” Trudier Harris provides a broad history of southern writers. She notes that although Maya Angelou is claimed within southern literary circles she actually spent a short portion of her childhood in Arkansas before moving on to California. Despite Harris’ assertion that Maya Angelou actually only spent a short time in the South, and using her earlier recognition that “it is increasingly difficult to isolate all criteria that would identify a writer as southern,” I place Maya Angelou alongside Alice Walker—who Davis rightly recognizes as one of the forethinkers for postmodern Southern literary studies—and bell hooks in a literary tradition of African-American women’s memoir in the South.

I am particularly interested in these three authors because of their form and the time period they are in. Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969, was written as a result of a challenge from publisher Robert Loomis who said that an autobiography could not be written “as literature” (P. Walker 91). This reference to literature is directly related to form, most specifically, “organic unity” (P. Walker 93). As I’ve shown Ward’s text takes a different turn since it does not use organic unity but
instead fragmentation and temporal distortion to relate the memoir. What is most important to note here is the focus on Angelou’s text as autobiographical fiction. Although I am not situating *Men We Reaped* in that genre, I do believe Angelou’s attempt to tell her life with the narrative arc most associated with fictive renderings of selfhood puts her text at the beginning of the tradition I argue Ward fits within.

In addition to form, Angelou’s text has been understood in terms of its representation of the liminal space that black women reside in. In *Gender, Identity, and the Liminal Space*, Maxine Sample looks at liminality as a means of “articulating issues of female empowerment and self-actualization” (215). Sample recognizes Angelou as performing political work, as is particular to the African American literary tradition, by providing texture to the conversation around race, gender, and class from her liminal position. Ward makes a similar move but puts her geographic location at the center of the *Men We Reaped*.

Davis’ choice to call Alice Walker a forethinker for postmodern Southern studies is based on her life’s work that focuses on the rural South. This includes the canonical *The Color Purple* as well as her research on and reintroduction of Zora Neale Hurston. It also includes Walker’s collections of essays in her 1983 publication of *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens* and most particularly her essay entitled “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience.” Walker admits nostalgia for the community that the Southern writer inherits that assists in herself and her siblings to never consider themselves poor or worthless (17). Ward tells a different story showing how the effects of racism directly impacted the way those in her community viewed themselves and one another:
And even as we distrusted the society around us, the culture that cornered us and told us were perpetually less, we distrusted each other. We did not trust our fathers to raise us, to provide for us. Because we trusted nothing, we endeavored to protect ourselves, boys becoming misogynistic and violent, girls turning duplicitous, all of us hopeless. (Ward 169)

Clearly there is a disconnect between the communal South Ward writes about and the communal South Walker yearns for. Ward continues the work that Walker begins by rewriting what the contemporary rural Southern community looks like and exploring the tensions created by racism and poverty within the black community. That is not to say that Ward does not crave home in the same way that Walker does. Walker argues for the richness of writing that the South allows for and references the beauty of home stating that her Northern counterparts have “never experienced the magnificent quiet of a summer day when the heat is intense” (21). Ward has similar connections to home, this is part of what constructs her liminal position, but she is also invested in the larger work of not only convincing African American literary studies that the South is worth reading, writing, and critiquing, but revealing the material conditions of that space so that African American studies can critique in the correct way. Ward is invested in the political force of writing about the South. Nostalgia minimalizes that force.

Finally, hooks’ 1994 memoir Bone Black is the text that most clearly fits into the postmodern form. hooks intertwines her girlhood fantasies, dreams, and impressions with reality to construct a memoir about her childhood in the South. She weaves her commentary about race and girlhood into her story but, besides an implicit assumption about the South and race, there isn’t necessarily a heavy focus on her geographic location.
by the text. There is minimal scholarship on *Bone Black*, and what scholarship there exists is not interested in the politics of bell hooks’ place and how that place is written in the postmodern form.

Angelou, Walker, and hooks simultaneously worked with and wrote against the Southern collective memory to show the “real” of Southern life as a woman. That included African American girlhood, motherhood, community, fatherhood, and the effects of segregation. In showing the real, all three authors interrogated the nostalgic rememories of Southern womanhood (the happy, asexual mammy or the happy, silly pickaninny) that so often accompanied black women’s representation. These are works in postmodernism in terms of subject as authors return to the South as counterculture; this is the closest landscape that offers a connection to some African roots and is in response to American metanarratives that situate African-Americans on the periphery. Additionally, the authors of these texts participate in rootlessness rather than rootedness and yet the South they construct does not follow suit. Their narrative remains intensely nostalgic about the South; in particular nostalgic about the racial community and the economic and racial conditions that make that community possible even as they are not in any way nostalgic about segregation. Although Walker makes a point of saying she does not yearn for poverty in “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” she goes on to the make the case for community, and particular the community that the Black southern writer is connected to, as grounded in the working class (19). The work I am doing, the exploration of mobility in an African-American woman’s text, directly pushes back against this outdated reading of southern womanhood as rooted in place—whether in

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7 Dubey, “Postmodern South” (360-61)
class or expectations for gender roles. *Men We Reaped* offers the opportunity to fully parse out the mobility of black women’s bodies in the rural South.

**Post-Modernism: The Complexities of Black Space**

In *Race, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, W. Lawrence Hogue defines postmodernism as questioning “concepts… of historical continuity or any totalizing and homogenizing system” (5). Additionally, “postmodernity constructs the subject as decentered, as possessing various subjective positions or a network of desires” (5). Formulations of the rural South in post-modern consciousness have begun the work of rupturing the nostalgic rural South as a site for authentic community. Moving beyond the works in post-modern African-American studies presented by both Cornel West and bell hooks⁸, theoretical works like Salamishah Tillet’s *Sites of Slavery* or Robert Patterson’s *Exodus Politics: Civil Rights and Leadership in African American Literature and Culture* look back towards slavery and the Civil Rights movement. Both are grounded in the South to complicate the nostalgia of those moments but do not necessarily treat the contemporary moment and conditions of the South. Another example, and one that I rely on heavily as a starting point for this research, can be seen in Davis’ *Southscapes* which deals exclusively with the south place, and scrapes away at the nostalgic memory of a southern economy through treatment of Mississippi’s economic deprivation. However, it focuses on a Southern literature rooted in place and does not treat the nomad, post-modern position in Southern African-American literature. Similarly, Dubey’s chapter “Reading as Listening: The Southern Folk Aesthetic” in *Signs and Cities* sets the stage for a critique of postmodern nostalgia about the south. Dubey pushes against assertions,

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⁸ Look to hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” and West citations in the Works Cited.
in particular by bell hooks, that a return to the communal system of the rural South is necessary for the black underclass. She shows how the rural South “acts as a stimulant for the postmodern African American literary imagination” by systematically breaking down and critiquing the rise of a focus on southern literature by critics as well as novelists (145). Although Dubey’s work is invaluable to my own, her ending is my beginning as I consider a text set in the contemporary rural South and focus on mobility as a tool that makes nostalgia about community, class, and gender in the rural South of African American literary and cultural studies impossible.

Let us open this conversation by teasing out the ideas and ideals of community, class, and the imaginary in the rural South and how these effect the way the rural South is constructed in African-American consciousness—particularly in this historical moment. First, we must recognize socioeconomic shifts towards the middle class for African-Americans following the Civil Rights movement.

The opening up of America’s mainstream institutions and practices, and the educational, economical, and social integration of people of color into the modernization process in the US have increased the number of educated, middle-class people of color. The elimination of legal barriers has stimulated an exodus of the colored middle class from marginalized spaces in urban and rural areas. (Hogue 15)

This “opening up” of the middle class begets the “crisis of community” that Dubey references. Post-civil rights possibilities for class ascension only further marginalized those who were not only poor, but outside of the exploitive media eye that pervaded northern and Midwestern urban areas. Even when the conversation returned to the south,
it was the New South that became the center. The reverse migration back to the New South included African Americans interested in taking advantage of the possibility at becoming middle class. In the *Introduction to Race and Displacement: Nation, Migration, and Identity* in the 21st Century, Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes of the urban space for African-Americans through the eyes of Richard Wright’s ascent to Chicago where he finds:

…the urban equivalent of the slave ship’s “festerling hold.” Blacks lived badly. In the Windy City, the black majority was housed in the “zone,” which the urban sociologist Robert Park et al. describe as a site of smokestacks, ashes, deteriorating houses, dehumanizing population density, crime, vermin, violence, and disease… Black intellectual and resistive impulses of racial advancement seemed erased by alienating white, urban economies. (Ix)

It is from this point that the literary South is presented as the remedy and thus the Southern power structure that systemically limits the poorest African-Americans left in these Southern spaces is ignored. The de facto racism that impacted the South just as much as it did urban Northern spaces is never parsed out in postmodern African American literary criticism. As Farrah Griffin states in *Who Set You Flowin’: The African-American Migration Narrative*, “While return migrants note that the racism of the South is more blatant than that of the North, it seems to be less effective in denying them access to opportunities. They cite it as an inconvenience they are willing to bear…” (181). Racism is not changed because of class position, but the possibility at class ascension makes racism a lesser factor.
The rural South that has bore that inconvenience was all but forgotten about not only in African American literary studies but in national consciousness as well. This can be best understood when one considers the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The real and imaginary came to a head as a result of the sudden media attention on this forgotten space. It is here that Edward Soja’s Thirdspace\(^9\)—the engagement of both the real and imagined world of a postmodern space—and what Linda Hutcheons identifies as post-modernism’s “commitment to doubleness and duplicity” becomes necessary for parsing out the real and imagined space of the South. In essence, Thirdspace is the work that Ward is engaging in as she conflates both the real and imagined in the memoir form by writing alongside Stacks’ analysis of class and a late 20\(^{th}\), early 21\(^{st}\) century return of African Americans to the South. Ward speaks about herself and friends that call the South home:

Many leave and never come back, lured away by cities where it’s easier to find working-class jobs, where opportunity comes easier because those in power are less bound by the culture of the South. But I’ve heard others who’ve moved away from Mississippi, worked for five, ten years of their adult lives somewhere else, and then moved back to Mississippi say: “you always come back. You always come back home.” (27)

The reasons for a pull back towards the Southern homeplace are hazy for Ward who seems to never have a clear reason for returning, but perhaps she doesn’t need one; as

\(^9\) Working from Edward Soja’s “Thirdscape” I will consider the South as both “real” and “imagined” and query post-modern African-American literary theory that defines the rural South from this starting point. Soja identifies Thirdspace as “a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the “real” material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through “imagined” representations of spatiality” (6). I wish to nuance the “multiplicity of locations” that Ward recognizes is birthed from this sort of reading.
“others” say its not a matter of why but when: “you always come back home.” Carol Stack postulates around the why in Call to Home: African-Americans Reclaim the Rural South. She says, and this is true in the context of this text, that:

“The people who are moving south are leaving cities where the economy has stagnated and returning to places where the economy has all but disintegrated—to homeplaces categorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as counties of “persistent poverty” (xiv-v)

However, these people return back to the South because, as Stacks states, there is a “multilayered” image of home and thus one’s return to that home is multilayered as well (xv). This layering is Thirdspace. Stacks goes on to nuance the Thirdspace South for African Americans:

The people returning there are not fools; they know that home is a vexed place, and they often consider it a virtually unchanged place…. In generations past, the conditions of life in the rural South for poor black people had to be either swallowed whole or abandoned; people literally had to take it or leave it. But in the darkness before the dawn of the twenty-first century, as the southern countryside is gathering in people… who have come home with new ideas, new energy, new skills, new perspectives, the proving ground has become the setting for […] a chance to start something new, to remake the South in a different image. (xvii)

Stacks is doing the anthropological work that must be done in literary studies of clarifying the role of the rural South for African Americans in the ongoing moment. This thesis is an attempt to do that work; Ward’s text provides the literary fodder.
To his credit, Soja begins considering Thirdspace and its implications on African-American studies and particularly black women. However, he stops short at identifying a literal place and instead utilizes the “chosen margin.” Soja says that the “chosen margin” accepts the imposition of the more powerful, binary Other to re-center and create counter-hegemonic identities (97). Like the unmarked nomad, a theory of the “chosen margin” blankets the conversation by refusing specificity. This only pushes forward essentialized notions of blackness that do not consider gender, region, socioeconomic status, etc. The stakes in complicating Thirdspace lie in its usefulness towards understanding African American formulations of self in contemporary literature. The vacillation between the real and imagined South, the Thirdspace, is a result of one’s mobility to move between the two. For Men We Reaped, that mobility cultivates what is understood and what is written about DeLisle, Mississippi. Without specificity, Thirdspace remains in the abstract place of theory.

### Laying out the Chapters

This thesis will be separated into two chapters to parse out the intersections of race, class, gender, and place in Ward’s text. The first chapter will focus on racialized class mobility by analyzing the liminality of Ward’s class position. It will then use that liminality to consider the gap in working and middle class African Americans and whether or not print literature works to fill that gap. This question is initially asked by Dubey however she places her question in the Northern urban setting. I will do the same for the rural South while also bringing forth the mobile nature of the text and the possibility for immobility, i.e. immortality, in the print word for African American males. The second chapter will focus on racialized gender mobility. I argue that gender mobility
is enacted in Ward’s treatment of the relationships between men and women. As the reader learns the way men and women can and cannot move in and out of gender roles, and how those gender roles differ from heteronomorative and middle class ideals, they also learn how home works as a site of mobile bodies. The conclusion looks towards current conversations in African American literary studies that question the purpose of African American literature post-Civil Rights movement. I am interested in where Men We Reaped, fits into that conversation.

Considering the South as Other in black literary space and identifying access and mobility as proponents of that othering lends itself to critical questions: How is mobility constructed in this text? Both within the Southern place and beyond it? How does Ward write the complications of class in her text? How do we define a working class reality? How does one consider privilege in this text? Does Ward acknowledge her own privilege? How is the rural, Southern body actualized in postmodern African-American literary studies and theory alongside the more visible, urban black body? Davis posits that contemporary writers of the South recognize location’s relationship to black subject formation, but their understandings, revelations, and action—the literal writing of this complexity particularly as it relates to the rural South—lacks reaction (10):

In part, theirs is a recognition of a rapid and perhaps unanticipated move into a postmodern existence by people of African descent, who, having survived the ravages of extended modern segregation and the violence of desegregation, emerged into a dispersal away from traditional sites of black communal experience. The new integrated, but often isolated, spaces offer little traditional
means of coping with the persistent residue of segregation, yet they may in fact stimulate new transformative methods of becoming in the world. (10)

These “new transformative methods of becoming in the world” are lost if theory remains invested in nostalgia. One must recognize the simultaneous insider and outsider position of African-Americans writers as not only one that assumes access on the part of the author who is able to give voice to a story, but also within the framework of Thirdspace. The real and imaginary space of the South is crucial towards furthering a theoretical literary approach to post-Obama, rural Southern texts because it reminds one of both the material “facts of the land” while simultaneously teasing out and defining the remembered South, the imagined South, for a generation of African-Americans who are connected to and yet can disconnect themselves from the South.

Ultimately, the work done by post-modern African-American studies is a work in confronting and complicating major narratives. As I have shown, the South is particularly important for the national memory of African-Americans. For that reason, the South remains important for African-American literary studies.
Chapter 1: The Classed Southern Space

One cannot consider the mobile African-American body without a full teasing out of the contours of class that keep that body in space. In *Men We Reaped* that space is the rural South of Delisle, Mississippi. If home is an extension of mobile bodies in postmodern literature, than the effects of class and race on that mobile body, and subsequently on that home, are the written narratives on the text that is the body thereby defining the parameters of its movement. This chapter will begin by situating Ward in the current African-American literary conversation that looks towards structural racism\(^\text{10}\). It will then move on to a discussion of structural racism beginning in the 1980s and in relation to the rural South to provide some historical context to Ward’s memoir. Finally, I will tease out questions posed earlier surrounding the liminal class position this black woman resides in, her engagement with that space, and what that engagement means in a postmodern framework. Ultimately, I argue that the liminal class position Ward is in makes possible an analysis of the written word that maintains its importance in African American culture. It is both a literal mobile object and metaphorical immobile object. The literature produced due to Ward’s liminal class position directly opposes postmodernism’s trivializing of the text and in doing so brings to bear the stakes for African American writers and the class positions they engage with and choose to write about, and thus the possibilities for postmodern African American critique in engaging with that writing.

**The Theoretical Conversation**

\(^{10}\) See Jones, *Prejudice and racism*: …those established laws and customs, and practices, which systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in American society. If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions. Institutional racism can be either overt or covert (corresponding to de jure and de facto, respectively) and either or intentional or unintentional. (131)
What is particularly noteworthy is that the rural South that Ward presents in her memoir is that it is affected in ways similar to urban spaces both in the New South and outside of the South. Here lies the intervention of Men We Reaped, but also the intervention in theory that my thesis is making: structural racism in post-modern African-American literary conversation has centered around urban spaces juxtaposing them against Southern community and notions of “home” that are birthed out of nostalgia. Ward claims the effects of minimal education, poverty, and drugs—the systemic effects of inequality and racism on the black rural Southern body—results in a metaphorical weariness and literal poverty as seen in the statistics about Mississippi she provides for readers. These claims are the crux of arguments and theorizing for cultural critics like Cornel West, but those arguments do not engage specifically with the rural South. Men We Reaped makes an intervention that conflates space and time in postmodern African American studies to refocus critique.

As stated earlier, Ward’s literary forbearers—Angelou, hooks, and Walker—also engage with the rural South, but, again, in ways that continue in nostalgia. More recent memoirs that engage the South and offer opportunities for analyzing mobility include Denzy Senna’s Where Did You Sleep Last Night? or Helena Andrew’s Bitch is the New Black engage with the South in memoir form. Despite their movement in and outside of the South, though, neither of these as pointedly participate in larger social conversations.

Ward’s choice to bring the statistics on her community into the text sets the tone for the retelling of not history, but her present moment. This particular investment in rewriting the current knowledge around African Americans in the rural South does its
own work in altering the South in African American literature. Riche Richardson speaks
more to this in Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta:

To be sure, whatever fascination with black rural southerners there has been in
academia has in no way translated into an interest and preoccupation with them as
objects of social concern to address, for instance, the deplorable material
conditions that many blacks living in rural southern contexts have continued to
face... lack of access to public utilities, decent housing, jobs, health care, schools,

etc. (126)

Ward is refusing her readers the opportunity to remove her writing from those she is
writing about by acknowledging, clearly, those material conditions. Richardson goes on
to, like Dubey, relate the significance of the “romanticized African American past in the
United States (i.e. ancestral, historical, spiritual)” in literature to the current material
realities (127). Richardson argues that in some way this belies “even the very existence”
of African Americans in the rural South (126). Richardson’s recognition of the erasure of
a rural Southern history is exactly the conversation that Ward and her text step into and
attempt to rectify. Although Richardson brings up this most critical point, she still returns
to Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, published in 1952, for her reading of the rural South in
literature. Men We Reaped provides the necessary terrain upon which to enact and engage
with both Richardson and Dubey’s call for a re-rendering of the southern aesthetic in
African-American literary studies.

Broader conversations around structural racism and African-Americans in the late
20th and early 21st century, specifically those that deal with class, don’t necessarily situate
themselves specifically in the rural South. Lori Latrice Martin’s Black Asset Poverty and
the Enduring Racial Divide, the collection of essays in Race, Poverty, and Domestic Policy, Catherine M. Casserly’s African-American Women and Poverty, and Nancy DiTomaso’s The American Non-Dilemma are a few that deal heavily and exclusively with structural racism and the economic divide that racism causes, but don’t exclusively treat the South and certainly not Southern African-American women. Newer critical thought that does speak to the South has used Hurricane Katrina as an entrypoint: Michael Eric Dyson’s Come Hell or Highwater is one such text as well as Douglas Brinkley’s The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina. Referenced earlier, one text that does reengage the literary conversation around the South in fresh ways, and in a way that acknowledges the intricacies of black womanhood and manhood even as it’s topic is black manhood, is Richardson’s Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta. Richardson, in part, uses literature to mediate her conversation on the construction of black manhood on the national stage through the South. Although an important work, Richardson does not focus on women.

Most importantly, to make my argument for Ward’s mobility and that mobility’s predication on the South as static, it is necessary to show how Ward’s narrative about structural racism—the term “structure” as inherently immobile—works towards better understanding her position as mobile; particularly because this stasis is directly connected to class.

**Economic Landscape**

Ward makes plain the economic and lived conditions of the people of DeLisle, Mississippi throughout the novel as she describes the home and familial background of the men whose stories she recounts. Rog comes from a single-parent, working class home
as do Charles, Ronald, and her brother, Joshua. Demond is markedly different “because he had both parents, and both of his parents had solid-working class jobs” (84). Ward says that most families have lived there for generations, built their own homes, and, despite being poor and working class, are proud of what they have (6). There is community here, that community that is so longed for in the rural South, but this does not change the scope of the economic landscape. Over the course of the book, Ward lays out the effects of political decisions, drugs, and economic collapse from the seventies up until the present noting that, “DuPont had put in a bid to build a factory in DeLisle in the seventies, promised lots of jobs to the community, and when approved, leased enough land for a plant but also enough to provide a buffer of woods in between them and us” (88). This is compacted with the eighties economic policies of Ronald Reagan “which undercut whatever shaky economic footing the poor had, and depressed the listless southern economy” (84).

The history of structural racism certainly reaches back further than President Reagan. In “Historical Overview of Race and Poverty from Reconstruction to 1969,” C. Michael Henry breaks down the intersection of race and poverty. He situates his historical analysis in the “Black Belt”: Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana stating that, “…during the period of government-sanctioned racial segregation to the end of reconstruction… (1866-77)… blacks made little economic progress, measured by the racial wage gap, prior to 1940” (2). After 1940, Henry reports a 13 percent decrease in the earnings gap until 1980. Educational discrepancies, which he reports in relation to both whites in the South and other blacks in the North, are one of the causes of this discrepancy. A chart showing the literacy rate in Southern black communities from 1880-
1950 reveals the correlation between literate and illiterate parents and school attendance. 36.8 percent of students who had two illiterate parents attended school, 45.1 and 45.4 percent of students who had one parent who was literate attended school, and 56.8 percent of students who had both parents literate attended school (3). This shows how the consistent denial of literacy to slaves bled into the educational tract of African-Americans born outside of slavery.

The numbers for southern black students versus their northern counterparts are also telling:

In 1960, 24 percent and 7 percent, respectively, of blacks and whites in the north, had less than five years of schooling, whereas in the south 36 percent of blacks did. (4)

These educational deficiencies only intensified the lack of employment opportunities. The unemployment rate for blacks in the United States is almost double that of whites in the years between 1950 and 196511. These statistics, multiplied by labor discrimination and housing segregation equated to black poverty.

As we shift from the 1960s into the 1980s12, Reagan’s economic polices, or Reaganomics, promised a “more efficient US government with faster growth and minimal inflation” around shifts that “included a supply-side revolution, a scaling down of wasteful government activity, lower taxes and less interference with the market economy”13. These policies included limiting government support for low-income

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11 “Historical Overview of Race and Poverty from Reconstruction to 1969,”
12 This is not to ignore Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” but for the purposes of this paper I will move to looking at Reagan.
American men and women\textsuperscript{14}. For those already in poverty, these new policies were detrimental. Although couched in non-racial language, the welfare reform was most certainly about race, gender, and class. This point was proved in the public discourse surrounding the Welfare Queen. Carly Hayden Foster’s “The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion” expounds on the welfare queen:

Invocation of the Welfare Queen… cues common stories and media images of a sexually promiscuous poor single African American woman who scams taxpayers by having babies then demanding public support (Gilens, 1999). She is demonized not just because of her race or her gender or her class… because she is single… because she has children. The Welfare Queen is specifically located at the intersection of all of those status markers (163)

The Welfare Queen is essentially a social pariah whose only interest is in living off of the back’s of those who actually want to work; she is the antithesis of the American Dream. She is not a man, she is not white, and she is not interested in pulling herself up by her bootstraps. Although Ward’s text never explicitly mentions the Welfare Queen, as a black woman who speaks towards race, gender, and in a working class there is an implicit argument made talking back to this representation. This implicit claim also assists in her attempt to resituate history towards the South. One prominent descriptor of the Welfare Queen is that she comes from an “inner city” (Foster 164). By confronting and claiming the effects of Reagan’s economic policies, Ward redefines the parameters for dialogue surrounding poverty, womanhood, and the South in literature.

The ripples of Reagan’s ideology effect on African-Americans continued into the 1990s with the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act which allows aid to families with limited income on the basis of their agreement to look for employment (Pavetti, 583). Additionally, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the program that provided long-term support for low-income families was replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Although, according to Ladonna Pavetti in “How Much More Can They Work?”, states were given the option for flexibility with the type and length of support they would provide, it is “intended to emphasize short-term, employment-related assistance” (583). Pavetti goes on to show that the expectations for women to find work to satisfy the short period of assistance provided by TANF do not consider chronic joblessness often connected to low skill levels that ultimately means families will still require assistance (599-600). These programs are predicated on a belief in an American Dream that was not built for those in poverty. One cannot find a steady job if there is a lack of education, sickness, no money for childcare etc. and so the cycle never ends. Ward lets us know that Mississippi feels the impact.

Before ending the novel, Ward reveals a compilation of facts about the state of Mississippi:

Thirty-eight percent of Mississippi’s population is Black. […] In 2009, the poverty rate was greatest in the South, and in the South greatest in Mississippi, where 23.1 percent of the population lived below the poverty level. In 2001, a report by the United States Census Bureau indicated that Mississippi was the poorest state in the country […] About 35 percent of Black Mississippians live
below the poverty level, compared with 11 percent of Whites, and “about one of every 12 Black Mississippi men in their 20s is an inmate in the Mississippi prison system. (236-7)

According to American Human Development, Mississippi ranks dead last in the United States on the UN’s Human Development Index, “a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living” (236). Her statistics are correct and follow the history of poverty in the South. In Black Asset: Poverty and the Enduring Racial Divide, Lori Martin uses asset poverty to define the gap in wealth gain between African-Americans and Whites. According to Parks blacks are “consistently less likely than whites to own assets” but “more likely than whites to have a zero or negative net worth” (1). Martin connects these continued disparities to race arguing that a post-racial society, as some have argued with the ascent of President Obama, should have equated to the decline of black asset poverty. She says, “the impact of the Great Recession and other economic crisis would have impacted Americans equally across racial, ethnic, and class lines” were race not a factor in economic equality (2). In The American Dilemma: Racial Inequality without Racism, Nancy DiTomaso supports Martin’s connection between class and the continued impact of race. DiTomaso invokes the “principle-policy” gap, credited to Howard Schuman, to explain the difference between alleviating the affects of racism in principle and the alleviation of racism in policy. She notes that policies such as busing, affirmative action, and welfare that were put in place vis-à-vis the Civil Rights movement to alleviate inequality, have been, for the most part, opposed (4). In other words, there is friction between the belief in equality and the action needed to make equality a reality. Again, this is reflected in the statistics that Ward provides above.
Ward’s choice to utilize statistics at the end of her memoir merely amplifies the stories she tells. Putting names and lived experiences to the percentages given by United State Census Bureau and American Human Development not only steers Ward’s historical charting of her community into the 21st century, but is something akin to the work done by Hurricane Katrina: upends the underbelly of American society that is too often forgotten. Michael Eric Dyson provides more texture for this point in *Come Hell or Highwater: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. He says:

…the government and society had been failing to pay attention to the poor since long before one of the worst natural disasters in the nation’s history swallowed the poor and spit them back up. The world saw just how much we hadn’t seen; it witnessed our negligence up close in frightfully full color… (6)

Dyson does not speak to his own newfound interest in the Gulf region due to the Hurricane, but his is one text in a multitude of research done on working class African-Americans in that area following the hurricane. Martin cites the work of Richard Alba that also stems from Hurricane Katrina:

- 76% of residents living in the flooded area were black.
- The poverty rate for the flooded areas was 29%.
- Blacks in the city and in the rest of the region had lower median incomes, lower levels of education, and less access to vehicles than their white counterparts
- The median income for blacks in New Orleans was about 21,000 and the median income for whites was around 40,000
- 90% of white men in the city had graduated from high school as opposed to 64% of black men.

- 93% of white women in the city of New Orleans graduated from high school, less than 70% of black women reported that they had completed high school. (15)

These numbers came out of a renewed interest in New Orleans brought on by disaster and the presence of the national media, but these numbers paint a much starker picture for the chances to disrupt the chain of poverty in the area.

Ward ends by citing researches at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health who she says found that “poverty, lack of education, and poor social support contribute to as many deaths as heart attack, stroke, and lung cancer in the United States. These numbers are the numbers that bear fruit in reality” (237). What Ward is saying here, and what is the overarching arc of Ward’s work, is that the percentage and the numbers provided by statistics equate to individual lives—hers and those in her community’s lived reality. These are the individual lives that she is bringing to the surface and what intensifies the stakes in ignoring the material reality and constructing a nostalgic rural South.

**DeLisle, Mississippi**

Education, job outlook, and what that becomes—poverty—is the thrust of Men We Reaped. It is not particular to the Southern man or woman as we know poverty, especially among African Americans, is a national issue. It is particular, though, in the
African American literary conversation. Although DeLisle is close to New Orleans, it has its own stories to tell and *Men We Reaped* is intent on the telling.

Black men are passed over in middle and high school and so they drop out—something that is “not uncommon here” (26). The “benign neglect” that Ward says the school administration utilizes to deal with “the problem of the Black male” include “laying a thick paper-trail of real or imagined offenses, and once the paper-trail grew thick enough, kicking out the students who endangered the blue-ribbon rating with lackluster grades and test scores” (111). Ward describes her brother’s experience in an educational system that did not bother to test him either for advanced classes or learning disorders, but instead mistook his laid back mannerisms for laziness and ignored his very presence. The question seemed to be “Why figure out what will motivate this kid to learn if, statistically, he’s just another young Black male destined to drop out anyway?” (208). Ward points out that without the type of class privilege that includes a parent’s ability to take off of work for a parent-teacher conference, or the money to invest in tutors or summer programs, a black male student is literally left behind with the “festering and turning sour” of possibility unimagined (8).

What Ward describes of her brother’s experience is reflected in Beth Harry and Mary Anderson’s study on the disproportionate placement of black males in special education programs. In the article, Harry and Anderson cite racial, gender, cultural, and linguistic biases as accounting for the large number of black male students placed in special education in the public school system. Referencing both the National Academy of Science 1992 research panel and the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (NLTS) study of a research group during the 1985-86 school year,
Harry and Anderson’s article posits that the high numbers of African-American males, in this case in secondary schools, points towards race and socioeconomic factors. Particularly, these are students who report from “low income and low educational attainment” families (604). This study shows how structural racism in the United States Education system equates with side stepping African-American males.

In a study more relevant to Ward’s region, Antoine Garibaldi recounts his study on the New Orleans Public School System during the 1986-87 school year:

In an urban school system where 87% of the 86,000 students were African American, we found that African American males accounted for 58% of the nonpromotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts—even though these young men represented only 43% of the school population. (5)

While the research mirrors Ward’s assertion that dropping out of high school is common in her community, Garibaldi’s research also goes on to support her claims about the connections between parental support and success in the classroom:

Eight out of every 10 of the 3,523 parents surveyed indicated that they believed their sons expected to go to college (compared to 4 out of 10 teachers who believed similarly). However, one-fourth of those parents also responded that they had never gone to their child’s school for parental conferences… (7)

Like Garibaldi, countless other work on African-American males and primary and secondary education discrepancies have shown how race and class collide to negatively impact the success of young black men in education\textsuperscript{15}. If it is already established that poverty is in part a result of a lack in education, then understanding these inconsistencies

\textsuperscript{15} See: Darensbourg, Harper, Hayes, Kunjufu, Lewis, Morris, Warren, Wright, Zamani-Gallaher
for black male education is especially salient towards understanding class and the static nature of rural South connected to a static class structure for blacks.

The inherent gender conversation here, one that I will deal with more fully in chapter three, ignores, though, the inaccessibility of poor black women to education besides what we learn of Ward’s own story and assent towards middle-class privilege. This can be attributed to the thrust of the book made evident in the title, *Men we Reaped*, but one can’t help but wander about the absence of the woman student as Ward identifies educational lapses for poor African-Americans. I will parse out this absent presence more in Chapter 3.

In an introduction to Baer and Jones’ *African-Americans in the South*, former Spelman College President Johnetta B. Cole spoke to the economic issues that continue to plague the South, reminding the reader that one must “address the plight of thousands of southern workers who have been left without jobs because their employers have fled to Mexico, or the Phillipines” even as there is a shift towards focusing on the New South. While Ward does not mention women in the classroom, she does recognize women as she acknowledges the struggle for working class African-Americans in the South and thus answers Dr. Cole’s call. Situating the African-American women in the pharmaceutical factory that is “one of the last good factory jobs on the coast” Ward talks about the change in job opportunities in the late eighties and early nineties. As factory jobs moved across seas and fishing jobs seemed scarce, casinos become big business on the barges. However, without an education, black people who “historically did not have the resources to attend college and so did not qualify for the administrative positions, were limited to jobs as cocktail waitresses, valet attendants, and food preparers” (86). Like in her
narrative on the education possibilities for black boys, Ward’s description of the job
opportunities left for African-Americans in the Gulf region falls in line with the statistics
that reflect economic possibilities for African-Americans and, specifically, women.
Ward’s limited discussion on the politics of women in the classroom, and more engaged
discussion around the politics of the labor market only reflects what Cecilia Conrad calls
the “feminization of poverty” (565). This feminization is no figment of imagination as it
correlates to a “higher risk of extreme poverty” for families with single mothers at the
helm. According to Kids Count Data Center, between 2009 and 2013 the percentage of
African American single-parent homes hovered between 74 and 71 percent. That is
between four and six decimals above the national percentage for single parent African
American homes depending on the year. The romanticized notion of motherhood and
rural Southern lifestyle is materially translated as the current high percentage of single
mothers in the state of Mississippi.

Ward provides one more layer to consider as she connects *what* drugs did in the
late eighties and nineties, with *why* drugs did what they did in the late eighties and
nineties:

I did not know what it was. I did not know that I had seen some of what grown-
ups who were poor and felt cornered and at their wits’ end did to feel less like
themselves for a time. I did not know this need would follow my generation into
adulthood too. (9)

Crack cannot stand alone in the community; it is the effect to a cause that includes a lack
of education and a lack of job options and in response to a feeling that there is no way
out. Again, Ward is recentering her community within a conversation that is associated
with an urban environment. In fact, she enacts the very argument that Richardson makes in her text against Hazel Carby’s *Cultures in Babylon*. Carby critiques contemporary African American literary criticism’s tendency towards romanticizing the South but does so, as Richardson states, by arguing that focusing on the rural South takes attention away from the “real” problems—those real problems being associated with urban environments. Richardson says, “[Carby’s] formulation in effect replaces an essentialist black rural context with an essentialist notion of black urbanities” (126). Ward is shifting the dialogue to not exclude any geographic space, but to include her own so that the statistics she gives are not lost in African American literary studies.

Education disparities, lack of employment, and drug abuse are compacted by a wariness of police that follows young black men. Ward states, her “entire community suffered from a lack of trust” of the society, community, and family (169). It is this distrust of society that further deepens as Ward tells the story of the first death for her and yet final death in her memoir, her younger brother, Joshua. He was killed by a drunk driver who fled the scene. The driver is given little time in jail, only charged with fleeing the scene of a crime, and pays none of the restitution he was charged. As Ward simply states, “The drunk driver was in his forties and White. My brother was nineteen and Black” (234). Joshua’s life is less important to the judicial system because it is the life of a black man. His killer, who is privileged because he is both white and upper class, is worth more despite his wrongdoing. The system is what fails justice for Ward’s brother even in a case that, according to what Ward tells us, seems so clear in its judgment of right or wrong. This is a particularly impactful conversation in the present moment when
the Black Lives Matter\(^{16}\) movement has been created for the explicit purpose of making clear the worth of black lives in response to recent killings by white police of unarmed black subjects. Joshua’s story can undoubtedly be placed in that movement.

**Racialized Class Mobility**

There are two places where Ward’s liminal class position is felt most in the novel: her schooling and her authorship. Ward acknowledges both. This access, her ability to enter into the middle class while still grappling with her working class background, is what frames the text as Ward’s class position is as much apart of her identity as her gender, race, and region. In fact, Ward’s ability to literally mobilize, move to California to go to college and then to Michigan to obtain a Master’s degree, comes as consequence of the access she has been garnered. This section will first provide some context for Ward’s liminality and then delve into the argument: racialized class mobility is enacted in this text through the material written word and Ward’s ability to engage with that word. I argue that Ward’s movement within her liminal class space is predicated on the continued importance of that word to African-Americans and the possibility of that word providing an immobility, an inplacedness in the text, of a narrative that is forever mobile as it literally moves with each book sold or read.

One of the more impactful moments of the text is when Ward’s working class position, and the possibility she has for upward mobility based on her education, collide. While sitting in the kitchen at one of the houses her mother cleans, Ward has a chance to

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\(^{16}\) "#BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year old Trayvon was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder. Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country who actively resist our de-humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society. Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes." (http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/)
reflect on the access to the middle class her education has provided her when she simultaneously watches her mother clean and talks with the house’s owner:

I thought of how it felt to witness my mother at work, of how I saw her in a broader context, as a Black cleaning woman, almost cowed, and of how I was very conscious in that moment of my dark skin, my overbite, my irascible hair, the way my hands itched to help my mother. […] how I was aware that the wife was talking to me like an intellectual equal, engaging me, asking me about my college plans. How the privilege of my education, my eventual ascent into another class, was born in the inexorable push of my mother’s hands. (202-3)

Seeing this moment of transitional space is not only salient as one understands the family history of Ward, but also salient as it signals a change in the possibilities for black women in a South that has a long and complicated history of making the black woman the unrecognized wife and mother to both white and black households. Unfortunately, and as I stated earlier, because more women from Ward’s generation are not talked about in the novel, one cannot get the same breadth of understanding for a black woman’s current positionality under the heels of the systemic oppression that Ward is trying to reveal.

Just as Ward is able to see her class position as she stands in the liminal space between her mother, as housecleaner, and the owner of the house, who sees her as intellectual equal, another conversation with her mother is used to show the reader her position. In a car ride home from school, Ward begins talking about a school project. Her mother interrupts and speaks to “the pebbly asphalt road, the corridor of trees leading us home to our trailer” as she tells Ward, “Stop talking like that” (208).

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further, one must acknowledge a speaking, literally, to the markers of class as she tells Ward to stop speaking in a way that Ward interprets as really meaning, “Why are you speaking so properly? As in: Why do you sound like those White kids you go to school with, that I clean up after? As in: Who are you? I shut my mouth” (208). The juxtaposition of the road that leads to her trailer with the sound of Ward’s own voice—the literal, material symbol of her class position juxtaposed against “sound,” a much more figurative symbol of the possibility of what her class position can be—reveals the particulars of what it means to be a black women who experiences a double consciousness that includes her class position and remains within “black space.” In other words, it is not only the double consciousness that DuBois speaks of, a sort of view into both the white world and black, but a consciousness that is reflective of the access offered to many in the post-Civil Rights generation—the black middle class.

For the purposes of this paper I will begin the discussion of the black middle class at government policy: affirmative action. In The Black Middle Class: Social Mobility and Vulnerability, Benjamin Bowser breaks down Executive Order 11246, signed by Lyndon Johnson in 1965, which he says “put into motion the actual mechanics” to end structural racism in school, work, and the private sector (101). This policy was put in place to close the gap between de jure and de facto racism. According to Bowser, by 1980 affirmative action proved less effective as public discourse and opinion surrounding affirmative action waned. This, along with the umbrella of affirmative action widening to include “Native Americans, Mexican and Puerto Rican Americans, and Chinese Americans, the disabled, and women,” all assisted in the ending of affirmative action. What came out of affirmative action, however, was a black middle class and although those policies ended
before Ward was attended college, the ripple effect made possible the continued cultivation of a black middle class but also a complicated middle class. Bowser brings to identifies this tension in what he calls the “Diversity Black Middle Class” (109). Those in this class are consciously aware of one another and their position in relation to the poor and working class; they have both social class and racial consciousness (109-10). The diversity class operates in the liminal space that is birthed out of a working class position one or two generations removed.

Similarly, the constituents of the Black Professional Middle Class that Eric S. Brown analyzes in his work The Black Professional Middle Class: Race, Class, and Community in the Post-Civil Rights Era are “conscious social actors, aware of their relatively privileged position” (16). Whether or not this assertion about the black middle class is true is arguable but both Bowser and Brown’s acknowledgement of a middle class that has stepped into that position and yet remains “socially conscious,” a phrase that seems directly connected to remaining aware of black working class issues, speaks the pressures around the relationship the black middle class has to the working class. In particular, it asks what responsibility the middle class has to larger social issues connected to the race. Ward is exploring this tension in her memoir by drawing the reader into the relationship that most clearly represents the divide: her and her mother. By analyzing the tension in her own family, Ward is explaining why such a strain exists.

Ward also troubles the relationship between the black “new middle class” and the black “solidly upper-middle or middle class” as she shifts the conversation from looking at her dialogue with her working class family to her dialogue with her middle and upper-middle class, African American peers. Ward recognizes that her class position
complicates her ability to nurture relationships with the small number of black students who attend her private high school (183). Two-parent homes, exclusive neighborhoods, pools, gyms, and golf clubs mark their lives. Ward’s experience includes government assistance, poverty, and broken homes. The difference is privilege. What they do have in common, however, is education which cultivates opportunity. The mobility of Ward’s class position is amplified by her literal movement from one space, the private high school that represents middle class life, to another space, the rural Southern community that has limited options for the African-American men and women who live there.

In another education space, Stanford University, Ward once more describes the in-betweeness of physically moving between both spaces that represent two very different socioeconomic structures. Ward recounts her relationship with her college boyfriend who came from an upper-middle-class family, with two parents—one a doctor and one with connections in Hollywood—, money, youth, and all the accouterments of privilege. She goes on to add that the “confluence of events that bespoke what it meant to be poor and Black and southern” for Ward and thus outside of the realm of privilege, does not fit into his reality. Although she is at an Ivy League university, like with the middle-class black students in her high school, she does not completely fit. Ultimately, Ward’s liminal space informs her authorship and that is where my argument and the text collide.

**Postmodern Gestures**

In my discussion of the memoir in the Introduction, I briefly touch on the way African American texts query print literacy. I would like to extend that conversation. While postmodernism calls for a constant questioning of the very validity and nature of
the text—what Couser calls understanding the text as artifice—there is a different purpose that print literature serves in the African American literary tradition. Of course that is not to say that this tradition has not engaged with this postmodern form. Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* are two examples of novels that question the validity of the “word”. However, and as Dubey states in her analysis of the role of print literacy in African American literature, there is not yet a death of print culture because of the power the written word still holds for this group of people that was historically barred from its use. Dubey situates her argument in the urban space using Sapphires *PUSH*, Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* and John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*. Dubey provides multiple questions around the purpose of print literacy in the contemporary moment but I am most interested in her queries around whether or not print literature provides the opportunity to bridge class gaps that can assist in speaking for the underclass. As can be seen from her literary choices, Dubey’s chosen focus group is in the urban city and thus her population is the urban underclass. I, though, believe this argument applies most necessarily to Ward’s text and her underlying dilemma about her liminal class position. It, therefore, can be situated in the rural South. I would even go so far as to say the stakes of print literacy in the rural South are perhaps even higher for a population that statistics tells us has historically been ignored or, when enacted in literature, has been used as an archetypal safe-haven.

We see Ward’s direct acknowledgement of the written word in two moments: first, in conversation with a cousin who asks what she is writing about, and then in a conversation with Demond. The latter, is the dialogue I would like to focus on. Ward tells Demond and her sister that she wants to write “Books about home. About the hood” after,
for the second time, the reader learns Ward is asked about her writing (89). At this point, Ward is home for her summer break from the University of Michigan where she is getting her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Even in this conversation one can see the differences in lifestyle even as both Demond and Jesmyn come from the same place: Ward is able to pursue a degree that is largely associated with luxury. It is a luxury, first, to pursue a Master’s that puts off the possibility for making money. Then it is a luxury to get a degree that does not guarantee money. This does not fit into the story of survival that is associated with Ward’s working class background. Demond is a factory worker at a job that Ward tells us is one of the few for African Americans in her community who do not pursue higher education. Additionally, Ward’s sister, who is also at the table, is a teenage mother who is also has not continued on with school. If one simply considers markers of class, there are differences undeniable between Ward, and her sister and Demond.

The class gap is bridged when Ward’s sister tells Demond that Ward is writing about “real shit” (89). This echoes their earlier conversation with a cousin who praises Ward’s choice to write about “real shit” (30). More specifically, when Demond asks Ward’s sister what she means by saying that Ward is writing about “real shit,” her sister replies that the people in her books sell drugs. These are markers of black working class experience that make Ward’s choice to be a writer, a middle class decision because of its luxury and not necessarily its ability to change her bank account balance, accessible for Demond. Most importantly to my argument is Demond’s acquisition for a story about him after which Ward takes the time to expound on for the reader:
Most of the men in my life thought their stories, whether they were drug dealers or straight-laced, were worthy of being written about. Then, I laughed it off. Now, as I write these stories, I see the truth in their claims. (89)

The written word represents one's ability to be both mobile and immobile. It is the metaphorical immobility but literal mobility that makes the men in her community see their written stories as most important. What is implied in Ward’s discussion of the text here and her conversation with Demond is the word as life and death. Like the memorial t-shirts that Ward, her friends, and family use to memorialize the young men who die in her community, the word offers a stepping outside of the margins, immortality, and empowerment for those disempowered. As Ward states later, their lives, the lives of the young men she writes about, are “worth more than [she] can say” (243). For this reason, the saying, what can be done for these lives, is of the utmost importance for Ward. In answer to Dubey’s question, it is the bridging of class gaps that speaks for the working class in the rural South. Ward’s text questions the word, but does so with the stakes of the word for that community in mind.
Chapter 2: Gender at the Intersection of Class and Race

Ward’s text centralizes gender. Her mother and father’s relationship, her relationship to the four men she chronicles, and her relationship to her brother are parsed out in terms of how not only race, but gender, impacts their associations with one another. While the former chapter discusses the effects of class on the woman’s body and the way she is written, and writes her own way, into a narrative, this chapter will consider how Ward constructs black womanhood in this text. Because the connection between black manhood and class highlighted black masculinity, I will first provide a close reading of moments when Ward uses womanhood to frame manhood. I argue that discussing home as a site of mobile bodies must include a break down of gender since gender in this text is just as tied to “home” as the South is. Therefore this chapter will provide an analysis of gender in Men We Reaped to show how Ward’s rendering of gender is a literal representation of the “home” in the rural South. Finally, I argue that the reality of possibilities for rootlessness versus rootedness reflected in how women and men can move based on their gender.

Constructing Womanhood

Men We Reaped in many ways places the male characters at the forefront of the narrative, leaving the only other female who is extensively talked about as being Ward herself. The dialogue around gender that does include women as supporting cast members shows women are the backbone throughout the history that Ward narrates. It could be argued that it is not their story, but it is not a story without them. Ward’s place is solidified in the tradition of using the African-American women’s narrative to reclaim and understand the rural South in post-modern African-American literary critique.
However, the women she introduces again fade to a backdrop and become representative of the rooted “home” even as Ward writes away from the margin of what the rural South can represent in the contemporary moment. Although black feminist literary criticism has analyzed literature that elides or ignores the women in their texts, there is not as much to say for literature in the present moment that takes on, what at first glance, could be called a similar form. This section will provide a close reading of the women that Ward does present in her text while also critiquing the very loud silences around womanhood that Ward does not engage with. This analysis, though, is a means to an end towards reading Ward as engaging with the politics of love and an investment in the interconnectedness of womanhood and manhood.

The mothers, grandmothers, and sisters that Ward writes about are in directly connected to the men who they have lost. Of her own family she says: “Men’s bodies litter my family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from beyond” (14). This is true of the few women who make a cameo in this text; on one hand, their pain is what makes them relevant. On the other hand, Ward is simply structuring a community, hers in particular, and refusing to draw lines in the sand. Men are just as connected to women as women are connected to men as men are connected to women. I will expand on this interconnectedness further in the next section, but first I would like to tease out the women Ward introduces the to the reader.

The first women characters the reader meets are the matriarchs of Ward’s family: her mother and Grandmother. Through Ward’s mother, we learn of the South’s relationship to black womanhood which has a lot to do with taking the heteronormative role assigned to manhood. Because of this Ward writes of her mother that, “She resented
the strength she had to cultivate, the endurance demanded of women in the rural South. She recognized its injustice, even as a child” (19). Unlike Ward’s father, who serves as father figure in his own family, Ward recounts that her mother is not allowed the freedom given to a man: “Instead, since my grandmother Dorothy worked two or three jobs…. Working as hard, physically, as any man, the role of mothering the seven children fell to my mother” (18). Here, we can see that in her family, fatherhood and motherhood become jobs occupied by a mother and her eldest daughter. Driving the point even further home, Ward tells the reader her grandmother worked as a “maid, a hairdresser, a seamstress, and finally a factory worker at a pharmaceutical plant” (45). Inserting the dialogue line, “We need a woman who can work like a man.” Ward follows by telling the reader that her grandmother is hired at the plant, “after a man saw her lift and carry a full-grown hog on her shoulders” (45). Ward’s construction of the South is very much premised on an understanding of the work of black women. She punctuates this by also describing the mothers of two of the boys whose stories she tells. Roger’s mother, Phyllis, or Mrs. P as they called her, was the sole care-giver of her children and, at least at one point, worked on an off-shore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico (24, 36). Both Ward’s grandmother and mother, and according to Ward, many of the women in her community, take jobs that are characteristically associated with masculinity. However, their strength qualifies them for the job. This strength looks like mammy, but where that strength is birthed looks different for some women in the late twentieth early twenty-first century rural South.

C.J.’s mother is also single. Ward states that, “she worked hard to provide a home for her children, pushing against all the constraints and limitations of who she was and
where she lived” (109). What the text refuses to take for granted is region. Ward makes this clear when describing her mother’s feelings towards California versus her home state of Mississippi: “In California, my family sat at the center of those hills, and my mother could tend to her husband and her child only, free of family and the South” (48). The location they are in is just as much apart of the conversation as their gender and race and certainly amplifies that position as one recounts the history of the South. Ward seems to want us to remember that history of the South, but not to stay there for this is a story begun in the seventies and ended in the present day. As much as a reader can apply and understand the history, it seems imperative that they understand what happens at the intersections of region, race, and gender now—or at least that is an understanding given to men.

Ward is successful at telling the story, even if peripherally, of the trials of being a black woman in the South for the generations that include her grandmother and mother. She however does not tease out those trials for the black women in her own generation. This is particularly the case, for her sisters, the sisters of the boys that were killed, and, as stated earlier, the young black women who sit in the same classrooms and are ignored in some of the same ways as the young black men. Ward does talk a bit more about her sister Nerissa who has a child at the age of fourteen. Nerissa has had curves since age nine and long glossy hair. Her beauty is a curse that her parents recognize: “If ever we have to worry about being made grandparents early, my mother would say of Nerissa, she’s the one” (25). Ward does not give the reader anymore in the way of teenage pregnancy, the statistics of such pregnancies in her community, and the effect it has on the women who are made parents early. This seems counterintuitive to the work Ward’s
text is trying to do as policy that targeted teenage pregnancy under the Clinton administration could be argued as having been just as detrimental as the image of the welfare queen. In fact, President Clinton’s 1996 State of the Union Address\textsuperscript{18} drew the link between welfare and teenage pregnancy. In “Teenage childbearing and personal responsibility: An alternative view,” Arline Geronimus, provides Clinton’s stance:

He argued that the "welfare system has undermined the values of family and work" and that "to strengthen the family we must do everything we can to keep the teen pregnancy rates going down." He announced that a group of prominent Americans had been convened to launch such a bipartisan national campaign. Its mission is "to reduce teenage pregnancy by supporting values and stimulating actions that are consistent with a pregnancy-free adolescence" and to do so by one-third by the year 2005. (408)

Clinton’s comments certainly did not employ the inflammatory language that Reagan used, but they make similar gestures that directly affect an issue connected to race, gender, and class. Why then, does Ward not mention how those policies impact the women in her community? Or, moving towards her parents and their diagnosis for Nerissa, why does Ward not choose to tease out the body and sexuality politics that directly impact the way young black girls are viewed? Additionally, Ward does not delve into the nature of respectability politics and how her own ascent into college and then graduate school, her ability to have a boyfriend who she describes as upper middle class, is aided by the fact that she does not have a child. She does not talk about how young women are handled at school: by guidance counselors, teachers, and other young men and women. What the reader does get is Ward’s contemplations about her own position

as a black woman in the South. She says: “I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor Black woman. Undervalued by her family, a perpetual workhorse. Undervalued by society regarding her labor and her beauty” (135). Even these contemplations are refracted through her mother as Ward seems to recognize her position of access, and utilizes the mother’s story to better ground herself in the “real shit” that she is praised for writing about by her cousin and then later, Demond:

I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of the poor Southern Black woman. But as an adult, I see my mother’s legacy anew. I see how all the burdens she bore, the burdens of her history and identity and of our country’s history and identity, enabled her to manifest her greatest gifts. (250)

Ward again situates her own black southern working-class womanhood around her mother’s experience, never delving into what makes her own experience different as a sort of nomad in terms of her class position—wandering within and outside of access with no steady ties to either. This is not to devalue what Ward tells us about the rural South and the working class black woman’s position in it. It is, however, to nuance the lack of dialogue surrounding a younger, black, rural working class Southern womanhood.

Through Ward’s experience the reader is given a view of the limits and constraints of black womanhood in the present moment, but without the same sort of treatment that is given black men, the statistics that assist in her project of engaging with the very real effects of poverty, race, and gender in the rural South, the treatment of women seems to fall short.
Black Men and Black Women in the South

While I have considered Ward’s construction of black womanhood in Men We Reaped, I would like to return once more to the interconnectedness of black men and women that Ward notes as she describes her mother and father’s relationship with one another, their own families, and Ward’s relationship to her brother. This interconnectedness reveals the roles black men and women can take and thus how mobile either can be within or outside of those roles. This, then, relates back to the home and more broadly the community. Women can move in ways that men cannot and men can move in ways that men cannot. What is notable here is that Ward uses her relationship with her brother to relate the present moment in gender relations while she uses her mother and father’s marital relationship to relate the generation before her and that generation before them with her grandmother and grandfather. The difference is that a brother and sister relationship seems to level the power playing field as opposed to the husband and wife relationship which historically has implied a particular hegemony. Of course that power relationship can exist among siblings as well, but looking at gender roles from that view seems to open up the conversation to move it towards what one can say when there is the love, obligation, and respect that comes with brother and sisterhood. This aligns with bell hooks’s call for a necessary shift in the way gender studies treat men and women’s issues and recognizing that neither men nor women can be studies or understood without the other. Gender roles intertwine, set, and are reset in Ward’s community and that mobility is critical to understanding how Ward situates both genders within a framework interested in institutionalized racism. By teasing out the mobility of

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19 See hooks, bell. "Feminism as a Persistent Critique of History: What’s Love Got To Do with It?,” *All about love: new visions, Salvation: Black People and Love, The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*
gender roles through her and Joshua’s relationship, and particularly the ways women can move and men cannot and men move and women cannot, Ward reopens the dialogue for African American gender mobility in the contemporary moment that disrupts the idea of the forever rooted African American woman in the rural South so prevalent in postmodern African American literary discourse.

Beginning with her grandmother and grandfather, Ward uses her family’s story to provide a brief commentary on black marriage in the sixties:

She took what my grandfather left her with, and she built it into something more, and she survived. This is a common refrain in my community … I have always thought of my family as something of a matriarchy… But our story is not special.
(83)

The fractured family, what requires women to work just as hard and men and what puts Ward’s grandmother and mother into the position of mother and father for their family, is not uncommon in this rural Southern community. Again, Ward is placing her family and the rural South into the national narrative around single parenthood in African American households, but pushing against the nostalgic “matriarchy” that Dubey points to as characteristic of a rural Southern space in literary conversation. This matriarchy keeps their family together out of a will to survive. That is not to take away from what is powerful about the black woman and community, but it is to say that this was not an easy road which nostalgia can imply.

Ward goes on to say that the sixties saw men marry, leave, marry once more and leave again. “…perhaps [they were] searching for a sense of freedom or a sense of power that being a Black man in the South denied them,” says Ward of these men (83).
Interestingly, her analysis sounds much like the analysis Ann Petry attempts to make in her text The Street, a novel set in Harlem in the 1940s. Like Petry, Ward’s argument makes clear the outside pressure that can negatively affect the black man and woman relationship: “They were devalued by everyone except in the home, and this is the place where they turned the paradigm on its head and devalued those in their thrall” (84). Both are interested in the embedded structural determinism that inequalities makes impossible to escape. For African American males, the end is determined from the beginning and includes joblessness, poverty, and perhaps even death. Maleness, blackness, the South, and poverty all define their experiences in the public sphere and so the private sphere is where they can exert the power denied them.

As Ward looks at her father and mother she builds her own ideas of what it means to a black man in the south as opposed to what it means to be a black woman in the South; both definitions rely on one another:

I looked at my father and mother and understood dimly that it was harder to be a girl, that boys had it easier. Here, boys could buy and ride motorcycles and come and leave when they wanted to and exude a kind of cool while they stood shirtless at the edge of the street, talking and laughing with one another, passing a beer around, smoking cigarettes. Meanwhile, the women I knew were working even when they weren’t at work: cooking, washing loads of clothes, hanging them to dry, and cleaning the house… Even then I knew there was some gendered difference between my brother and me, knew what the world expected of us and allowed us would differ. (88)
In this analysis of men and women, which again moves from a marital relationship to a familial one, Ward explains the difference in mobility for the black man and black woman. Black men can “come and leave” as they want. They have the power of a mobile body because of the difference in responsibility. On the other hand, black women are tied to the home. They are left immobile. In this analysis, what the southern black world allows for Ward is limited to motherhood whether or not you were actually a mother yet. The matriarchy so apart of the nostalgic southern homeplace is the same thing that literally stops how that woman can mobilize herself.

Ward goes on to tell the reader that she recognizes now that the way her father disciplines her brother versus the way he disciplines her is predicated on his gender and his positionality in the South: “My brother would have to fight in ways that I would not” (52). His working class position, his male position, and his black position all put him in the danger that Ward describes in detail when discussing the cops who seem to watch her neighborhood a bit more closely and the school system that seems to set up students to, at one point or another, have these interactions with police. Although in the black community black women are immobile while men are mobile, the outside world, the “white” world demobilizes black men in ways that women do not experience. That is not to say black women are not demobilized in other ways, as I make clear that Ward does not interrogate, but it would seem that Ward is telling us that because of the world’s view of the black man, he is “dangerous,” he must me demobilized in ways that women not deemed as dangerous, are not.

Even though black men and women are interconnected, and Ward uses her relationship with her brother to make clear that connection, she does not ignore how the
difference in attitude towards men and women within the community sets the two genders against one another. David Ikard further parses out this notion in Breaking the Silence: Towards a Black Male Feminist Criticism. Using Richard Wright’s Native Son to begin his discussion, Ikard sets forth the proposition that the “black male victim status” has assisted in black patriarchy that uplifts the problems of black men above black women and, in part, “informs” and “distorts… black men’s perceptions of themselves as victimizers of black women” (4). Because Ward uses her position as “sister” to insert herself into the conversation around gender, blackness, and her community, she automatically takes on the peripheral matriarchal position. This allows her to speak out of love for the community and therefore speak to both the position and struggle of black men and black women. Ikard might argue this as apart of the “unintentional black female complicity” that supports black patriarchy, but I argue that it simply operates out of the non-academic realm of love. It is invested in a belief that for men to support women and women to support men the two must understand one another and often times that understanding comes out of respect for one another that in her community, seems most closely tied to brother and sisterhood. Ward explains how she and her brother define womanhood and manhood:

Both of us on the cusp of adulthood, and this is how my brother and I understood what it means to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What it meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was. (162)

Men and women for Ward and Joshua equate with a set of worries that are different and yet cannot be disentangled. The black woman as the workhorse within white and black communities is juxtaposed against the black man who must learn to navigate his
predetermined “dangerous” identity outside of his community and perhaps even the resentment of the women in the community.

(Class) Mobility and Gender

While I have shown how gender supports or impedes mobility, I would like to further parse out gender’s effect on class mobility. For, mobility extends into the access to the “American Dream,” steeped in middle class ideology, that black men and women can or cannot acquire. Again, Ward sets herself against her brother to define what gender and class position can mean for one’s ability to be mobile—not only in the literal sense, but in one’s ability to visualize an upward shift in class positions (212). Because Ward never fully parses out the advantages or disadvantages of other young women in her neighborhood, the reader can only make conclusions based on Ward’s experience. She aligns her brother with her father and herself with her mother, setting the two’s parenting styles up against one another. She says that the father “taught [her] brother what it meant to be a Black man in the South too well” in teaching him not how to overcome but to survive “unsteady work, one dead-end job after another, [and] institutions that systematically undervalue him as a worker, a citizen, a human being” (211). Meanwhile her mother “created opportunity for [her], to give [her] the kind of educational and social advantages” that both herself and her brother would have had if not for class and race. Because of these, their gender differences were amplified (211).

Continuing with this line of thinking the reader is lead to believe that Ward’s access was improved by her gender despite the fact that she does not mention any other young women in her community who achieve the same sort possibility for class ascension as she does. Ward states:
For me there were hopes: a house of brick and wood, a dream job doing something demanding and worthwhile, a new, gleaming car that never ran out of gas. Joshua would hustle. He would do what he had to do to survive while I dreamed a future. My brother was already adept with facts. His world, his life: here and now. (212)

What Ward does not include in her hopes is for that of a respectable man, but her actions seem to speak otherwise as she mentions her five-year college relationship with an upper-middle-class boyfriend. Might this have been apart of her ascension into upward class mobility? Undoubtedly. Ward is the figurative nomad; given the ability to be mobile, but not really fitting into either pole that represents the locale of her mobilities. This, in many ways works against the idea that the woman represents a stable, and stagnant, home and community in literature. Ward recognizes her push towards and against the Southern homeplace.

On the opposite end, her brother is faced with the world in “the here and now.” The “here and now” is representative of his literal and figurative stagnancy. He does not have the privilege of considering a mobile future that, for him, is the distant star of the American Dream that, again, stands in for mobility (212). His body is immobile as a result of his gender, race, and class. What Ward does here is bring gender to the forefront as salient in analyzing post-modern identity African-American identity in rural Southern texts as one works from the starting point that post-modern African-American literary critique is predicated on a rupture in community.

While Ward seems to believe that gender was the catalyst for her ability to move forward and her brother’s inability, there are some holes that return back to the loud
silences around womanhood. I would argue that Ward’s move to a private school completely changes the course of her educational career. Before moving there, she is failing all of her classes despite her intelligence and following her mother and father’s divorce (138). It is her mother’s employer, a Harvard graduate who practiced corporate law in New Orleans, and her mother’s position, that gives Ward access to privilege. What of those black women who had no financial backing and thus were forced to stay in the schools where their grades plummeted? Again, Ward does not tease out her position in her conversation around gender and what possibilities it does or does not offer for black men and women in the South.

Despite Ward’s lack of attention to black girlhood, the current numbers on the amount of black women and men in higher education are daunting. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, out of the total amount of bachelor’s degrees conferred in the 2009-10 school year, 10.3 percent of those went to African Americans. Of that percentage, 65.9 percent that graduated were women. We have already established that education and job opportunities are bosom buddies. Therefore, access to the American Dream is also tied up in one’s higher education pursuits. Ward states that many men in her community drop out of high school, much less continue on with college. She credits this to the low expectations for African American men. As was parsed out in Chapter 2, these low expectations are apart of the larger system of structural racism. Ward’s acknowledgement of that lack of privilege for the southern African American male does not ignore male privilege, but it is reminding us that gender issues are not so easy as binary formations insist upon.
They are Reaped

One of the epithets of Men We Reaped explains its title. A quote from Harriet Tubman in which she explains the results of a battle during the Civil War, it’s poetic in its description of death:

We saw the lightning and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder
and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.

This quote rings true for Ward’s text as the memories of dead men litter her book just as readily as they litter her family’s history. What this quote does, though, is bring gender into the conversation. Tubman of course is not speaking as the only woman who finds the dead men, but she is the one whose words are recorded. She is the lone woman speaking for these men in a battle that may or may not be highlighted in historical memory as particularly important during the Civil War. Ward, too, is positioned as the lone female voice for the black men who have died in her community.

Also relevant is that Ward takes this title from a moment in the South during which the fight against racism was literally a question of life or death and a fight for the humanity for African Americans in this country. Similarly, Ward sets the tone for her conversation around gender in the text as being of life and death importance at this critical moment where racism is so embedded into American institutions. The focus of that life and death is on black masculinity in Men We Reaped. Despite this focus, Ward works through mobility and contemporary gender roles in her rural Southern community.
by utilizing her relationship with her brother. With home as the site of mobile bodies, how gender affects that body cannot be ignored.
Conclusion: ‘It’s Not History, It’s the Present’

The final chapter in *Men We Reaped* ends with Ward telling the reader that this, this story of her brother’s life and death, “is where the past and the future meet” (217). This mirrors Ward’s reflections on writing her memoir saying that “it’s not history, it’s the present” in an interview with NOLA, a New Orleans news publication. Hutcheons explains the past thusly:

The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled... The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power. We only have access to the past today through its traces—its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations. In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. (55)

The never dying relationship between past and future is an identifying marker of postmodern African-American literary theory. This relationship makes reading Ward’s text through a post-modern lens much clearer, but it also makes critiquing that lens clearer as well. There must be a rethinking of Southern literary texts and their representations of gender, community, family, and class and what those texts are attempting to do or not do, to say or not to say even as they reach back to formulate these spaces. What is absent in the presence of a nostalgic past? It seems that what is absent includes the gendered implications of the Southern rural place, what that means for mobility, what that means for class, and how one can theorize around those characteristics in literature.
Beyond what I have stated are the implications for postmodern Southern African American literary studies, I am interested in where Ward’s text fits into conversation begun by Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Studies?* Warren questions the purpose of African American literature if what was its purpose, to challenge Jim Crow, no longer exists. One particularly salient point, and what I believe was the thrust of Warren’s argument, is that African American literature was published for a specifically political purpose. If that purpose, Jim Crow, is no longer in place, how can African American literature be defined as such? Similarly, in “The End of the Black American Narrative,” Charles Johnson says that “inequities in class” are more to blame for African American issues than “racial victimization and disenfranchisement” (36). Johnson takes issue with the essentialized notions of blackness that ignore the differences within the African American community. However, this is not an issue that he correctly connects to the continuation of institutional racism. Furthermore, he completely erases the work done by Africana studies programs that research and write about the totality of the African and African American experience across the African diaspora. Nonetheless, *Men We Reaped* enters this conversation by having the class conversation that Johnson is interested in while refusing to ignore race. If Warren and Johnson are interested in whether or not African American literature has a purpose, even if that purpose is connected back to the effects of Jim Crow, they can look towards *Men We Reaped* as an example of what that literature can look like.

Furthermore, neither Warren nor Johnson seems interested in how gender impacts the purpose and place of African American literature. They both skip over the black feminist movement, which transformed the focus and form of African American literary
studies, or at the very least, opened up the scholarship in a new and necessary direction. This emission seems to assist in the conclusion both scholars come to for the demise of African American literature. However, had both considered the work that gender politics continues to do for African American literary studies perhaps there would have been a revision in the argument for the end of African American literature. Certainly there may have been a more clearly visible space for Ward’s text. One of Deborah McDowell’s questions in her 1980’s article “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” asks whether or not “Black female high school dropouts, welfare mothers, college graduates and Ph.D.’s share a common language” (154). Class lies at the center of this inquiry. Men We Reaped answers by reminding theorists that the line in the sand between the college graduate and welfare mother are not so easy and clear. Ward seems to ask what does one do when those voices converge. Understanding how to better theorize around the liminal class space that many black women occupy, and not only academics, is the necessary shift that black feminist criticism must take. This thesis is meant to provide a formula for what that theorize may look like.

As I stated in the introduction, the stakes of doing this work stem from an investment in working through complications normally blanketed by the signifier of racial or cultural community. In addition, the work of redefining the rural South and its purpose in literature ruptures the nostalgic narrative that has been primary in post-modern African-American criticism but ignores a whole class of people. *Men We Reaped* steps into that space and forces open the eyes of those unwilling to see.
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