Growing Up Black: Representation of Childhood in the Works of Contemporary African American Women Writers

Doctoral Thesis

by

Sanra R

(2019HSZ0012)

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ROPAR

November, 2024

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A Thesis Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **Growing Up Black: Representation of Childhood in the Works of Contemporary African American Women Writers** has been solely authored by me. It presents the result of my own independent investigation/research conducted during the time period from December 2019 to November 2024 under the supervision of Dr. Aparna N, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Ropar. To the best of my knowledge, it is an original work, both in terms of research content and narrative, and has not been submitted or accepted elsewhere, in part or in full, for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship, or similar title of any university or institution. Further, due credit has been attributed to the relevant state-of-the-art and collaborations (if any) with appropriate citations and acknowledgments, in line with established ethical norms and practices. I also declare that any idea/data/fact/source stated in my thesis has not been fabricated/ falsified/ misrepresented. All the principles of academic honesty and integrity have been followed. I fully understand that if the thesis is found to be unoriginal, fabricated, or plagiarized, the Institute reserves the right to withdraw the thesis from its archive and revoke the associated Degree conferred. Additionally, the Institute also reserves the right to appraise all concerned sections of society of the matter for their information and necessary action (if any). If accepted, I hereby consent for my thesis to be available online in the Institute's Open Access repository, inter-library loan, and the title & abstract to be made available to outside organizations.

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Acknowledgments

I have never been a fan of the quote, “It is not the destination; it is the journey.” However, these five years made me inclined more towards the journey than ever. I cannot honor it without honoring the community of people who supported me all along.

First and foremost, I thank Dr. Aparna N for her guidance and encouragement throughout my PhD journey. I am grateful for her systematic, process-oriented guidance and for rewarding my attempts. She has always been available, gently guiding me towards developing cogent thoughts and poised expression as we worked on multiple papers. I consider her lessons on the values of ethical research practices, academic communication, and workplace etiquette as long-term assets as I move forward. She has contributed to my holistic growth and ensured I am not running the rat race. I thank her for her enduring efforts in making this journey enriching for me.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. H Kalpana, Dr. Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, and Dr. Rajeev Nair for their guidance in the early stages of my research career and for always encouraging my work. I am thankful for their tutelage. I thank my doctoral committee members, Dr. Samaresh Bardhan, Dr. Dibyakusum Ray, Dr. Rano Ringo, and Dr. Manigandan S. Their suggestions and encouragement helped me complete my research on time. I also thank Ms. Sanu Usmani for helping with all the paperwork and the kind staff at Nalanda Library IIT Ropar, as I made it my haven for the last couple of months.

I extend my thanks to Chandni, for being my role model. Without her inspiration and the enriching sisterhood she offers, I would not have sustained my interest to embark on this journey. Thasfi, my biggest hype woman, for cheering my wins, big and small. Watch me over as I gather the strength to move forward. Namitha, for always showing up for me. I am thankful for the kindness she extends and the companionship we built over the years. Meenakshi, for reading my manuscripts and being a kind critic. I thank her for supporting my gentle yet firm steps in academia.

I want to thank Reshma for being there, offering conversations, evening walks, and tea. Prarena, Pooja and Aleena for their encouragement. Hari, Anvy, and Muthu for their help during this period. Kadambari, for being an indispensable part of this journey and showing interest in the topic.

I thank Subbu for his calming presence amid chaos and a big shoutout for listening to ninety-nine of my hundred mock presentations. Meera and Jyothi for encouraging me to pursue a master's degree at a central university. My journey to IIT Ropar would not have been possible without that step. Arabhi, Arya, Shalin and Nafeesa for sticking through the tough times. Hafsa, for bringing the comfort of home to Ropar. Hafsoah, for making the final year incredible and for an extra pair of eyes.

I extend my thanks to Nekha, Aneesh, and Sruthy for their role in making this journey meaningful. I am grateful to them for being there through flood, grief, mock presentations, and whatnot. Our academic discussion group, friendly taunts and unharming workplace banter have been essential to keep the inner circle morale up even as I felt the world around me was falling apart.

Finally, I thank my parents, Reji and Prasad, for getting on board with the PhD journey and for the number of times they visited Ropar to care for me. I am grateful to my sister, Narmada, for always being my earnest cheerleader.

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Growing Up Black: Representation of Childhood in the Works of Contemporary African American Women Writers**, submitted by **Sanra R (2019hsz0012)** for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, is a record of bonafide research work carried out under my guidance and supervision. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original and has not been submitted, either in part or full, for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship or similar title of any university or institution.

In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standard fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the Degree.

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Lay Summary

Most of us who grew up reading fairy tales and children's literature must have come across stories with a white child as the central character. Their blue eyes, innocence, pristine nature and need for protection fascinate the readers. However, have you ever wondered if there are children who are treated as less than humans, are misrepresented, and/or experience childhood differently from how the cherubic characters go through it? One might recall the murder of innocent Black children, and the abuse meted out to them in different walks of life appearing in news occasionally. Present day African American writers such as Jesmyn Ward and Jacqueline Woodson are invested in outlining Black children and their experiences of growing up in contemporary United States of America. Both writers recollect their childhoods experiences of reading books that did not have a character who looked like them, leading them to representing Black children in novels, memoirs and picture books. This thesis looks at Black children in the selected works of these writers to underline the fact that childhood is not a universal experience. By studying the representation of Black children whose experiences are not often voiced in literature, the thesis informs the readers about the heterogenous state of Black childhood. Each chapter throws light on the pervasive injustice Black children face from various structures and their attempts to navigate the adversities. The thesis concludes that contemporary Black childhood as represented in these fictional works, is a sum of complex socio-cultural issues. The study contributes to broader conversations on social justice by focusing on one of the most underrepresented demographics in the United States of America.

Abstract

This thesis argues that the dynamic terrain of contemporary Black childhood sits at the intersection of precarity, trauma, and resilience. To demonstrate the argument, the study analyzes the representation of childhood in the works of critically acclaimed African American women writers – Jesmyn Ward and Jacqueline Woodson. Their body of work illustrates child protagonists negotiating the anti-Black environment by redefining their agency. The thesis falls in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies that problematizes the social construction of childhood. As an academic domain engaged in promoting social justice, childhood studies explores children's embeddedness in various socio-cultural contexts. Nevertheless, existing discourses on the representation of Black childhood in literature is rather sporadic. Owing to the interdisciplinary nature of childhood studies, the overarching framework integrates methodologies of critical race theory, vulnerability studies, history and trauma studies to problematize the ongoing dehumanization of Black children in the United States of America. This research is contextualized in the broader framework of Black Lives Matter discourses, and the conceptual chapters explicate varied facets of Black childhood. In addition to the fictional works of the authors, the thesis also studies their memoirs to interpret their proclivity toward representing childhood. The thesis concludes that the children negotiate their unfavorable circumstances striving for resilience. The study contributes to childhood studies by adopting underutilized methodologies to illuminate Black childhood. Moreover, it reframes the works of Ward and Woodson in terms of their attempts in presenting the narrative gaze of children.

Keywords: African American fiction; Black childhood; Childhood studies; Literary representation; Resilience; Social justice; Ward; Woodson

List of Publications from Thesis

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Growing Up in the 'Dirty South': Precarious Black Childhoods in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing and Salvage the Bones." *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies,* 2025, forthcoming.

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna, Nandha. "Transgenerational Trauma, Belated Witnessing and Resilience in Jacqueline Woodson's Red at the Bone (2019)." arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture, vol. 60, no. 1, 2025, forthcoming.

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Childhood Trauma." Postcolonial Text, vol. 16, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1-3. https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/2680/2516.

Publication from Domain

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Carnivalesque Subversion and the Narrative Gaze of Children: Taika Waititi's Boy (2010), Hunt for the Wilderpeople (2016) and Jojo Rabbit (2019)." *Studies in Australian Cinema*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 2–16. 2022. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503175.2022.2050591

Sent for Publication

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Re-humanizing through counter-storytelling: Jesmyn Ward's memoir Men We Reaped (2013)"

Conference Presentations

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Negotiating Black Childhood Identity: Reading Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017)." Traveling Concepts: The Travel and Translation of Ideas in the Humanities, New Directions in the Humanities Research Network, 26 Jun. 2024, Sapienza University Rome, Rome.

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Men We Reaped: Narrating Memory, Community and Loss." Suffolk Storytelling Conference, 11 July 2023, Online.

Reji, Sanra, and Aparna Nandha. "Children in New Zealand Cinema: Carnivalesque Subversion and the Child Protagonist in the Select Works of Taika Waititi." International Conference on Childhood Studies, London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, 5 March, 2022, Online.

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Chapter 1

Understanding Black childhood

1.1 Introduction

Contemporary cultural representation of Black children gravitates toward an authentic portrayal of their childhood agency and experiences. An example from popular culture is Ryan Coogler's sensational film *Black Panther* (2018). While the film celebrates Black futurity, it challenges the homogenization of its characters by presenting a riveting antagonist. The film's underbelly narrative contextualizes Erik Killmonger's (Michael B. Jordan) dialectic racial struggles as a Black man raised in Oakland. His enduring ideology is shaped by loss and unswerving anti-Black racism he encountered as a Black boy growing up in America. While King T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) is oblivious to Killmonger's struggle, the film communicates the pain Erik experiences as a child. In a dream sequence where he meets his father's spirit, the young and detached Erik says, "Everybody dies. It's just life around here" (*Black Panther* 1:27:13). This statement captures the historical anti-Black violence in the United States of America and its effects on children. The complexity of the dynamic site of Black childhood invites academic exploration regarding its representation in recent literature and popular culture. Moreover, the contemporary cultural moment of the Black Lives Matter Movement promotes diversity in representation, and present-day writers and filmmakers participate by depicting the lived realities of Black children negotiating America's racist climate.

Consequently, this study interprets the works of selected African American women writers incorporating theoretical lenses drawn from diverse academic domains encompassing the philosophy of Critical Race Theory. By reading the selected texts that are published in the twenty first century such as *Where the Line Bleeds* (2009), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), *Men We Reaped* (2013), *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014), *Another Brooklyn*

(2016), *Harbor Me* (2018), *Red at the Bone* (2019), the study problematizes race as a social construct devised to oppress people of color. The analysis illuminates the intersectional identities created by the interplay of race, class, gender and age by voicing the concerns of Black children. It explicates the methodologies the writers employ to align with the tenets of Critical Race Theory. The thesis, therefore, unites compelling research domains to explore the overarching question of situating Black childhood in the broader perceptions of childhood.

Children's narrative gaze has long been employed in literature to discern the composition of social fabric. From time-to-time writers, have also employed children's perspectives to "control, manipulate, and convey their own messages" (Loo 59). However, such narratives have inadvertently perpetuated harmful stereotypes of childhood and reductionist conceptualizations of children. On the other hand, literature employs the representations of childhood to delineate "sensitive political issues" (Chitando 115). Moreover, children's narrative gaze is widely incorporated in adult literature to "add an element of shock value to the stories that catch and hold the reader's attention" (Loo 59). Additionally, studies on trauma narratives have identified childhood at the center of narratives on family and war trauma. These foundational works underline the concept that children's experience and expression of psychological trauma are distinct from those of adults (Schonfelder; Kumar and Multani). It is therefore clear that humanities research has witnessed tremendous growth in placing children at the center of critical inquiries since the foundation of childhood studies.

Ellen Key, a Swedish thinker who pioneered the discourses on childhood and children's education, recognized the twentieth century as the century of the child. The period was characterized by heightened awareness of children's welfare, protection, and education (Kumar and Multani 1). However, the earliest academic interventions on childhood were primarily sustained by pioneering research in developmental psychology and pediatrics. The developmental perspective universalized stage-based growth and seldom acknowledged socio-

cultural factors that contributed to the construction of childhood. Consequently, the 'New Sociology of Childhood' emerged in the 20th century as a deconstructive response to the towering presence of developmental discourses on childhood. It evolved into an academic discipline as programs dedicated to studying the cultural construction of childhood flourished in Western universities in the late 1990s (Tesar, "Childhood Studies" 1-2).

The precursive works in the domain scrutinized the normative developmental understanding of childhood to re-interpret it as a social construct where children are active agents of their world. Since its inception, the field has advocated dialogues on dismantling reductionist and over-glorified notions of innocence and purity consequently stimulating discussions on children's ability to exercise autonomy (Tesar, "Childhood Studies" 1-6). The domain contextualizes the socially discursive category of childhood in dynamic socio-political settings and encourages robust methodological approaches to interpreting children's lived realities. The tenets of children's agency, participation, and rights inform scholarships on the representation of marginalized children and their childhood experiences. The domain engages in "dismantling structural ideas around children and childhoods, and re-shapes the understanding of children's power and agency, and how children can perform these notions as members of society" (Tesar, "Childhood Studies" 1).

As the field is now interested in marginalized childhood experiences, drawing from instances of violence against children, scholars of childhood agree that Black children, among many other oppressed children, are gatekept from the protected site of childhood. In demarcating their experiences, scholars note that Black children are not offered the privilege of "innocence and the need for protection" (Goff et al., "The Essence of Innocence" 526). Additionally, they argue that "antiblackness has shaped the very contours of childhood from its inception" (Breslow, *Ambivalent Childhoods* 2-3), necessitating diverse projects with a shared focus on social justice to reimagine equitable childhoods. Consequently, this thesis attempts to

engage with revisionist views on Black childhood by carefully analyzing its representation in contemporary African American literature.

As a study that inspects the construction of Black childhood, the thesis situates itself in the broad interdisciplinary domain of childhood studies. While engendering a radical approach to childhood, childhood studies exhibits tremendous self-reflexivity as scholars address the privileged intellectual site grappling with majoritarian definitions of childhood. Consequently, several attempts have been made to critique the "ubiquitous child," thereby focusing on little-known depictions of childhood (Holt and Holloway 135). However, despite their ideological focus on engaging with the marginalized childhoods, academic discourses ensuing comprehensive inspection of the particularly marginal category of Black childhood remain sporadic. This intermittent nature of research on Black childhood motivated this study to conduct a comprehensive literature review to locate Black childhood and its prominence in the academic domain of childhood studies.

The contemporary cultural shift propelled by the Black Lives Matter Movement and its reverberations in academic and public domain reinforces the voices of minority women writers. Their engagement with recent themes such as intersectionality, police brutality, gentrification, respectability politics, and adultification surrounding Black children is intriguing (Levin). Moreover, scholars of the African American canon note that the critical study of Black women writers is a relatively young domain that flourished in the 1970s (Mitchell and Taylor 6). African American women's writing has embraced plurality and multiplicity in terms of genres, themes, and interests (Mitchell and Taylor 7) that are reinterpreted in each generation. Childhood studies, on the other hand, is also a dynamic field that employs deconstructive approaches to the "adult centrism" (Alanen et al. 133) of various domains.

The subsequent sections of the introduction inspect the discourses on the domain of childhood studies to elicit intriguing patterns and subthemes of research. The literature review

provides a brief outline of childhood studies as an academic domain to contextualize the research on Black childhood. It identifies that a comprehensive analysis of the literary representation of contemporary Black childhood remains underexplored. However, ongoing research is being conducted to study Black children's lives in early childhood education, developmental psychology, and policy research. Based on existing research, this study speculates that such a paradigmatic shift is the byproduct of the groundbreaking work of Black Lives Matter discourses (Francis and Wright-Rigueur).

1.2 Childhood studies: origin, debates, and collective contributions

The concept of childhood is relatively young and has undergone several iterations and metamorphosis, for instance, from 16th century Calvinist doctrines that viewed children as "sinful" and "sexual" to the eventual universalization of childhood innocence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (Bernstein 4). In studying the history of childhood, Roy Lowe notes that "the powers of society to govern and control childhood have been greatly enhanced" (31). Moreover, Breslow iterates that childhood "emerged as a technology by which the bourgeoisie could invest in, expand, and preserve its well-being and survival" (*Ambivalent Childhoods* 11). Studies trace the emergence of childhood related discourses to English Philosopher Thomas Hobbes who perceived children as savages who were ordained to be disciplined under strict authority. On the other hand, Enlightenment scholar John Locke, adhering to the notion of tabula rasa, regarded children as potential contributors to society if endowed with proper guidance and knowledge. While building on the existing philosophical strands and departing from their views, Rousseau kindled a pastoral view of childhood that had a formative impression on Western imaginations. He distinguished childhood as a derivative of children's relationship with nature and condemned societal structures, including adult interventions, as impending threats to their inherent innocence and purity (Tesar et al.).

Consequently, romantic literature popularized such themes and portrayed childhood as an "embodiment of innocence" and "raced white" (Bernstein 4).

As interest in cognitive development and children's education burgeoned in the 19th century, John Dewey's contribution in acknowledging children's agency, a precursor of the founding tenet of childhood studies, flourished. Subsequently, two fundamental scholars of the twentieth century, Ellen Key and Philip Aries, offered more nuanced perspectives on childhood. In *The Century of the Child* (1900), Key provides a state-of-the-art study that envisions child-centered approaches in education and development. On the other hand, in *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), the French medieval historian Aries offered a diachronic analysis of childhood and argued that childhood is a social construct that materialized in the fifteenth century (Tesar et al.). Despite the nascent discourses on childhood, the formation of childhood studies as an academic domain extended to the late 20th century. Moreover, the actualization of childhood studies converged with the discourses on children's rights and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Thus far, the document remains pivotal in understanding the ongoing discourses of the domain. As a young and eclectic field of research, childhood studies rely on other complementary research domains in terms of methodologies and practical implications. The field sought to scrutinize the emerging patterns and trends in the social category of childhood by accommodating several turns, such as ethical, normative, and ontological, employing timely methodologies and interdisciplinary dialogues (Prout and James; Alanen; Spyrou).

1.2.1 Interdisciplinarity, and methodological advancements

The proponents of 'New Sociology of Childhood' Allison James, Alan Prout, and Martin Woodhead envisioned an interdisciplinary discursive realm highlighting social, political, cultural, and historical contexts that contribute to the construction of childhood. They reiterated that childhood is an "overtly political issue, marked by gross inequalities in resources,

provisions, and opportunities, shaped by both global as well as local forces" (Woodhead 20). Such a nuanced understanding of childhood emphasizes children's agency, participation, and socialization in their surroundings. Consequently, they proclaimed that children's social relations are worthy of study and that the lack of attention to their lived realities results from a patriarchal worldview that neglects the lives of minority groups. The initial interpretations assumed that the developmental approach weakened the diversity of childhood studies and instead focused solely on the social constructivist school of thought.

Eventually, scholars diverged from the elementary discourses of deconstructing developmental notions of childhood and embraced a more balanced approach. They incorporated Foucauldian biopolitics to understand the category of childhood, traveling beyond the bio-social dualism of the initial period. Later, a new wave in childhood research emerged, resulting in a "biosocial nexus" (Ryan 440) that sought to synthesize the individual strands, uniting the developmental approach as well as a social constructivist school of thought to scrutinize childhood (Lee and Motzkau). The biosocial nexus led the scholars such as Linnea Bodden, Loo, Balagopalan and Viruru to welcome the methodologies of feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical realism to examine children's lives. They investigate the reductionist assumptions and deficit approaches that brand children as a social category that invites global charity interventions (Nieuwenhuys, "Keep Asking: Why Childhood?" and "Theorizing Childhood"). Consequently, by incorporating varied methodologies, the field highlights the multiplicity of childhood in various settings and deconstructs the existing adult-centric perception, thereby accentuating children as beings in their own terms rather than adults in the making.

As a result of the rapid increase of diverse methodologies, studies explored Indigenous childhoods and majority and minority world expressions of childhood. Nevertheless, the dominance of Western conceptualization of childhood glorified its pastoral nature, and literary

representations duly nurtured narratives of innocence. Moreover, children drive the narratives in numerous cultural texts that feed the assumptions of a normative childhood, resulting in prejudiced assumptions. However, subsequent research established that the narrative of protection was primarily attributed to white children through sustaining patriarchy by utilizing women's labor and conveniently casting out Indigenous children. Therefore, research focused on inspecting childhood innocence as an exclusionary terrain and sought to understand childhoods constructed outside its normative expectations (Knight; Garlen).

The field continues to be diverse in its methodologies and incorporates ethnographic research, children's rights, and participatory methods to study children's lives. An ethnographic study among white and Black children in middle, working-class, and low-income families in the US demonstrates the role of class in the construction of childhood and children's interactions with the outside world (Lareau). Moreover, scholars explore rural childhood through ethnographic research to diversify the narratives that overrepresent urban childhood and the prevailing adult interests in studies on rural settings. However, they acknowledge the methodological difficulty in deconstructing the predominant conceptualizations of a rural childhood in minority world settings, thereby encouraging scholars to inspect the state of Black and Indigenous childhoods. Studies indicate that a lack of research on rural children's lived realities in the minority world has resulted in systemic neglect, lapsed employment opportunities, overall boredom, and gender disparity (Powell et al.).

On the other hand, participatory methods in childhood studies evolved to include children as active agents in their world, thus shifting their role from mere objects of research to active participants. Despite the contributions in advancing the epistemic foundations of the domain, participatory research has welcomed debates about the practicality of the method. Critics raise concerns that children potentially become participants in adultized research techniques. To combat this, they also propose an attitudinal change that embraces a methodological immaturity

which diminishes the power dynamics, vulnerability, and competence between participants and researchers. Moreover, researchers also address the "preoccupation with children's voices in child centered research" (Spyrou, "The Limits" 151) that can potentially negate the significance of non-verbal utterances in childhood. They argue for methodological reflexivity and transparency on the researcher's part. According to them, such an approach can offer more nuanced, ethical, and sophisticated discussions on diverse childhood experiences (Gallacher and Gallagher; Tisdall).

Concurrently, discourses on children's agency have always piqued researchers' interest. The field underwent a paradigmatic shift as scholars problematized the domain's founding tenet of children's agency and participation. Researchers called for a nuanced understanding of ambiguities and ambivalences surrounding childhood and challenge essentialist understandings of childhood agency. They critique the conceptualization of childhood in UNCRC, which favors minority world ideologies. Studies note that it is significant that the researchers consider the negative potential of agency and the cases where children do not have the privilege of choice. Scholars also maintain that agency is an ambivalent concept expressed in assemblage and illuminates the need to distinguish inventive and routine forms of expressing agency (Punch and Tisdall; Gallagher).

Studies conducted on marginalized children problematize victim discourses by employing Black feminist epistemologies to inspect children's agency and resistance against moments of abuse. Recent debates posit children's agency as fulfilling the field's normative agenda and therefore argue for the need to replace the concept of agency with social autonomy. They maintain that incorporating an intersectional lens in childhood studies will actively acknowledge the domain's fundamental interest in identities constructed in diverse social contexts. Such intersectional approaches inevitably drive researchers to inspect varied

expressions of agency regarding Black and other marginalized childhoods across the globe (Perez; Muhlbacher and Stutterluty; Konstantoni and Emejulu).

The foundational explorations on the interdisciplinarity of childhood studies have witnessed multiple iterations. Discussions on factors such as social structures, relationships between adulthood and childhood, and interactions along various national, local, and global perspectives were lacking in the initial period. Nevertheless, an increasing number of academic journals were established to generate conversations on diverse aspects of childhood, promoting otherwise under-explored methodologies from the Global South. Even though fields like human geography and law have tremendously contributed to policy development for children, scholars note that "engagement with the full range of social science disciplines is still missing" (Cook 11).

Researchers have proposed a balanced approach by employing an integrated lens to scrutinize the concept of childhood. A critique of gatekeeping practices in the field shows that only a few subfields of childhood studies contribute to the emerging publications and discourses in the field (James; Andal). The field has always had room for self-reflexive discourses regarding research perspectives and the potential lack of diversity from the Global South. Moreover, scholars have pointed out the tendency to dichotomize Global North and Global South, which has resulted in under-exploring the diverse childhood experiences in either landscape. Researchers from Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) backgrounds have always struggled to delineate diverse childhood through primarily Western theories. Additionally, contemporary critics interrogate philosophical racism in childhood studies and argue that the quintessential theories of "ontological simultaneity" and "mutual causation" require thorough reformulation by incorporating non-Western contributions (Holt and Holloway; Perez, et al.; Biswas 339).

Further extrapolating the argument of self-reflexivity, research notes that it is time to decenter the concept of child and calls for a "critically open childhood studies" (Spyrou, "Time to Decenter" 435). Such a school of thought urges the researchers to address the relationality of childhood and scrutinize various contexts in which children and childhoods are implicated. Discussions also address the significance of acknowledging the agency of non-human contributors and the collective past of childhood to understand childhood's status better. Additionally, scholars acknowledge that the field, founded on emancipatory ideals, still needs to fathom the tangible issues of child migration (Cook, "The Mire of Its Own Construction?"). They question the relationality of social justice for children and youth from different backgrounds and call for a transformative domain employing an amalgamation of transformative justice, feminist methodology, and childhood studies (Silver), thus accommodating marginalized and diverse childhood experiences. Moreover, they note that literary and textual analysis could provide a more nuanced understanding of how various representations of childhood are created and sustained (Andal).

1.3 Locating discourses on Black childhood, its significance and implications

As the literature survey traced the diverse methodological progress, thematic evolution, and the focus on underprivileged childhood experiences, it now shifts the focus to the recent research on Black childhood to locate its significance in the broad domain of childhood studies. The thesis observes that pioneering research in the wake of Black Lives Matter investigated the aftermath of various social justice policies. Studies demonstrate that even after the desegregation of schools, pedagogical methods failed to accommodate Black children, resulting in the production and maintenance of anti-Black ideologies. Through historical and ethnographic research from a position informed by Bourdieu's concept of ordinary suffering, Dumas inspects schooling as a site of Black suffering amidst policies implemented for mandatory desegregation. The study acknowledges the lack of academic grammar to articulate

the suffering caused by covert racial discrimination (Dumas, ""Losing an Arm"). It indicates that the world often dismisses children's suffering under the assumption that it will be forgotten in adulthood. Similarly, in a later study, he investigates the technocratic neoliberal intervention programs for young Black boys and men. While recognizing the work of the 'My Brother's Keeper'[1] program, the research notes that the framing of Black boys as a problem entails legitimization of state interference. The study concludes that rather than inspecting and dismantling systemic ordeals that feed racial antipathy, such programs inevitably place the burden of transcending inequality as an individual choice, thus placing the onus on marginalized community members (Dumas, "My Brother as 'Problem'").

The alarming rate at which Black children are racially profiled and murdered compels researchers to investigate the ongoing dehumanization of Black children. Through fieldwork, laboratory research, and translational methods of research, Goff et al. argue that Black children are not extended the protection of childhood, and they are likely to be perceived as "less innocent as well as older than their other-race peers" ("The Essence of Innocence" 528) resulting in unjust treatments. Studies reveal that the existing discourse on Black boys equates them with Black men and often essentializes their diverse experiences. Research comments that the pathologization of African American youth is a probable cause for their impartial treatment in the criminal justice system. While anyone under the age of eighteen is termed as a child according to UNCRC, in the US, it is the state's discretion in "establishing the boundaries, structure, and function of their juvenile justice systems," which leads to the unfair treatment of Black children (Shook 471).

[1] My Brother's Keeper was an initiative by President Obama in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder. The program sought to address the persisting opportunity gap for Black boys and youths of color.

While childhood studies maintain that childhood is a social construct, the field acknowledges that the social construction of childhood most often does not extend to Black and other marginalized children. By inspecting the racial "representational landscape of childhood" in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder, studies scrutinize the ongoing disavowal of Black childhood (Breslow, "The Theory and Practice of Childhood" 13 and *Ambivalent Childhoods*). Researchers critique the disposability of young Black life and accentuate the significance of possible re-imaginations. Drawing from childhood studies, they call for critically re-imagining Black childhood that involves educators, researchers, and policymakers to create wholesome childhood experiences (Dumas and Nelson 27).

1.3.1 Dehumanization, politics of respectability, and adultification

Research on the dehumanization of Black children has also stimulated discussions on the politics of respectability. It is a strategy that is often co-opted by Black Americans and inculcated in children to help them survive the effects of racism. Respectability politics is a subtle mechanism of racist surveillance forcing marginalized groups to conform to normative white expectations. It forces Black people to assume individual responsibilities for racially motivated interactions, thereby negating centuries of systemic racism. The narrative of respectability has forced Black youths to internalize oppression and has increasingly become a tool for monitoring their quotidian lives. Literary and cinematic representations involving Black lives portray 'the talk' Black parents are forced to give their children about the dangers of anti-Black racism. Abiding to notions of respectability allegedly lessen the friction between police and Black youth. Critics note that the respectability politics and resulting deficit perspectives render Black boyhood unimaginable. They argue that such narratives have only enabled unwarranted violence against young Black boys. Refusal to perform respectability norms results in narratives of Black children's adultification, thus perceiving them as older and dangerous (Drake; Epstein, et al.; Gilmore et al; Silver).

An inspection of the role of adult/child binary in anti-Black racism offers a rather intriguing perspective on Black childhood. While the recurrent studies problematize violence against Black children as stemming from adultification, Rollo argues that European perception identified childhood as a site of servitude and naturalized violence. Violence against Black people was sustained by branding them as a child race through the colonial perception of Blackness as savage ("The Color of Childhood"). Studies also scrutinize the constructions of Black childhood to highlight the anti-Black nature of childhood. It points out the infantilizing discourses of Black childhood from the antebellum era and the adultification of Black children in the supposedly post-racial era. Adultification of Black children involve perceiving them as older, hence denying them protection and innocence, otherwise glorified qualifiers of childhood. It indicates that the adultification of Black youth justifies the unwarranted police force. Moreover, such violence is justified, institutionalized, and sustained in educational settings, eventually resulting in harsher punishments in schools and other supposedly safer environments (Breslow, "Adolescent Citizenship"; Dancy III; Nuamah and Mulroy).

In her foundational work "*Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race* (1997), Dr. Beverly Tatum explores the psychology of racism through concepts such as self-segregation and self-identification. Employing her experiences as an educator, Tatum translates her observations from the higher education sector. She highlights the significance of conversations on race in creating racial awareness among both Black and white people. The book also explores at length the ongoing practice of systemic racism and the role of white privilege in sustaining racism.

Tonya Bolden's diachronic analysis of Black children and their childhoods titled *Tell All the Children Our Story: Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America (*2001) is a foundational study contributing towards a critical inquiry of African American childhood. Incorporating ego documents and memorabilia, Bolden supplies a book-length exploration of

Black childhood from the 1600s to the twenty first century. She illustrates the evolution of the multifaceted site of Black childhood and maps it against various watershed events in American history. Illick, on the other hand, weaves together diverse experiences of childhoods in *American Childhood* (2002), stressing on factors such as gender, migration, and class. He investigates the opportunity gap in America and how the experience of childhood differs vastly across diverse strata of society. His work is devoted to discussing multi-ethnic experiences through real-life stories of a range of people from American history. Building on the work of Illick, Mintz complied *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004). In this comprehensive study on American childhoods, he argues that there is a "deep disconnect" (Marten 216) between America's proclamations on childhood and the lived realities of children. The study notes that a critical understanding of past childhoods can lead to building nuanced child-rearing approaches rather than being manipulated by obscure and nostalgic representations of childhoods in the past. Mintz's study presents an overarching framework of childhood studies, focusing on childhood as a social construct and offers a critical look at the middle-class construction of childhood as a protected state.

In *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois* (2006) Levander discusses the significance of the child figure in American political, cultural, and literary domains. She explores the works of an array of writers and thinkers to trace the role of children in driving the narratives of race, slavery, and imperialism. Wilma King's groundbreaking research on African American childhoods remain an unapparelled contribution to critical scholarship on Black childhood. In *African American Childhoods* (2005), King interrogates childhoods, during and after slavery. The study explores diary entries, legal documents, and welfare agency reports to contextualize Black childhood amid historical developments. It also inspects the representation of Black children in popular culture. Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to*

Civil Rights (2001) underlines childhood innocence as the foundational concept of racial formation in America. She argues that over time childhood became synonymous with whiteness, and Black children were denied the popular markers of childhood. The study explores the theme of racial innocence by analyzing literary works, stereotypical images, and children's toys. Debbie Olson's *Black Children in Hollywood: Cast in Shadow* (2017) scrutinizes the representation of Black children in recent popular culture texts. Olson provides a comprehensive analysis by studying the evolution of cultural representation. The study deconstructs the normative expectations of childhood by portraying the cultural coordinates of marginalized childhoods.

While most discourses surrounding Black childhood focus on Black boys, investigations on Black girlhood have been pushed to the margins. Studies note that "historians interested in black girls and girlhood had to work at the margins of several fields, including the history of childhood, black women's history, and girls' studies" (Field et al. 383). Meditations and critical reflections on Black girlhood such as bell hook's *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) explored the struggles of coming-of-age as a Black girl in segregated South. hook discusses her experiences of navigating her complex family dynamics and the intersectional identity created by class, race, gender and sexuality. The prevalent theorization of Black girlhood often incorporates Black feminist methodologies that tend to over-essentialize the unique experiences of Black girls (A. Smith; Perillo et al.). Recent projects incorporate distinct methodologies at an elemental level, such as employing the term 'Blackgirl' instead of Black girl as a conscious approach to reject the compartmentalization of their lives and reimagine Blackgirl as a complex and whole entity (D. Hill).

Research deconstructs the perception of Black bodies as a site of injury and racial harm and calls to reimagine them through the lens of pleasure. Critics developed theory and praxis rooted in anti-respectability that requires society to listen to Black girls. They urge to understand

pleasure beyond the limits of sexuality instead as a product of comprehensive education (Garner et al.). Further building on adultification, the study discusses injustice in instances where Black girls are granted "credibility excess" in topics of sex, often denying them the opportunity to process the trauma of sexual assault (Carpan 793).

1.3.2 Black childhood and literary representation

In 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman, a member of the neighborhood watch. Zimmerman perceived Martin as a "suspicious" boy who is "up to no good" (Breslow, *Ambivalent Childhood* 1). Trayvon Martin's murder and the eventual acquittal of his murderer sparked movements against rampant racial profiling, incarceration and vigilante violence in the US. Scholars argue that Trayvon Martin's teenage body was perceived beyond the framework of a child. He was discerned older, and his carefree stroll was deemed suspicious. This narrative of adultification curtails Black boys' access to childhood (Breslow, "Adolescent Citizenship") and facilitates harmful stereotypes. Moreover, adultification of Black children severely affects policy developments intended for their well-being. Critics also show a severe lack of representation of young Black lives in cultural media, resulting in social ignorance. The multifaceted experience of being Black and young are rarely recorded in dominant discourses. Consequently, they observe that the possible reimaginations of Black youth and their inner lives are abundant in the soundscapes of Black rap music (Drake). This reflection drives us to inspect the cultural representation of Black youths in contemporary literary texts. Literary and cultural representations are significant mediums through which narratives of Black youth spread. Therefore, scrutinizing such representations can teach us about their power to engender negative and positive ways of perceiving Black children.

Audre Lorde observed that "A piece of the price we paid for learning survival was our childhood. We were never allowed to be children. It is the right of children to be able to play at living for a little while, but for a Black child, every act can have deadly serious consequences,

and for a Black girl child, even more so" (171). Such recollections on lost childhood and stunted coming-of-age were a recurrent theme of early African American literature. Eventually, such themes became tropes through which writers portray the persistence of racial discrimination, dehumanization, and the resilience of the Black community in North America. Stalwarts of African American literature, including Toni Morrisson, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry incorporated the narrative gaze of children and young people in their body of work to portray the victimization of Black people in America. The bourgeoning narratives of Black childhood and youth confirmed that "black childhood and violence go hand in hand" (Pastourmatzi 200). However, the ongoing discourses on the metamorphosis of Black children's representation in contemporary literature are scattered.

Historically, Black writers explored the themes of troubled childhoods and often unabashedly spoke about their experiences with racism. Researchers remark that children have always been the driving force of African American literature. Writers were tasked with deconstructing stereotypical representations of Black children, which in turn, gave rise to the subgenre of African American children's literature (Augustine 3-4). Contemporary writers like Jacqueline Woodson, Angie Thomas, Jesmyn Ward, and Ta-Nehisi Coates widely incorporate the perspectives of Black children in their works, often mapping Black childhood against the Black Lives Matter climate. Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) is a poignant example of recent literature that problematizes growing up Black in America. It delineates the complex history of racism in America and its psychological and physiological reflections on Black people. Additionally, their corpus belongs to "the tradition of remembering and reconfiguring old histories to investigate the continuities between past and more recent processes of racialization" (Khedhir 7). They explore children navigating various circumstances that are complicated by their racial location. Such literary texts propound authenticity, germinating from the writer's personal experiences, thereby becoming an "anthropological pen" (Hinton and

Rodriguez 101). Moreover, critical analysis of these novels confirms that race continues to be a fundamental facet that defines the growth and integration of a person in America. Through meticulous analysis of social structure by employing an ethnographic and often Black feminist lens, these fictional works function as a "potentially transformative or liberative weapon" (101) in the discourse of social justice.

Literary representation of African American coming-of-age in twentieth-century novels is explored in a 2004 study by Claudine Raynaud. Studying the prominent novels that are set against the aftermath of slavery, poverty, violence, and sexual abuse, Raynaud notes that the coming of age of the Black hero often culminated with "the discovery of American society's racism" (106). Through a detailed analysis of selected texts, the study explicates that because of culturally sustained anti-Black racism, for the Black hero "coming of age is often a precipitation of the stages of life, a distorted or reversed process" (109). However, emerging discussions read contemporary Black young adult fiction as an antithesis to the coming-of-age genre and its white heteronormative assumptions, thereby making room for Black futurity (Dawson, "'It Was the Last Time," "'We Knew We Were Being Watched,'" and "Growing Up Black").

The contested state of Black childhood invites nuanced study in the wake of ongoing racial killings of Black young adults. Graham mentions that there is a lack of study on the lived experiences and marginalization of Black children, particularly in the public care system ("Giving Voice to Black Children"). Recent cinematic and literary representations depict the ongoing effects of the troubled relationship between police and young people from marginalized communities. Emerging analysis of contemporary fictional works argues for tangible and extensive systemic reformulations to tackle such unfortunate incidents. These studies deconstruct the monolithic representation of Black childhood and instead urge multifaceted portrayals across diverse mediums. Literary representation of Blackness, adolescence, and

rebellion against respectability narratives emphasizes that inspirational stories of resistance and resilience can further social justice movements (Toliver; Beck; Owen; Levin).

The detailed literature review of the evolution of childhood studies, discourses on Black childhood, and its facets illuminate the existing gaps in research on literary representations of Black childhood. Scholars of childhood studies note that the domain not only "write[s] children into our narratives and conceptual understandings of social formations, but to expand, even fundamentally transform, understandings of broader phenomena" (Spyrou, "Emerging Scholars" 424). The thesis adheres to this statement while engaging with the works of selected contemporary Black women writers and their contribution to narratives of social justice. The study employs a thorough textual analysis of the selected works of Jesmyn Ward and Jacqueline Woodson. Both Ward and Woodson are writers of national significance who delineate themes of race, class, violence, and trauma in their corpus. The tenets of Critical Race Theory inform their body of works and engage with the persistent systemic racism in America.

Jesmyn Ward hails from DeLisle, a rural town in Mississippi. Ward won her first National Book Award in 2011 for her second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which launched her into America's literary arena, and later in 2017 for her third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). Her critically acclaimed novels are set in Bois Sauvage, the fictional twin of DeLisle. Ward's narratives are "connected spatially" (Khedhir 11) and the selected texts form the Bois trilogy. Studies draw thematic similarities between Ward's corpus and Toni Morrison's novels. Moreover, Ward invokes Faulkner's narrative style and "recycle[s]" (Moynihan 554) his canonical texts to suit the neoliberal discourses. The thesis relies on her three novels, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2009), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and her coveted memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) to explore the representation of Black childhood.

Jacqueline Woodson won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature for her verse memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Woodson's prolific writing career spans over

three decades and she is celebrated to have revolutionized Young Adult literature in America (Chow). According to Woodson, YA novels are crucial to elucidate complex themes of mass incarceration, economic disparity, and education disparity intelligible to young readers (Bishop 31). Woodson adheres to realistic fiction that reflects the lives of people who have historically been missing from documented representations (Watson). The novels that are studied in this dissertation are *Another Brooklyn* (2016), *Harbor Me* (2018), *Red at the Bone* (2019), and her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014).

In narrativizing the lived realities of Black communities in America, often traversing through a child protagonist's gaze, these writers employ the methodologies of Critical Race Theory to delineate their experiences. While engaging in the adult world, the children in Ward's and Woodson's universe negotiate the lack of job opportunities, impending climate crisis, transgenerational trauma, and postmemory of historical injustice. The conceptual chapters dedicated to each author's works employ theoretical frameworks drawn from Critical Race Theory, vulnerability studies, history, and trauma studies. All of these individual frameworks engage with the quest for social justice. Owing to the interdisciplinarity of childhood studies, the thesis unites diverse methodologies to illuminate the facets governing the literary representation of Black childhood. Despite the presence of child focalisers in the works, book-length studies on the representation of childhood in their works are sparse.

Ward and Woodson engage with the politics of representation by illuminating their individual experiences of growing up Black in America. Therefore, the thesis also explores their memoirs in contextual chapters to illuminate their personal experiences and proclivity towards representing authentic child protagonists. Despite the presence of child focalisers, Ward's novels are not categorized as Young Adult Literature due to the choice of themes. On the other hand, Woodson's works are primarily meant for young adult readers. Nevertheless, by employing lyrical prose, both writers dissect the ongoing dehumanization of Black people by

narrativizing children's complex realities. The thesis studies the representation and construction of Black childhood in the works of these writers. In reading their memoirs, the study explores how these writers' childhoods act as a lens to explicate the lives of marginalized communities. This thesis anchors itself in the broad domain of childhood studies to examine children redefining their agency and resilience. While the study explores various facets contributing to the construction of Black childhood, it eliminates certain aspects. The urban and rural experiences of children in the selected novels still need to be explored. While the chapters analyze Black boys' and girls' experiences, it does not provide a detailed exploration of the gendered aspect. To explore the objectives, I divide the thesis into four core chapters. Two are dedicated to Ward's canon, while the remaining two focus on Woodson's works.

1.4 Chapter breakdown

Chapter two

The second chapter examines Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) through the lens of counter-storytelling. The memoir details the life of precarious Black communities in the American South through the death of five young men in four years. The chapter reads Ward's memoir as an antithesis to history by contextualizing it in the socio-political context of America. Through meticulous textual analysis, the chapter argues that counter-storytelling methodology is significant in re-humanizing the historically dehumanized Black community. It further examines the significance of narrating childhood experiences in re-humanizing community members. While the chapter limits its scope to counter-storytelling in *Men We Reaped*, it can open avenues for theorizing contemporary African American storytelling.

Chapter three

Jesmyn Ward's literary canon renders an indelible portrayal of Black people in the contemporary American South. She narrativizes their everyday lives through young protagonists who endure the repercussions of systemic racism. This chapter aims to unpack the

parameters of Black childhood in three of Ward's novels, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2009), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). By contextualizing the novels in the broad domain of childhood studies, the chapter employs Judith Butler's explorations of precarity to argue that politically induced precarity predetermines and shapes Black childhood in America. The study interrogates the doctrines of childhood by engaging with the pertinent question of gatekeeping childhood from Black children. Consequently, by analyzing the selected works, the chapter demonstrates the need for an integrated lens in perceiving Black childhood.

Chapter four

Jacqueline Woodson's memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) delineates young Jackie's aspirations to become a writer interspersed with her family history and the larger political fabric of America. The memoir deals with a short period of her childhood and concludes with multiple histories converging to build a promising future. This chapter employs the theoretical framework of microhistory to analyze Woodson's memoir. Microhistory engages with the intricacies of individual lives to complement the epistemic murk created by the grand narratives of history. The section treats the memoir as a microhistorical record to inspect the period's social dynamics and how it painted a Black girl child's world. It concludes by commenting on the significance of childhood memories in understanding history.

Chapter five

This chapter analyzes Woodson's novels *Another Brooklyn* (2016), *Harbor Me* (2018), and *Red at the Bone* (2019) from the vantage point of trauma and witnessing. Employing the theoretical framework of Michael G. Levine's belated witnessing, the chapter explicates children as belated witnesses and childhood as a probable site of belated witnessing. The section also asks how one belatedly witnesses a lost childhood. Levine argues that belated witnessing occurs in the liminal space where stories are transmitted to the witness. Building on Levine's theory, the chapter

problematizes young adulthood as a liminal space negotiating the complex process of witnessing. By analyzing the protagonists' reluctance to witness and their belated acceptance of the traumatic past, the chapter concludes by commenting on resilience and reconciliation as a positive outcome of adversity.

Conclusion

I intend to conclude the thesis by arguing that literary representation of contemporary Black childhood sits at the intersection of political precarity, trauma, and resilience. The conclusion reiterates the significance of literary representations of diverse childhood experiences. Further, it illuminates the utility of the self-reflexive field of childhood studies and, therefore, incorporates an intersectional perspective to understand Black childhood. The conclusion also charts the limitations and the future directions of the study.

Chapter 2

Re-humanization through counter-storytelling in Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*

2.1 Introduction

The aftermath of Trans-Atlantic slavery haunts Black people's lives in innumerable ways. The history of racial segregation and its lingering consequences permeate contemporary American society through mass incarceration, police brutality, ghettoization, and economic inequality. Literature and cultural productions have reconstructed such traumatic repercussions, internal conflicts, and the cycle of loss to portray the dejection Black people face in present-day America. The constant pain of loss and hopelessness that engulfs Black lives encapsulates Jesmyn Ward's moving memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013). The memoir poignantly captures the despair as she writes, "*I hope nobody dies this summer"* (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 21).

In *Men We Reaped* Ward chronicles the untimely death of five young men within four years in her hometown DeLisle, Mississippi. She traces her family vis-à-vis the community's genealogy, retrospectively documenting the harrowing deaths. Her descriptions of the lives and deaths of her community members in the Bayou highlight the underlying political dimension of the events. Having witnessed inexplicable losses linked to systemic racism, the writer undertakes the role of an ethnographer expressing the disillusioned voice of the Black community in the American South. By employing the lens of counter-storytelling, the present chapter investigates her memoir as the writer's attempt to re-humanize southern Black people. It further inspects the role of narrativizing childhood experiences to depict the community.

Over the past decade since its publication, *Men We Reaped* has drawn the attention of researchers as a work of subject mobility and socioeconomic class in the South (Barlow), an

exposé on the mental health of the Black community (Masip) and as a call for a revolutionary social system (Dennison). Researchers investigate the representation of filial bonds in the memoir (Kaznocha) and the figurative quality of Ward's writing (Mikal). While reading the text as a critique of the American Dream, Mertens finds similarities in an array of memoirs by Black authors in contemporary America ("Myths of Race and Equality"). Recently, McCormick scrutinized Ward's methodology of *black feminist reaping* to explore the oppositional geographies the text offers ("Here We Are"). Although the existing literature exhibits a grasp of Critical Race Theory in scrutinizing *Men We Reaped*, the arc of counter-storytelling within the book remains underexplored. Ward's works demand the vantage point that the historical knowledge of a nation is the concocted memories of the privileged.

Ward's writing is driven by the socio-economic and cultural environment of the South and is perfectly couched in its literary tradition and art forms. The philosophy of her oeuvre emanates from the tightly woven community of DeLisle as her narratives often portray people united by rituals, funeral traditions, and rap songs. Previously known as Wolf Town, DeLisle has a bloody history of racially motivated lynchings and incarcerations. It houses the autochthonous communities whose lineage consists of Native American, African, Spanish, and White, the permutations and combinations defining "*Black* in the American South" (Ward 15). Immortalizing her hometown, Ward situates her works in Bois Sauvage, the fictional twin of DeLisle. She says, "it's the kind of place where family and community are sort of the same thing" (Briger). As she reflects that the bond between the community members inexorably pulls her back to DeLisle each time she has left, Ward recounts, "I commit to telling the truth about the place that I live in, and also about the kind of people who live in my community" (Briger). The Black community in DeLisle lacks institutional support and the consequences of federal negligence are deeply reflected in their everyday life. Consequently, her work unflinchingly captures the banality of southern lives while simultaneously shifting the onus to the State.

Further, along the Gulf Coast, tragedies manifest through natural calamities, wherein recurring hurricanes and floods thwart the community's existence and stability. Consequently, Ward's stories also depict the subsequent slow infiltration and production of violence surrounding the lives of her community members.

Studying the fictional and non-fictional works of Ward, Patrizi notes that Ward's poetics is "fundamentally driven by survival and witnessing" (70) an aspect she attributes to African American cultural productions. Confirming the observation, Ward survives, and bears witness to the recurring unfortunate events. She suggests these stories silenced her for such a long time that she finally decided to "give voice to this story" (Ward 8) and, therefore, narrates their lives with urgency. The urgency in her tone emanates from the reality that she may not have a future in the "feeble and unpredictable" ("Jesmyn Ward's 2011 National Book") nature of Black American life. Subsequently, the interstitial space between life and death, populated by ghosts and their hauntings, becomes the kernel of her canon.

The memoir illuminates the community's survival primarily through personal memories interspersed with the history of the community. Descriptions of death, addiction, unresolved grief, dysfunctional families, incarceration, dispossession, and friendship epitomize the memoir as she narrates the lives of her people. She refuses to depict them as saints, and instead, portrays them as human beings in all their complexities and imperfections. However, their deaths are often driven by larger systemic flaws that render Black lives "worthless" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 195).

Ward is engaged in generating discourses on Black experiences in America. In the prologue to *Men We Reaped*, she indicates that the story of her friends is also the story of her family and the community (Ward 8) where everyone struggles with the vicious cycle of intergenerational trauma. She captures the "weight of the South" (Ward 195) that obstructs their growth and chooses to honor their fight by writing them into a discourse of paramount

importance. Consequently, by delineating the lives that are perceived worthless and inconceivable, Ward's memoir investigates the lacuna of hegemonic narratives that historically silenced the marginalized. To better understand Ward's storytelling technique, the chapter resorts to the theoretical anchor provided by the methodology of counter-storytelling. Solorzano's and Yosso's classification of counter-stories as "personal stories," "other people's stories," and "composite stories" (32-33) function as signposts for the analysis. While personal stories incorporate "individual experiences with various forms of racism and sexism," other people's narratives follow a biographical approach of a person of color "in relation to US institutions and socio historical relations" (Solorzano and Yosso 33). However, Ward's memoir follows the pattern of composite stories dealing with both autobiographical and biographical elements "to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination" (Solorzano and Yosso 33).

Counter-storytelling is a widely used methodology in Critical Race Theory to deconstruct the dominant narratives of racial hierarchy. It is a "method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Solorzano and Yosso 32). The counter-hegemonic nature of such narratives exposes the "silences in official governmental reports" (Twyford et al. 332). Researchers note that counter stories "have the potential of offering alternate perspectives about reality, and ultimately giving people opportunities to explore a different life than the one that has been constructed for them" (Matebekwane 118). Through her writing, Ward appends the contours of historical documentation to fill the unfair erasure of details by "trying to undo these silences and to undermine the unity and continuity that official histories produce" (Medina 14).

In her explorations on precarity Judith Butler denotes that "the differential allocation of grievability" (Butler, *Precarious Life* xiv) creates an exclusionary framework that casts certain

people outside the normative understanding of human. The afterlife of slavery[2] continues to render Black lives precarious and hence ungrievable. Concurrent with this idea Rosenblatt and Wallace note that "African American grief has been neglected to a remarkable extend" and traces its origin to larger systemic flaws (xi). Evidently, Ward refuses to "indefinitely postpone" (xviii) her grief and inevitably reveals the truth behind the deaths of her friends and brother. The following chapter of the thesis will explore this dimension in Ward's fiction.

Ward's narratives are further supported by statistical reports that validate the reverberations of systemic racism in the Black community. *Men We Reaped* begins with a short history of her family and follows the death of Eric Roger Daniels III, the last person to die among the five. The memoir employs a reverse chronology and ends with the death of Joshua, her beloved younger brother, who was "only the first" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 27) to die. She recollects that by the time Rog died, her friends in the hood had resorted to drinking away the pain with their "one foot in the grave" (30). Rog was dead for four days due to the combined effect of heart disease and self-medication when his sister found him. Demond, on the other hand, was shot for testifying against a local drug dealer. CJ died in an explosion triggered by the mishap of local railway authorities. Ronald struggled with failing mental health and died by suicide. Her brother Joshua died in a tragic case of hit and drive, where the judicial system bailed the white drunk driver.

While explicating counter-memory in Morrison's *Beloved*, Comfort states that "Mourning is an active engagement with history" (122). Substantiating this statement, Ward's memoir functions as a step towards processing her grief. By narrating the stories of their life through

[2] The phrase is borrowed from Saidia Hartman's monograph *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Trans Atlantic Slave Route* (2008) that scrutinizes the ongoing effects of slavery.

deaths, Ward shows that their lives are indeed grievable and hence require remembrance. She draws the similarities among the deceased, all except one growing up in fatherless families, unsupervised in houses and schools. Unattended in schools, they were perceived as troublemakers, prosecuted for selling drugs, and eventually forced to drop out of school.

My discussions on Ward's canon and, notably, *Men We Reaped* incorporate the theoretical observations ensuing re-humanization and counter-storytelling as a tool to encounter normative history through intimate childhood memories. The study concludes by substantiating the purpose of such counter-narratives in reimagining the social psyche. In the following sections, the chapter outlines a brief history of the dehumanization of Black folks and chronicles the attempts at re-humanization through counter-storytelling as employed in Ward's memoir.

2.2 The dehumanized other

It is not an overstatement to mention that the cornerstone of American history is the narrative of the dehumanization of its Black populace. Dehumanization involves "an extreme form of prejudice that enables violence and cruelty" (Haslam et al. 409) directed at a minority group. Theorists who investigate the empirical and conceptual structure of dehumanization firmly assert that at the heart of the process is the perception that certain people are "less than human" (Oh 157) a notion thoroughly explored by Ward. A phenomenon that facilitated ethnic cleansing, genocides, and wars around the world (Harris and Fiske 175) the historical dehumanization of minority groups operated systematically, employing scientific racism to deny basic human rights. The strategic dehumanization of Blacks in America became institutional, even documented in the Constitution, as African Americans were "worth three fifths of a person" (Haslam et al. 409). Excluded from the human status, the humiliation of Black people was accentuated by their representation as apelike (Goff et al., "Not Yet Human"), incompetent (Harris and Fiske 181) and lacking cognitive abilities. The resulting exclusion hindered their access to social support, making them socially precarious.

Ward recollects events from her childhood that she later recognizes as the anxieties of the dehumanized other. She reiterates that the underlying motive of the bullying she faced in school was always about white people's view of her as racially different and inferior. She would hear, "*You're Black. You're less than White…You're less than human*" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 195). She shares her apprehensions as the only Black girl in a private school where her inconsiderate white classmates would joke about lynching. Through the horror of such incidents Ward captures the disposability of Black lives that has traversed space and time. By furnishing the experiences of Black children, Ward prompts her readers to rethink stereotypical perceptions of Black people.

Inspecting various junctures of American history, Ward says, "Black children are not granted childhoods" and expresses her trepidations over raising a Black boy in America (Ward, "Raising a Black Son in the US"). Analyzing the biopolitics in *Men We Reaped* Torres-Quevedo notes, "Innocence, a quality so intimately bound with American identity, is, as Jesmyn demonstrates, not a quality that Black children, especially boys, are afforded" (180). Moreover, while Ward, as a girl child was relatively protected within the family, her brother was treated differently. Black men encompass a complex identity because of their racial subject position. Black masculinity is predicated on the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow laws and continue to be prosecuted by public. Young black men are perceived as embodiments of negative stereotypes and dehumanization. Moreover, they "remain objects of public curiosity" (Young Jr. 441). As a young Black boy growing up in the South, her brother was required to be brave, find a job and soon support the family. Ward also comments on the disproportionate distribution of childhood through the example of a prank that her friend Rog played. As playful kids of the neighborhood, they light the mailboxes with firecrackers, resulting in a serious federal involvement and the boys were sent to juvenile detention facility. She notes "This is how silly pranks by Black kids are handled in the South" (Ward 24-25).

Perceived as denizens, the moral exclusion faced by Blacks and the heightened antipathy of the state were apparent during the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The ingrained dehumanization in the American psyche "diminish[ed] collective helping" (Haslam and Loughnan 414). Their bodies were considered throwaway and discardable (Lloyd) and, as a result, dead bodies of Black people piled up in the streets. The nation's denial of the humanity of Black folks during the hurricane exposed the disastrous result of slow violence and the magnitude of the federal government's failure to acknowledge the disaster. Abandoned and unaided, dead and unburied, Black people occupied the sidewalks and, once again, the margins of the nation's history.

Moreover, the normative representations of Blacks propagate "racialized, classed, and sexist notions regarding their sexuality, sociability, intelligence, trustworthiness, and socio-economic standing" (Castaneda 7). They caricature Black people through stereotypical representation, and "the white gaze continues to get its sustenance through various media representations of Black bodies" (Yancy 30). The fictional misrepresentation and societal judgment continue to feed on each other, thereby fabricating the Black body as "a dangerous beast" (Yancy xxxiv) posing a threat to the peaceful existence of white people. While the stalwarts of American literature inspire Ward in constructing her corpus, she actively rejects their myopic understanding of the Black community. Although she acknowledges the influence of William Faulkner, Ward notes that when it comes to people of color, "he doesn't develop them as human beings" (Hartnell, "When Cars Become Churches" 217). Consequently, her works also function as a response to Faulkner's world-building in their structural and narrative similarity, particularly *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

2.3 "The danger of a single story"[3]

By employing a range of tropes, Ward confronts the dominant narratives of racialized history and brings forth the silenced epistemologies. The notion of re-humanization is self-explanatory and stipulates reparation through various social, cultural, and political approaches. Ward re-humanizes the victims of structural marginalization by attributing dignity to the dispossessed in all contexts, thereby honoring their lives/deaths through the act of remembrance. She individualizes her friends and community members by capturing their loss, tangible grief, and fleeting moments of joy and happiness.

The chapter reads Ward's *Men We Reaped* by interpreting re-humanization as "treating dehumanized people with respect and dignity" (Oh 170). Oelofsen remarks that re-humanization is fundamental to "change a society from an ethos of conflict to one with an ethos of peace" (178). Her model of re-humanization is primarily based on re-imagination, as she argues, "A lack of imagination renders the lives and subjectivities of others invisible to us. The imagination is necessary in order to render these people's lives, and their suffering, joys and sorrows, tangible and visible to us as the joys and sufferings of a human being" (Oelofsen 184). Moreover, counter-storytelling enriches one's imagination and aids to conceive a more peaceful world.

Re-humanization involves a complex process of "re-forge[ing] one's own identity" (Oelofsen 186). Re-humanizing the Black community is conceived as a grand project where sociologists, anthropologists, scientists, educators, activists, writers, and ordinary citizens play an active role. Consequently, the African American school of thought can be discerned as an

[3] The section's title alludes to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," 2008.

attempt to re-humanize the marginalized victims of racial violence. While scholars debunked the discourse of scientific racism, literature embraced a Black culture that exposed the lives of Black people. Shared testimonies and storytelling heralded movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, over half a century later, America witnessed a renewed proclamation for Black dignity through the Black Lives Matter Movement. Scholars assert that the movement called for a revival of public perception of the Black community and became "a leading force in the struggle for a re-humanization of Black lives" (Ross v).

The movement called for a paradigmatic shift in the American socio-political landscape. Incorporating an intersectional approach, it united the masses to reimagine the official history of race relations. However, the armed retaliation and the predatory attitude of the police during the recent protests further highlight the deep-seated racial prejudices that the movement addresses. Coincidentally, Ward's memoir was published the same year Black Lives Matter attempted to reconceive the American political climate. Ward captures the transient nature of Black lives through the real-life stories of her friends, where her subjects are humanized through narrative (Hartnell, "From Civil Rights to #BLM" 298).

Martinez notes that "Counterstory as methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (*Counterstory*). Ward's literary contribution becomes a part of the larger narrative as the movement parallelly exhumes the racial past and present of the United States. In such a sense, *Men We Reaped* becomes emblematic of the philosophy of the Black Lives Matter movement. Both Black Lives Matter and *Men We Reaped* produce a "counternarrative to the barrage of messages that insist the lives of the Black urban poor do not matter" (Ransby 50).

Critics remark that counter-storytelling is a "storytelling strategy" demonstrating the "intentional use of narratives to resist and counter normalized practices and ways of being that get imposed onto others" (Kinloch et al. 3). They note that Black people rely on counter-narratives to "make sense of their lives and to reject racist, public portrayals of their identities" (3). Bell's research on the role of storytelling in understanding racism outlines that the stories from the margins "are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns. Thus, their analysis can be a potential tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society" (Bell 4). She reiterates that counter stories "back talk" to a dominant narrative that minimizes or diminishes racism (8).

Contextually, Ward's memoir is a historical tool that "back talk" (Bell 8) to normative history by re-humanizing the Black community of the South. Her recollections of the community's history "'tell on' or bear witness to social relations that the dominant culture tends to deny or minimize" (Bell 8). Halpern and Weinstein note, "To be genuinely moved by another's suffering is to see the other as human, a first step in rehumanizing the other" (580). Through her recollections of her community members, Ward engages with the readers to induce empathy and open a window to the life of the dehumanized other. Upholding the ethics of peace, Ward indulges in telling instances that humanize her community and breathe life into the victims of systemic racism. Despite the therapeutic aspect of storytelling, for Ward, the process of storytelling becomes a "choiceless choice" in the "face of official denial" (Hackett and Rolston 360) of the reality of Black lives in the South.

Ward utilizes the notion of "back talk" by salvaging the themes of dirt, disposability, savages, and brutality that are stereotypically associated with the dehumanized and dirty South and rewrites the narratives to contextualize her community. For Black people, back talk becomes a "survival strategy" through which they "learn how to decode racist assumptions and every day articulations of racism" (Bell 8-9). Ward repurposes the raw human-animal

connections integral to the South through the persistent depiction of the savage imagery in her works. Encapsulating the notion of back talk, while concluding *Men We Reaped,* Ward remarks that despite the numerous tragedies and ever-looming death, "We survive; we are savages" (250). She maintains this in the context of *Salvage the Bones* by saying, "there is honor in that term [savage]" (Hoover). Reiterating in her responses to Hartnell, Ward says, "The way I wanted to use that term. . . is to say that we are fighters, and we are resourceful" ("When Cars Become Churches" 213). Bell identifies facets of counter-stories such as "personal danger and vulnerability in White settings, differential treatment in public arenas, attacks on one's sense of worth and dignity, and White blindness, insensitivity and cruelty" (9). Ward recollects that her friends in the hood believed they were worthy of being documented and sometimes nagged her to write about them. However, she scoffed at the idea as a young aspiring writer. In retrospect, she realizes the significance of their stories and honors them through recollections.

2.4 "The real shit"

In *Men We Reaped,* Ward recollects an occasion when her friends applaud her for writing about the "real shit" (30). The real shit, according to her peer group, is a counter-narrative about the people in the hood contrary to the normative depictions of their lives. Solorzano and Yosso note that "a majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upperclass, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (28). The existing majoritatian narratives surrounding Black youths are damaging and stereotypical. Consequently, Ward engages in counter-storytelling, "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano and Yosso 32). Even as a teenager, Ward was dissatisfied with the majoritarian story that defined New Orleans. She recollects that her classmates would inevitably look at her (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 2) as the embodiment of the frightening tales of the murder capital. She remembers how her favorite uncle and his neighborhood became a lurking danger for her classmates.

Moreover, Ward recounts, "Uncle Bookie would play games with us in the street: kickball, football, and basketball. He laughed when the football hit one of us in the mouth, leaving it sore and swollen, his eyes slit to the thin side of a penny" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 3). Through the earnest portrayal of her people, Ward debunks the white people's perception of Black Southerners and the lack of understanding she faced from affluent Blacks. She recollects that "class also complicated" (Ward 183) her relationship with Black classmates or partners. They came from an upper-middle-class, two-parent family whose realities differ significantly from Ward's. Through such examples, Ward highlights the inherent heterogeneity in the lived experience of Black people and deconstructs the prevailing notion that "all blacks experience the effects of race in the same way" (Lacy 1248).

Illustrating the historical significance of memoirs, Fass notes that childhood is "a favorite site of memoir" (108). Cardell and Douglas include that "The presence (or indeed absence) of childhood in autobiographical writings reveals something of the cultural position of the child within society and culture of the time" (1). Researchers of childhood agree that various cultural and ideological forces exert power while shaping the narratives on childhood. As Tesar observes, "Historical analyses often pinpoint childhoods as not defined or linear but of complex interactions of individual experiences with ideologies" ("Childhood Studies" 1). Representations of childhood have undergone paradigmatic shift to illuminate cultural, philosophical, historical and societal influences on children and their experiences. However, there has been sporadic representation of non-normative expressions of childhood. Consequently, Ward joins an array of African American writers by representing contrasting notions of childhood to debunk the racialized and normative understanding of childhood.

Scholars of childhood studies note that "One of the central foci of life writing texts, particularly in recent decades, is childhood" (Cardell and Douglas 1). Childhood is a product of the intersection of diverse historical, cultural and political contexts. Consequently, Ward

explores the social context of her friends' childhood. She counters the historical misinterpretation of Black lives through presenting the childhood experiences of her community members. Research on the demography of Black children states that they are "misperceived as older, relative to children of other races… and are viewed as more culpable for their actions" (Owusu-Bempah 6). Young Black bodies become the receiver of "unwarranted violence," "psychological harm," and "ultimately certain unavoidable doom" (Drake 447). Considered a threat, Black children are denied an egalitarian environment. The idea of disposability that marked Emmet Till as a criminalized throwaway body continues to shun the lives of numerous young adults in America, as the persistent police brutality towards children reveals.

As a voracious reader who attempted to escape her lived reality through reading, Ward was largely acquainted with white, normative narratives of coming-of-age. She discusses moments of dissatisfaction by presenting her experience of reading *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) and realizing her surroundings were not magical like Terabithia. Wanting to reach a whimsical land, Ward leads her friends to explore the backyard. She notes "Instead, Josh and Aldon and I wandered around the shed in the backyard, leapfrogging over the septic tank, sliding along the slippery slope" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 86). Although the "innocence of the white canon and coming-of-age genre is unavailable" to her, (Torres-Quevedo 174) Ward yearns to become "one of those girls" (88) presented in the book.

Ward traces the experiences of Black children in DeLisle, starting with her grandmother. She recollects that her grandmother was denied access to school as a Black girl in the South. When she grew up, she could "work like a man" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 45) and therefore worked multiple jobs to single-handedly raise a family. On the other hand, Ward's parents were the elder children of their respective families in two fatherless households. As a result of the common circumstances, both were given tremendous responsibilities, which hindered their childhood experiences. Mapping their childhoods, Ward makes a pertinent statement: "Like all

children, they were the children of history and place" (15). She deconstructs the linear perception of childhood as a site of innocence and happiness to underpin the idea that it is a product of social context and history. A generation later, Ward was also forced to bear the adult responsibilities of tending to her younger siblings and managing the house while her mother was at work. Moreover, as Ward discusses in multiple sections of the memoir, the lack of a nurturing environment and institutional support play a major role in fragmentation of families, transgenerational trauma, incarceration and detrimental coping mechanisms.

Going back in time, Ward recollects that her mother has always been taking care of children, and, as a result, had "little patience" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 159) for Ward and her siblings. Her frustration often projected as bouts of anger that terrified the children. Her father was no exception when it came to shouldering responsibilities as a teenager. The cumulative effect of her parents' resentment and their curtailed young adulthood created friction and the family splits up leaving her mother in charge of the children. Ward notes that "Children often blame themselves when a parent leaves, and I was no exception" (101). As a child, Ward secretly blamed herself for her father's constant disappearance and endless parental conflict. She recollects that she grappled with low self-esteem and underwent severe stress as a teenager. Moreover, her father's absence affected her education, and her mother struggled to support four children alone. Ward notes, "Every day after school, we sat at the table with our books, all of us desperately trying to do better and all aware, in the bewildered way that children are, that we were failing" (138). She indicates that despite the absence of a nurturing social circumstances, children from marginalized communities are expected to confirm to a "teleological linearity of standard coming-of-age narrative" built on the foundations of whiteness (Dawson, "We Knew We Were Being Watched" 100).

Like Ward, most of her peers were unaware of the reason behind their fractured families. While most children faced neglect from their families, their negative experiences in schools

became an extension of this. As a result of the unstable family structure, children develop a lack of trust in structures that are required to protect and nurture them. Due to the effects of systemic racism in low-income families, children become primary caregivers and providers, often dropping out of school to support their families. The accelerated growth adversely affected their self-perception and sense of security, ultimately transmuting as generational trauma.

Ward recollects that her classmate's family referred to Black people as Scoobies in an allusion to Scooby Doo. Although the family belonged to the minority community of Asian immigrants, they did not associate with Blacks, "the lowest of the low" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 194). She explores the dehumanization of Black people through the shared vulnerability between dogs and them, in that Black people manifest disposability, are deemed as savages, and are stigmatized, demonized, and eventually left to die in the streets. By problematizing the trope of human-dog relationships, Ward illustrates the notions of self-worth and dignity of Blacks that the dominant discourses of white supremacy have denied. Her corpus demonstrates the formidable presence of dogs, especially pitbulls. In *Men We Reaped,* Ward elaborates rather unsettling depictions of her father's pitbull severely wounding her in childhood. Nevertheless, she also intersperses moments of extreme love and care for the animal, depicting a complicated human-animal kinship. By portraying the dichotomous relationship between dogs and humans, Ward delineates the "nature of black social, political, and *interior* life" (Bennett 1). The presence of dogs in her works thus functions as an ontological opening into the narrative of dehumanization and racism.

By studying the human-dog relationship in Ward's memoir Boisseron comments that "The dog, as a mediator of pain, is a good figure to politically engage stories about the past" (514). She successfully maneuvers human-animal relationship as a trope of her counter-hegemonic narrative to delineate the racial enterprise in America. Although her body of work exhibits a "critical embrace of *savagery*" (Bennett 150), the intricate relationship between dogs

and Black people complicates it. She anthropomorphizes dogs while also revealing their historical animosity towards people of color. A review of the literature shows that human animal interaction is an essence of southern literature (Ho), an element that can be traced back to slavery.

Critics observe that dogs appear as a "dire threat and dearest companion" (Bennett 133) to Black people. Brutal yet gentle, "the dog was perhaps a more effective tool for managing labor or even inflicting horrific pain or death on those who defied their masters' commands" (Parry and Yingling 70). In *Men We Reaped*, Ward turns to her own childhood experiences of having dealt with the love and fear of dogs. Her recollections of a pitbull attack are horrifying, although she expresses guilt for starting the fight that eventually led to the dog's death. Ward's tendency to blame herself translates to the survivor's guilt she experiences while her brother, friends, and community members continue to die. Moreover, as Boisseron agrees, "By connecting the animal death with that of young black men, Ward addresses the entanglement of black and animal fungibility" (515).

Ward delineates the "personal danger and vulnerability in a White setting" (Bell 9) through the stories of her friends trapped in the white gaze. She problematizes the demonized perception of Black males that curtails their interactions with the outside world. Discerned as a menace, young Black men are deemed as "lacking in intellectual skills" (hook 32) and the education system is inconsiderate towards their lived realities. Ward provides the example of Joshua, CJ and Ronald, who were "branded as misfits" (*Men We Reaped* 24) and forced to drop out of school. In retrospect Ward notes that they must have felt unremarkable in the classroom, as a body crowding the school (*Men We Reaped* 111). Ward notes that Black children have been historically refused a safe space in schools. She describes acts of subversion that the children in the hood engage to tackle the oppressive environment. She recollects the example of Rog, who "sat in the back of one such class and beat-boxed while his cousins sang spirituals that

substituted the teacher's name for Jesus" (27). MacCampbell identifies Rog's attitude as a subversive response to trauma, by replacing Jesus with the teacher's name, the purveyor of the system, the children respond to the trauma fostered by the school to prison pipeline. The merciless school policies results in unlawful incarceration of Black youths in southern communities ("A Prophetic Tension").

Drawing from the experiences of her friends and family, Ward indicates that the concept of family remained fluid, leading children to move out of their homes and grow up in their relatives' houses. Sometimes the unhealthy environment of the family drew them out, while sometimes they left on their own volition. Such arrangements also resulted from the family's financial requirements. For the men she interacted with while growing up, it was necessary to sell drugs at some point to meet their needs, as the stagnant economy did not reward their contributions. She recollects that once she found her brother selling drugs, he responded, "You think I like to do this shit?" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 129). By illuminating that at the heart of such precarious situations is enduring poverty, Ward's memoir humanizes the image of the stereotypical drug-dealing Black youths.

According to Ward, being a Black man in the South mostly meant "unsteady work, one dead-end job after another, institutions that systematically undervalue him as a worker, a citizen, a human being" (*Men We Reaped* 211). These elements further contribute to mental health issues and ultimately foster "self-loathing and destructive behavior" (200) in men. The lack of access to proper health care renders them vulnerable to incarceration, profiling, death, and substance abuse. Ward unpacks these notions as she delineates the life of her friend Rog, who shot himself to death after struggling with depression. The conflicting terrain of Black masculinity compels Black men to be savages who fight the odds of systemic racism in their day-to-day lives. People also leave their houses in search of better jobs. As Peter and Massey note that "racial stratification of Black Americans in the United States has resulted in most

Blacks being expected (or assigned) to do the hardest and/or lowest paid jobs" (196) as a result of this pattern, the structure of families is fractured, a phenomenon "fostered by endemic poverty" (Ward *Men We Reaped* 131).

An aspect frequently detailed in Ward's corpus is the looming threat of incarceration triggered by the demoralizing justice system. It is common for Black men to be "stopped by the police and searched for no other reasons than they were [are] Black and male" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 99). The treatment that Black men receive is epitomized through the towering presence of Parchman prison, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, a reminder of eternal imprisonment for Black men. The vicarious trauma generated from yesteryear's slave plantation-in-disguise revisits young Ward through nightmares of her father and uncles being arrested. Parchman becomes the focal point of the generational trauma of the community. Black males, young or adult, were booked by prison authorities for petty crimes and imprisoned for a lifetime and were compelled to provide free labor during their coercion. The strained relationship between police and Black men ultimately translates to the narrative that Black lives do not matter and are not worth living.

Hackett and Rolston note that in most cases, the "victims of state violence" have to narrate a "much broader story about a system of injustice" (62) to delineate the story of their family. This is precisely the case in Ward's memoir. She cannot begin to discern her brother's death from the eventual acquittal of the murder without discussing the history of the unfair justice system or the politics of "driving while black" (Dib 139). The "danger and vulnerability" combined with "differential treatment in public arenas" (Bell 9) feature in the mundane act of driving. Ward humanizes the images of driving Black men, a recurring motif in her writings. Although the popular American trope of driving and travel are relevant components of American narratives of freedom, it almost always excludes the experiences of Black people.

Exploring the haunted roadscapes in Ward's fiction, Dib notes that "Ward demonstrates how for black travelers the road primarily functions as a policed space where they are subject to violence" (142). Perceived as a threat, Black people's right to mobility is curtailed by unfair means. While the vastness of roads promises eternal freedom for the white hero, the Black protagonist's journey is defined by "untimely halting of mobility" (Dib 134). She recycles the traditional road narrative to critique the unsafe roadscapes of the American South. For Black young men, being stopped and frisked becomes a rite of passage as such moments test the respectability of the Black subject in a distinctively traumatic way.

In an interview with Anna Hartnell, Ward agrees that cars "partially fulfil the function that churches once performed for an older generation of African Americans" (206) providing comfort and safety domestic spaces fail to extend. However, she also captures the "simultaneously routine and yet horrifying duality" (Bell 9) through the narratives of Black men driving. The presence of cars and long drives play a vital role in her relationship with her brother Joshua. He did not reach his planned destination, nor did CJ, as both died on the roads and were denied justice even in death. The memoir ends with a sentimental note of her dream of waiting for Joshua to invite her for a ride. It strikes the reader that the turbulent climate of anti-Black racism can actively hinder the journeys and aspirations of the nation's Black youth.

Ward addresses the question of "how history bears in the present" (Ward and Taylor 267) in all her works. She engages in writing to decipher the cycle of loss haunting her community. The title *Men We Reaped* directly references Harriet Tubman's quote on the Civil War events, which she employs to acknowledge the repetition of history for the poor and Black. While growing up, only Demond had the luxury of a stable family, with both his parents doing "solid working-class jobs" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 64). Ward remembers that as a child, he had a house "where all the kids wanted to be" (64). However, despite the stability of his young adulthood days, Demond grew up to be a "hustler" (65) juggling between jobs that could never

fully support his family. Although as children aspired for a family like Demond's, Ward notes that, ultimately, it was not so different from her family, especially the reality of growing up Black in the South with death "stalking" (64) them in countless ways.

She captures the systemic negligence by citing the example of the community park in her locality. "The land that the community park is built on, I recently learned, is designated to be used as burial sites so the graveyard can expand as we die; one day our graves will swallow up our playground. Where we live becomes where we sleep" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 127). While criticizing the narrative that deems Black lives worthless, the statement persuades us of the reality that instead of proposing systemic changes to counter the effect of racism, the federal system resorts to introducing shallow measures. Black people, including women, men, children, scholars, and activists, have historically received and continue to receive unwarranted violence and backlash from the white world. In exposing the repetition of history for the poor, she discusses a place where racial relations continue to matter. By reflecting on the history of dehumanization and life on the margins, Ward features the South in all its zest and destitution, rightfully becoming the "literary voice of the dirty South" (Ward and Taylor 266).

2.5 Conclusion

The pervasive effect of racism fabricated a narrative where Black people pose a concomitant threat to their white counterparts' peaceful existence. This concocted narrative that fosters the erasure of Black lives stretches across schools, workplaces, and even playgrounds that foster the erasure of Black lives. The ontological presence of Black bodies and their spatial interactions are deemed hostile and shunned to the margins. The disposability and abuse against the Black community are normalized throughout the erroneous retellings of history and such misconstructions further blur society's perception of Black people. In such situations of systemic erasure marginalized communities have a limited voice, a situation which makes it necessary for Black women writers to subvert dominant discourses by reclaiming histories and

narratives. By narrating personal histories, life stories, and intimate memories, Ward counters the historical dehumanization of the Black community.

The didactic nature of Ward's canon empowers readers and exhorts the significance of storytelling and listening as fundamental features of counter-hegemonic narratives. The grief and pain Ward delineates are universal and truthfully attribute humanity to the poor and marginal, thereby shedding light on the "broader human experience" (Lee and Madden). Consequently, *Men We Reaped* evokes empathy by "*imagining the experience of a narrative* from that other person's point of view" and creates a "deeper understanding of difference" (Lee and Madden) to preserve the diversity of the social fabric. In the memoir, Ward contextualises her community members' troubled childhoods and young adulthoods that moulded their adult lives. At the crossroads of Black Lives Matter and recurring police killings and mass incarceration, her works are widely incorporated into the pedagogical practices to critically engage with the history of racism, environmental justice, young adulthood, poverty and agency. In a period of rampant racially motivated crimes, Ward's counter-story functions to re-humanize the victims of systemic injustice. Moreover, critics note that the methodology of counter-story has the ability to "*move* us toward social transformation" (Martinez). Commenting on the significance of storytelling in social movements Civil Rights activist John Lewis stated that "the movement without storytelling is birds without wings" (Collier). By depicting the lived realities of Black people in the South, Ward joins the band of writers who give wings to the ongoing movements for Black dignity.

Chapter 3

Growing up in the 'Dirty South': precarious Black childhoods in Jesmyn Ward's *Where the Line Bleeds*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

3.1 Introduction

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) attempts to understand how "literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate" the "ontological negation" (14) of Black lives. Contemporary writer Jesmyn Ward's canon harbors an answer to Sharpe's inquiry, for her narration of the Dirty South contextualizes the dehumanization of Black people in the 21st century United States of America. She portrays the ethos of ordinary southern rural life by rendering the violent relationship among structures of inequality, haunted landscapes and the dispossessed Black community in the South. By echoing the legacy of Southern writers yet simultaneously rejecting "stagnant notions" (Coby) of the earlier representations, Ward delineates predominant themes such as racism, childhood, trauma, poverty, and everyday precarity. She reconstructs the traditional tropes of the coming-of-age narrative, the gothic and the road narrative to amalgamate mundane African American experiences and therefore her works inevitably garner international attention. Her agenda of unapologetically engaging with the politics of representation dates back to her experiences of growing up as a Black child who "starved for fictional representation" (Ward and Taylor 267). She reflects that, even as a writer, she required considerable time to unlearn the misrepresentation of her community "and to reach a point where I [Ward] can confidently say that our [Black] lives are just as human and complicated and fascinating as anyone else's" (267). Consequently, her works delineate the complexities of being Black in contemporary America.

Maintaining this position, her corpus offers a nuanced portrayal of Black people, effortlessly evading the debates on stereotypes and instead portraying the "rawness" of their lives with "honesty" (Ward and Taylor 267). Her narratives detail the struggles of marginalized Black people negotiating their everyday lives in Bois Sauvage, a fictional place modeled on her hometown DeLisle. She integrates the elements of the Dirty South[4] to represent her community that has been historically "devalued" and labeled "nugatory" (Yancy 11). Dirty South emerged as a subgenre of hip hop, marketing the regional and racial identity of the South (Grem). Translating its essence, Ward investigates the regional identity, repressed voices and historical silences by narrativizing the mundane experiences of the Southerners. Her young protagonists live in the Pit, a deserted piece of land deep inside Bois, where they gather for fierce dog fights or a swim by the dirty lake. By portraying children thriving in ghettoized neighborhoods, she chronicles their perseverance in constructing alternate social structures in the absence of a nurturing environment. Drawing from Patricia Yaeger's foundational study *Dirt and Desire* (2000) that contextualizes Southern women writers, critic James Crank writes about notions that are stereotypically attributed to the South such as "the dirty, the shameful, the repressed, the forgotten, the damaged, the underrepresented, [and] the trash" (166). Reinforcing Crank's claim, the overarching themes of Ward's canon own the South's dirt "with a courage born of desperation" (Ward and Taylor 268), a quality that her characters exhibit.

Throughout her oeuvre, Ward critiques the systemic racism that created the precarious population of the southern Black community. As explored in the previous chapter, her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), relates the untimely death of five young men, including her brother, and holds the State accountable for the grim living conditions of the underprivileged southern

[4] Dirty South refers to the southern states of US marked for its distinct culture.

Black communities. Interrogating traumatic ruptures and state violence in Ward's fiction, Arin Keeble argues that "In none of Ward's works is there any support or intervention from the American state" (41). This remark corresponds to Sean Hill's observation on precarity in the era of Black Lives Matter, that Black Americans remain "an eternal precariat class" (98) in America. The perpetual precariousness endured by the Black community is often the afterlife of slavery manifested through "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 6). Drawing from her personal experiences, Ward's fictional and non-fictional works capture these repercussions truncating the lives of Black people. Consequently, this chapter examines Ward's ongoing efforts to voice the lived experiences of the Black community. It proceeds to analyze the representation of childhoods in her novels *Where the Line Bleeds* (2009), *Salvage the Bones* (2013), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) from the vantage point of childhood studies, an interdisciplinary domain that problematizes the experience of childhood.

Childhood studies has "traditionally focused on critical understandings of the social construction of childhood and children's agency, participation and rights" (Konstantoni and Emejulu 6). As explored in chapter one, the field incorporates discourses from various disciplines to reimagine the normative constructs of childhood. The domain enables researchers to examine "children as social actors and to research their rights, participation, and vulnerability" (Tesar, "Childhood Studies" 1). It agrees that "what childhood means . . . who counts as a child and when and how that state of being begins and ends, is contingent on historical, economic, and cultural contexts" (Dumas and Nelson 28). Following this trajectory, it is pertinent to note that the effects of poverty and precarity are endured differently by Black children and adults. Moreover, the dearth of representing marginalized children at a policy level adversely affects them for a lifetime. Scholars of Black childhood studies, Dumas and Nelson agree that "If children in general are materially vulnerable, and their perspectives and social

worlds seldom acknowledged in public and policy discourse, it is no surprise that Black children are among the most invisible, the most underrepresented and misrepresented, of all" (33).

The most misrepresented and contested demographics in literature and culture, Black children are historically perceived as "despicable" and "dangerous" (Yancy 34). Further, gender obscures how young girls are perceived within the substructure of Black childhood. The loud, angry, and hypersexualized representations of Black girls in cultural productions reinstate Black female stereotypes. The ramification of misrepresentation denies them the safety nets of society, and as a result, Black children are mistreated and ostracized from the majoritarian society. Ward's storytelling provides contexts for this problematic typecasts of gendered performance. Determined to delineate the everyday lives of Black community in the South, Ward portrays Black boys and girls navigating such precarious living conditions in contemporary America. The narratives reveal that the neglect Black children face is of "systemic kind" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 208) wherein intergenerational poverty and trauma become the coordinates of their childhood experience. As the racial profiling of young adults continues to terrorize Black communities, Ward's project to reconceptualize Black childhood through literature becomes a political engagement that forefronts the need to scrutinize coming-of-age as a Black person in the supposedly post-racial America. Consequently, the chapter reflects on discourses the intersections of childhood studies, political precarity and African American canon, thereby generating a dynamic and intersectional field of inquiry. This chapter intends to bridge the research gap in the scholarship on literary representation of Black childhood employing the lens of precarity.

Researchers have contributed to creating frameworks to understand the role of racism and adverse experiences in Black young adults' mental health (Bernard, et al.). Multiple studies investigate the intersections of Black children and the educational system to scrutinize patterns of microaggressions and types of school violence in early childhood education (Essien). Further,

quantitative inquiries on the adultification of Black girls conclude that they are perceived "as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers" (Epstein et al. 1). Scholars also discuss Black futuristic photo essays as a fugitive educational space for young Black children (Nxumalo and ross), recalling the pertinent question of representation. Although Ward's works have been subject to multiple burgeoning inquiries, the concept of childhood is overlooked despite it being a notable element of her corpus. Consequently, the chapter attempts to fill in the persisting gaps in investigating the lives of children and their performances of childhood in Ward's corpus.

By studying the central characters of Ward's novels while drawing and expanding further on Judith Butler's explorations of precarity, the chapter argues that political precarity predetermines the young Black lives in contemporary South. Ward depicts children who resist adverse living conditions through mundane yet radical acts of resilience. Since its inception, the discourses in childhood studies have recognized children as political agents with individual agency. However, the recent debates critique the field's founding tenets concerning children's agency and power. Scholars argue that the field does not "question or problematize what such agency really means for different groups of children and young people" (Tisdall and Punch 255), often highlighting issues of children from marginalized communities. Even in the 21st century, as the field attempts to recalibrate the singular perception of childhood, Black children continue to be "precariously understood within the framework of childhood itself" (Breslow, *Ambivalent Childhoods* 3).

Consequently, to inspect childhood at the intersection of race, gender, geography, and shifting socio-political paradigms, we employ the theoretical framework Judith Butler provides in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Butler's engagement with social theory to discern gender, violence, grief, and vulnerability encapsulates the significance of human inclusivity. The theoretical underpinnings of *Precarious Life* can be employed to foster dialogues on grievability and disposability of Black and other marginalized lives in the

wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Therefore, this method is engaged as an effective tool to discern the lives of Black children, the unheard of all.

Butler defines precarity as the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" ("Performativity, Precarity" 2). She questions the grievability of lives to theorize why certain lives are considered "less than human" (Butler, *The Power of Mourning* 74). Further, she argues that an ungrievable life "is one that cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were"" (33). This predicament concurs with the racially motivated murders of innocent Black children and sheds light on our perception of institutional racism. In her subsequent works, Butler describes precarity as the "rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless" ("Performativity, Precarity" 13). Resonating with her argument, childhood and Black studies scholars agree that Black children continue to be mistreated, and their Blackness is seen as "another register of the human" (Breslow, *Ambivalent Childhoods* 43), and their bodies are perceived as "devoid of intrinsic value" (Yancy xiv).

Contextually, in Jacob Breslow's route map to investigating Black childhood in the current political climate of America, he asserts that "antiblackness has shaped the very contours of childhood" and it "functions as an exclusionary frame of protection and prioritization limited to privileged and historically contingent groups of young people, *and* as a longstanding means of marking marginalized populations as inferior" (*Ambivalent Childhoods* 2-3). Analyzing the public discourse surrounding the murder of innocent Black young adults, scholars emphasize that it is difficult "for the nation at large to imagine black boys as occupying a space of childhood and being children" (Drake 447). At the heart of this exclusion is the omnipresent systemic racism that finds representation in Ward's fiction. The selected novels portray the

tremors of a precarious environment that dismantles and, at the same time, molds young adults in present-day America.

3.2 Economic precarity and troubled boyhood in *Where the Line Bleeds*

In the subsequent sections, I investigate such junctures of precarity outlined in the selected novels and conclude by commenting on the parameters of Black childhood. *Where the Line Bleeds* is Ward's first novel, written in 2009, marking her entry into African American literature. The novel discusses the coming of age of twins Joshua and Christophe and their subsequent job hunt amid the lousy economy of the South. It follows the boys as they navigate their new role as the breadwinners of their family. They have grown up under the care of their blind grandmother Ma-mee, after their drug-addict father, Samuel (Sandman), and mother, Cille, leave DeLisle. Ward traces the boys in their mundane surroundings, engaging in small-town activities and evening basketball games as they pass their time in the days following their high school graduation. Joshua and Christophe do not plan to study further. Instead, they are actively searching for a job within the perimeters of their hometown. The plot thickens as Joshua gets called back from the dockyard while Christophe is left without a job. The feeling of inadequacy and jealousy, coupled with the pressing need to make money, drives Christophe to sell drugs, mostly weed, to the people in the locality. The drama intensifies as their mother's visit coincides with their father's reappearance in Bois Sauvage.

In the first book of her Bois Sauvage trilogy, Ward engages in detailed descriptions of Bois, the fictional twin of DeLisle, where the dispossession of Southern Black communities is manifested. Ward's characters have lived in Bois for generations, and the locale has intrinsically become a part of their identities. The term Bois Sauvage is derived from the French word meaning "wild wood," capturing the "untamed" and "free" nature of its biotope (B. Smith 84). She describes the mundaneness of Bois through Joshua's perception of the place: "[H]e knew

every copse of trees, every stray dog, every bend of every half-paved road, every uneven plane of each warped, dilapidated house, every hidden swimming hole" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 87). Later, "This was Bois Sauvage. There were no strangers, everyone knew everyone" (87). The description of the shanty town dictates the precarious living conditions of its people. Signs of neglect are apparent in their locality. These signs include the overgrown grass "that the country officials had overlooked cutting" (179), garbage cans that have not been replaced, and an unattended basketball court that functions as a community center for the youth suggest dispossession.

Although Ward's canon has received massive academic attention in recent years, scholars agree that *Where the Line Bleeds* remains overlooked (Bone) despite its role in situating the precarious presence of rural Southern geography in contemporary literature. The study explores the ripple effect of "racialised and neoliberalised disposability" (64) in the domestic space of a family. The existing literature also explores the non-normative representation of coming-of-age in the novel (Dawson) and neoliberalism's impact on marginalized Southerners' lives (Bone). Further, Dawson explores how racial capitalism is worsened by the protagonists' subject position as young adults. The study contextualises the phenomena of racial capitalism in the novel in the larger history of slavery and Reconstruction era. Critical inquiry also examines the psychic lives of twins, which function as an alternate framework through which their lives are reimagined (B. Smith). The lack of attention towards the vulnerability endured by Joshua and Christophe drives this chapter to inspect the instances and contexts of precarity through Butler's framework.

Resonating with the wild nature of Bois, Ward exhumes the savage nature within her characters. Owing to the intermingling of people and the place, Ward's protagonists carry their hometown in their names as their official names are Joshua and Christophe DeLisle. Their grandparents migrated to Bois Sauvage from New Orleans in search of cheaper land, where

their grandfather Lucien worked as a carpenter until he died. On the other hand, Ma-mee cleaned the houses of wealthy whites in the Bayou. The couple built their house with their life savings, where the twins now reside. Ward does not fail to depict the haunting past of the racial South that revisits DeLisle in the form of "confederate emblems" (*Men We Reaped* 126) and billboards of Klan members or "caretakers chasing them away" (4) at the beach. Ma-mee brought the twins up with the help of her other children, Rita, Paul, Julian, Maxwell, and David. In the absence of the twins' parents, their uncles and aunt functioned as elders, often caring for their needs. In Bois, the community is often an extension of families; intermarriage is common, and people marry at seventeen and fourteen. Research notes that the African American family system relies on the support of extended family and communities to raise children (Connor and White). Ma-mee tells the boys that "it was common to apportion the raising of children to different family members in Bois Sauvage" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 8) suggesting the role of extended community in child rearing. This could also indicate the lack of resources and support from the State given to low-income families.

Moreover, dim employment opportunities and pressing responsibilities often result in a broken family structure, where parents are required to move to newer terrains. Despite the boys' protests, Cille moved to Atlanta in search of better prospects; on the other hand, their father, Samuel, has never been reliable. Studies point out that "black children have limited meaningful interactions and relationships with men as father" (Connor and White 6). In *Men We Reaped*, Ward agrees, "This tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 131). She recollects her trepidations and tendencies to blame herself for her father's constant appearance and disappearance. In the case of Joshua and Christophe, they are unconcerned about Sandman's absence; however, their mother's absence affects the boys as they grow up. The twins felt vulnerable and voiceless when she first left, and they are not yet ready to talk about it. Joshua thinks: "she talked to them less and gave

them more" (*Where the Line Bleeds* 10). Their childhood needs were not fulfilled, and their only relationship with her seemed to be her occasional gifts and monthly allowance that would soon stop after their graduation.

Ward employs the classical trope of twin brothers to portray the dichotomized experiences of young adulthood. The twins were raised as two versions of the same person under similar circumstances. Researchers explore the narrative use of twins in contemporary literature to explore the theme of coming-of-age (de Nooy). Having grown up in Bois, their life experiences have been mainly the same; however, as they prepare to enter the work world, they are forced to construct individual identities. Ward hints at their desire to follow different paths in the novel's opening section. As they prepare to jump into the Woolf River on their graduation day, Ward alludes to the river branching out to the Bayou, taking diverse directions. Nevertheless, their lives are intertwined, and they support each other in the absence of a healthy social structure and nurturing parents.

Ward portrays Joshua and Christophe as young Black boys without safety nets navigating rare employment opportunities and aspirations of upward mobility. They do not have familial wealth and social capital to launch them into the workforce or fund their studies if they wished to pursue college. As the novel progresses, it is evident that this is the case for most youths from Bois. Most of the young men in Bois Sauvage engage in a side hustle like their cousin Dunny. Besides working in the shipyard, Dunny sells weed to make ends meet. The prologue suggests the boys' poverty and their aspirations to "make money" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 3) and perhaps own a "Big" and "Nice" house like the white people's houses where Ma-mee worked. They decide to find employment out of necessity and are yet to figure out where they want to work and what kind of job they want to pursue. Ward states that for her community members, "leaving's not an option" (Bone 65). Similarly, the twins' plans "never included leaving Bois Sauvage" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 7), further reducing their chance of finding a job.

Consequently, their options narrow to "Wal-Mart, the grocery store in St. Catherine, [and] the McDonald's" (22) the only avenues in the Bayou.

In "Mapping the 'Ungeographic' in Jesmyn Ward's *Where the Line Bleeds*" Smith notes that Ward offers these southern Black men a chance by reframing their geography and context. Studies argue that youths are the most vulnerable demography regarding access to proper education, resulting in intermittent unemployment and poorly remunerated labor (Weston et al.). Joshua and Christophe struggled to study in school and "barely passed senior English" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 24); some days, they bunked classes and smoked weed with their cousin Dunny. Despite the discouragement from school in terms of learning, both Joshua and Christophe were skilled basketball players. However, the absence of guidance eventually led them to drop the sport. By illuminating the deep-rooted systemic racism that affects the livelihood of young Black men, Ward deconstructs the historic racial stereotypes surrounding Black boys. Moreover, Joshua and Christophe's boyhood is conflated with manhood and an impending list of responsibilities. It is presumed by the family that it is now their turn to look after Ma-mee, and the possibility of losing Cille's monthly money order further accentuates their anxiety.

Ward provides glimpses of Ma-mee's childhood which is defined by extreme poverty and hunger. She recollects having had to eat stews made of snakes and mice with rice. Nevertheless, two generations later, the twins still must ration their food. Although their grandmother claims the twins were well-fed as children, "Joshua remembered otherwise" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 72). "He remembered eating handfuls of corn flakes and watery powdered milk, of eating tuna for weeks at a time, of dreaming of pizza as an eight-year-old. He remembered being perpetually hungry" (72). Ward notes, "they grew up tailoring their needs to fit the amount of expendable cash they had available" (30). They aspire to finally be able to buy food for the house once they find a job. The brothers wait four weeks for the stores to call back. Instead of

individuating, the twins lose their identity in the process of job hunting and inevitably succumb to normative expectations of the white world. Christophe considers braiding his hair, the author states: "His hair had to be neater; prospective employees would think him lazy and unreliable if he wore his hair wild and curly" (94). However, when the man from the docks finally calls, they only have a position for Joshua, leading to Christophe feeling "hurt and love and jealousy" (48). This thickens the plot and highlights how the consequences of neoliberalism are felt in low-income families.

Studies note that neoliberal policies have resulted in increased precarious labor in America, with Black people being "disproportionately vulnerable" (Mullany et al. 135) to precarious jobs. Precarious labor is "characterized by low wages, variable hours, little to no benefits, involuntary part-time work, contract or temporary work, and work that entails hazardous conditions" (Mullany et al. 136). In *Where the Line Bleeds*, Ward explores Black fungibility through the precarious position of young boys engaged in blue-collar jobs. Joshua looks forward to finding a position in the dockyard for his brother. According to his colleague Leo, "people got into accidents all the time. Anything was possible" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 116). This comment suggests that young adults in Bois must wait for someone to fall ill or get into an accident to fill their position. Researchers reiterate that under precarious employment, young men from low-income families are considered "expendable machinery" (Mullany et al. 136), where the company's profit is prioritized over the employee's health. The teetering employment opportunities and neoliberal economy force Joshua and Christophe to "chase security" (Millar 1).

The lack of proper employment severely affects mental health, as seen in the case of Christophe, who resorts to smoking up weed to forget his pain. Studies show that "Chronic job insecurity brings on the individual deterioration of health such as increased mental stress, depression, and anxiety" (Mullany et al. 136). The historical perpetuation of stereotypes that

represent Black boys as "pathological deviants" diminishes their chance of finding a stable structure in their lives. Ward captures the interior monologue of the twins, who are found to be stressing over their shattered dreams. She humanizes the image of Black boys by portraying the premature adult responsibilities they navigate. "They were boys, and they were grown; they took her to doctor's appointments, cooked for her, spoke to her with respect. . . . They called her ma'am, like they were children still, and never talked back. They were good boys" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 11). The boys took care of these household activities every day suggesting that they had to juggle multiple tasks simultaneously. Ward reiterates the point of children navigating adult responsibilities in her corpus, and it clearly finds representation in *Where the Line Bleeds* as well.

As Christophe is bereft of job opportunities, Dunny offers to help him out by letting him join in dealing drugs. Selling drugs becomes a choiceless choice for Christophe. When Joshua reminds him that selling drugs was not part of their plan, Christophe says, "Fuck the plan" (Ward, *Where the Bleeds* 84). Despite his swagger towards Joshua, Christophe struggles to accept what he now does for a living. He is disappointed in himself; Ward notes, "The idea of legitimate job had existed as an absolute in his head. It was the fulcrum upon which the bar of his dreams balanced" (56). Christophe was aware, like any other young man in Bois, of the sudden growth and ultimate doom that came with dealing drugs. However, he painfully comes to terms with "that this was something he did, now, like helping Ma-Mee with dinner or playing basketball or driving Joshua to work" (127). Javon deals with most drug supplies in Bois, and Christophe eventually starts spending time selling drugs at Javon's place despite Joshua's disapproval. Although Dunny introduces Christophe to selling weed, he plans to eventually stop it out of despise, further complicating Christophe's opinions about himself. He has witnessed the inevitable incarceration resulting from dealing drugs, and the possibility of a curtailed youth scares him. Now that Dunny plans to quit, he feels trapped and alone in the front.

Drake notes that America as a "nation becomes complicit in the theft of black boyhood" (448) by creating difficult circumstances that require Black boys to navigate unfamiliar terrains. Christophe starts earning more money in a short period; "he could slip all of the help-money into Ma-mee's purse himself" (201). When he contributes his money for the family potluck to celebrate July Fourth, he is guilty that "Everything was dirty about him: his body, his money" (143). His feeling of untidy is accentuated as he encounters Franco, a boy from the neighborhood, during the Fourth of July celebrations. Christophe associates Franco's robustness and clean clothes with his working two-parent family. He recollects, "He [Franco] always had the newest shoes, the best baseball caps, the flyest fits" (151). On the other hand, the twins had to ration their food and spend wisely the money that Cille sends. Moreover, Christophe suspects the family's affinity towards Joshua is a by-product of his success in finding a job and a girlfriend. He feels inadequate and struggles to accept his position; he bursts out to Joshua, saying, "I ain't the one with the job and the girlfriend. What I say don't matter because I ain't shit to the house" (196).

On the other hand, Joshua always finds himself tired at his new job. He wonders, "Would every night of the rest of his life be like this one: dreading the morning, the endless monotony of the repetition of days, of work that he hated, spiralling off into old age" (31). He observes the dockworkers and realizes, "It was more than tedium: it was hard, backbreaking work" (36). Each time Joshua thought of giving up, the image of Ma-Mee and Christophe surfaced, and "He would endure" (92). While theorizing the precariat as a class identity, Guy Standing notes that "they lack a work-based identity" and "solidaristic labour community," create "a sense of alienation and instrumentality in what they have to do" (Hill II 96). This alienation is reflected in Joshua's attitude towards his work. He goes to dockyard at the break of day and works until his shift is over. Soon enough into his job, Joshua encounters severe occupational injury at the tender age of eighteen that could eventually reduce his chance of finding a better job.

Studies argue that precarity "signals the loss of stable, regular jobs, which had allowed people to project themselves in terms of upward social mobility" (Han 335). This statement underlines Joshua and Christophe's position as young adults struggling to find a sustainable employment. Both Joshua and Christophe are found to be tackling their new situation on their own terms. Ward states Christophe's small-town dream thus.

> There was a pattern, an order to life. He dreamed things, worked for them, and they happened. He'd assumed this would continue after he graduated, that there existed steps to his life: a job at the dockyard or the shipyard where he could learn a trade, pay raises, stacking money, refurbishing Ma-Mee's house, a girlfriend, a kid, and possibly a wife one day. (55)

However, his dream of a teleological growth is unmet when he cannot find a job. Research agrees that "Precarity undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and challenges 'progress' and 'development' narratives on all levels" (Ridout and Schneider 5). The precarious conditions of their surroundings do not grant them a linear coming-of-age as expected. Their circumstances demand the twins to abandon their small-town dreams and aspirations.

Sandman's recurrent appearance at the house annoys the boys. They cannot stand the sight of him drinking, smoking, and buying drugs at Javon's place. Although Sandman claims that he is out of rehab, the twins know that he still uses drugs. When he confronts Joshua and Christophe at the basketball court, Christophe yells, "You ain't got no sons here. Ma-mee our mama and our daddy" (Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* 139). The twins feel immense responsibility towards Ma-mee their primary caregiver. As Butler theorizes

> the social nature of human existence means that we are dependent on and made vulnerable to others—vulnerable both because we might lose the very people with whom we have formed relationships and because we are exposed to others and that exposure always comes with the risk of violence. (Millar 4)

In the novel's final chapter, Javon and Sandman fight as Javon refuses to give Sandman more drugs. The twins get enmeshed in the brawl, and Sandman ends up gravely injuring Christophe by stabbing him. Butler argues, "Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, *Frames of War* 14). Under the influence of drugs, Sandman does not have any awareness of his surroundings or what he has done. On the other hand, Joshua feels immensely responsible for Christophe's life and rescues him by rushing him to the hospital. Ward notes, despite their differences, the twins ultimately belonged to each other. She captures the poignancy of their relation like this, "Yes, they conformed to character, but these two traded skin like any other set of twins" (*Where the Line Bleeds* 69). Here, Ward underlines the significance of archetypal trope of twins by portraying their affinity towards each other.

Butler iterates "life requires various social and economic conditions to be met to be sustained as a life" (*Frames of War* 14). Unfortunately, the twins cannot access those parameters that can promise them a sustainable transition into adulthood. In *Where the Line Bleeds,* one can see the multiple interpretations of precarity intermingle: precarity as a labor condition and precarity as an ontological experience (Millar). Research notes that the insecure employment opportunity "erodes a sense of social belonging," "disrupts everyday temporalities and life plans," and contributes to severe mental health crisis in youngsters from marginalized communities (Millar 5). In *Men We Reaped,* as she contemplates the characterization of the twins, Ward notes that "as an author, I was a benevolent God. I protected them from death, from drug addiction" (Ward, 70) the inevitable dome of the Black boys in DeLisle. However, in the novel, both Joshua's and Christophe's precarious labor conditions go hand in hand with their precarious living conditions, illuminating their impending doom.

3.3 Black Bois, girlhood, and Katrina in *Salvage the Bones*

Examining adolescence and politics of respectability in popular fiction such as *Monster* (1999) and *The Hate You Give* (2017), Gabrielle Owen notes that "a fictional representation always has the capacity to resist normative logics . . . through some relation to or engagement with dominant ways of seeing and knowing" (238). Ward's novels bear testimony to this statement by portraying childhoods that depart from the normative ideas. While we discuss the plight of Black boys, the public sphere considers the teetering lives of Black girls virtually non-existent. In *Salvage*, Ward deals with Black girlhood, a triply marginalized space in both historical and academic discourse despite their persistent presence in the works of Black writers. Although discourses on Black girlhood recently emerged as a discipline, Ashley Smith, in *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (2019) makes a pertinent point that most of the research incorporates the lens of Black feminism, which, while being a valuable tool, fails to theorize early childhood and adolescent experiences often resulting in "over-essentialised and homogenised descriptions of Black girls' experiences" (21).

Salvage the Bones (2011) follows the fifteen-year-old protagonist Esch, who navigates her unwanted pregnancy in her poverty-stricken, precarious, and dysfunctional family. Ward traces mundane yet eventful eleven days in Esch's life that culminate in Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The novel delineates the Batiste family, which comprises Esch, her brothers Skeetah, Randall, and Junior, and their drunkard father, Claude Batiste, who live in the Pit, a shanty area deep inside Bois. The family lives in an isolated and dilapidated house, surrounded by a salvage yard, where Mr. Batiste works to receive a meagre income by repairing abandoned vehicles or home appliances. Owing to the tradition of the Dirty South, Ward rightfully chose the novel's prologue from Outkast's hip-hop album, "Da Art of Storytellin (Part 1)." It reads, "Talking about what we going to be when we grow up, I said what you wanna be? She said, Alive" (*Salvage the Bones*). These lines embody the essence of the precarious condition that

surrounds Esch. In navigating the impending racism and poverty as a marginalized young adult, which is further complicated by her gender and teenage pregnancy, Esch cannot maintain hopes for a healthy future. She does not have the social support that can offer a secure future. Consequently, survival, despite the odds, is her biggest concern. In her attempts to survive the poverty, Esch redefines her agency. She expresses her resilience despite the unfavorable circumstances that hinder her growth.

The Batistes live deep inside Bois, which is strictly demarcated into Black Bois and white Bois, the two sections that never interact. Ward employs allegory to portray the invisible line between Black and white communities that find recurring representation in her novels. Esch comments about the locality saying, "We live in the black heart of Bois Sauvage," and the white people live "out away in the pale arteries" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 74). Ward's story points out the lack of resources that often force Esch and her siblings to steal things from the white household while the family unleashes hounds on the children. As they crawl through the bush to the white side of the Bois, Esch wonders "if they have their own Skeetahs and Esches crawling around the edges of their fields, like ants under the floorboards marching in line toward sugar left open in the cabinet" (54). She aptly compares their position to that of ants in Bois, an often-forgotten subsistence. The children of Bois fear white people, and the Batiste siblings often use it to instill fear in Junior, the youngest. Their harrowing everyday experiences highlight the strict racial divide that continues to materialize and render the Black children growing up in Bois invisible and dispossessed.

When Esch's mother dies giving birth to Junior, the youngest, the children were not allowed time to process the trauma and mourn their loss. Moreover, Esch bears the responsibility of parenting her younger brothers while also managing the household chores. Although the siblings parent each other, the weight of gender roles falls on Esch, who is immediately expected to tend to everyone's needs. In *Men We Reaped,* Ward notes this pattern

of parentification throughout the southern communities, citing the example of her parents, who were forced to shoulder adult responsibilities at a tender age (*Men We Reaped* 17). Recognizing the absence of a nurturing environment, Arin Keeble argues that Ward's novels delineate "siblings struggling to support each other in the absence of protective parents, allegorizing the wider need for citizens to support each other in the absence of state or government protection or any kind of social safety net" (41). As *Where the Line Bleeds* discussed Joshua's and Christophe 's struggle to safeguard each other, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing* also depict the children's attempts to nurture the younger siblings.

These imposed adult responsibilities warp Esch's years of young adulthood, and it instead becomes a "precipitation of the stages of life, a distorted or reversed process" (Raynaud 109). For Esch, childhood becomes a privileged terrain that she cannot access. While her brothers' friends frequent the Pit, Esch exists as a spectator in the margins of their discussions. However, she deploys her precarious position as an observer to understand and analyze her subjection. Nevertheless, the broader public imagination undermining Black girlhood also affects how Esch constructs her identity. Consequently, she identifies as an abject and hates her body when she sees her reflection in the mirror. Esch observes that apart from her hair, the rest of her body "wasn't so remarkable: wide nose, dark skin" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 4), victimised by the white gaze.

Although the parameters of the white gaze trap Esch, she emerges resilient in her journey as the story progresses. She models herself after Medea, the character from her summer reading of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942). Despite her daunting living conditions, Esch resorts to creativity by forging space and agency to reimagine herself as Medea jilted in love. Ward's story voices the lived reality of African American young adults through Esch's yearning for care and her distorted understanding of love and sex. Esch says, "The only thing that's ever been easy for me to do, like swimming through water, was sex when I started having it. I was

twelve" (16). Equating sexual intimacy to affection, she falls in love with Manny, who impregnates her and later refuses to acknowledge or reciprocate the feelings. Elaborating on Keeble's argument on allegory, this chapter argues that Ward employs Esch's relationship with Manny as an allegory of the dynamics between Black people and the State. Despite being an integral part of the country, the State has denounced and ghettoized the community. However, Esch rebels against the constant disregard from Manny and physically confronts him. Her act of challenging Manny's neglect and her attempts to hold him accountable for his actions translates as her refusal to bear the shame of teenage pregnancy alone. In asserting the limited agency she has access to, Esch reinstates her resilience.

Esch is deeply aware of her family's vulnerable position and decides against revealing her pregnancy. As a financially underprivileged Black teenage girl, she is denied access to the health care system. The complex dynamics of her family, the befallen adult responsibility, and her social class ostracize Esch from other kids at school and therefore she is alone in her journey. She does not enjoy the privilege of choice, as she says her options "narrow to none" (78). Esch recalls her brother Skeetah noticing her protruding stomach, thus, "I will not let him see until none of us have any choices about what can be seen" (78). She says, "This is what you do when you can't afford an abortion when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you" (78). Ward's story draws a parallel between Esch's mother and her. Her mother, who died during childbirth, was also the victim of a non-egalitarian healthcare system and it is that legacy of loss that Esch carries.

As the novel's opening chapter suggests, the entire family's hopes and aspirations rest on China the Pitbull's litter. Her brother Skeetah mows and weeds the Church graveyard to earn money for dog food and invests his time taking care of China. If the litter remains healthy, he hopes to sell the puppies, which in turn pays for Randall's basketball camp. The family's financial insecurity further deteriorates when the litter's subsistence is jeopardized due to

China's injury. Ward's construction of the series of interconnected events that determine the siblings' future depicts the inherent precarity of the family vis-à-vis the community. Through this episode, Ward reinstates the need for access to governmental institutions that support the African American community's welfare.

As Ward portrays, there is a scramble for survival in the Batiste household. The lack of opportunities to find a stable income affects the siblings and their day-to-day lives. Research reveals that "African American males coming of age in urban low-income communities are faced with the challenge of distressed communities, limited job and recreational opportunities, and public school systems that are underfunded and too often fail to adequately prepare students" (Hunter 430). Similar to Joshu and Christophe, Skeetah and his group of friends in the neighborhood are out of jobs, and they find odd jobs to support their families. They engage in precarious work categorized as "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky" (Millar 3). However, his efforts at pushing back precarity are evident in his attempts to find income sources to financially and emotionally support his sibling during turbulent times. Through these performative acts, he aspires to build a familial structure and thereby counter innumerable narratives of African American men resorting to detrimental ways of coping with structural abuse. His symbolic gesture of killing a sick puppy to protect the rest of the litter translates as an individual's desperate attempt to protect the vulnerable African Americans at any cost. His attempts to construct a safe environment for the litter to thrive can be read as a constructive rebellion against the structures governing his life and also his means to escape from the immediate reality (Mendes and Lau). In the climactic chapter, while trying to keep Esch safe from the raging storm and flood, Skeetah loses China. This incident wounds Skeetah more than the havoc caused by the hurricane, and he decides to stay in the Pit, in the aftermath of Katrina, waiting for China to return.

While recounting the events surrounding the storm, Esch notes that "Before a hurricane, the animals that can, leave" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 34). However, Ward's novel unravels the lives of animals who cannot leave but spend "the entire summer pointing out the safest place in the house to crouch" (34). Due to the apparent lack of support and intervention from the State, Batiste spends time preparing the house for the looming hurricane for most of the novel. He is driven by the motive that "We make do with what we got" (149) and employs the children to bring supplies to keep them alive during the hurricane. The people of Bois do not have faith in the press, as the mainstream media reinstates stereotypes about the community to feed the public imagination. Esch narrates the State's marginalization of their lives during the hurricane and the delayed and impractical warnings they were given. She recounts, "The battery-operated radio told us nothing practical" (165). As the family waits for the hurricane to subside, Esch recalls the words recited by a mechanical voice, "Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow… There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die*" (165). Nobody comes to rescue the family in the devastating storm that destroys their house. By unflinchingly capturing the family's survival, Ward exposes the disaster of systemic racism evidenced in the aftermath of Katrina.

Christopher Llyod iterates, "Black southern life in the wake of the storm, as in memory, was precarious and vulnerable" (246). As a nation, America fails to acknowledge the Black communities, and during calamities, they are left to die at the wrath of nature. Upon visiting the sites destroyed by the storm, Esch collects shreds of glass from the debris that she plans to hang above her bed. She ponders that it will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the "murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive" (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 255). This statement evokes Christina Sharpe's meditations on the "unrelenting violence that has been integral" (Erevelles 182) to Black lives since slavery. What Esch and her family survive is a natural calamity aggravated by the existing disparity of resources rooted in systemic racism.

Butler argues, "Political orders, including economic and social institutions, are to some extent designed to address those very needs, not only to make sure that housing and food are available but that populations have the means available by which life can be secured" (Butler, "Performativity, Precarity" 2). The nation's denial of the humanity of Black folks during the hurricane exposed the disastrous result of slow violence and the magnitude of the federal government's failure to acknowledge the disaster.

Through *Salvage the Bones,* from its onset, Ward portrays how such social institutions fail to address those very needs and create perpetually precarious communities. The novel presents the excruciating reality that no official authorities reach Bois to save the stranded family, and the young adults find support in each other. Ward concludes her novel when Esch emerges powerful and acknowledges her strength after having survived the hurricane and found comfort in the community. She has no choice but to accept her "uphill climb" (Hall 486). Devoid of the safety nets of social structures, her resilience stems from extreme and political precarity. As Ward notes that in her first novel, she tried to protect characters from "what was happening to young Black people I [she] knew in South." However, in *Salvage* she portrays the unedited reality of young Black lives, stranded, abandoned, unaided, dead and unburied, occupying the sidewalks and, once again, the margins of a nation's history.

3.4 The crisis of Black childhood in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Sing, Unburied, Sing is a 2017 novel that won Ward her second National Book Award, endowing her as the first woman in American history to win the award twice. In *Sing*, Ward amalgamates the protagonist's coming-of-age with a political discourse addressing the socio-economic effects of racism that neglect Black people in the South. The novel centers around Jojo, a thirteen-year-old mixed-race boy born into a dysfunctional family that includes his Black grandparents, Mom and Pop, toddler sister Kayla, and his mother, Leonie, who grapples with addiction. Ward employs the travel narrative trope, unfolding episodes of past and present as

the central characters travel to Mississippi State Penitentiary, infamously known as the Parchman prison, to receive Jojo's father, Michael.

Despite Pop's apprehensions, Lenoie travels with her co-worker turned friend, Misty, Jojo and Kayla in a desperate attempt to reunite her family. Ward introduces multiple narratives of Jojo, Leonie, and Richie, the ghost of a twelve-year-old boy who suffered incarceration and subsequent gruesome death in Parchman. While the family returns home from Parchman, Richie's ghost joins them to meet Pop, who guarded him during their time at the penitentiary. The spectral Richie is pivotal in Jojo's discovery of the family's traumatic history of racial injustice. Ward weaves a series of such harrowing events condoned by the persistent systemic racism as the novel outlines the ancestry of a thriving agrarian family in the South.

As the novel opens, Jojo prepares to watch Pop slaughter a goat to celebrate his thirteenth birthday, saying, "I like to think I know what death is" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 1). The vulnerability of being born as a Black child in the South equips Jojo for his looming death. This platform also channels the toxic narratives of masculinity that require Black children to toughen up. Consequently, Jojo appears hyper-vigilant whether he is watching the slaughter or when he is out shopping in Walmart. Jojo is born into a history of injustice; therefore, he is "harder pressed" (Ward, *Men We Reaped* 52) to be a man. He feels unseen by his parents and therefore yearns for their affection. On the other hand, his mother's addiction results from her denial of the family's tragic past, and the subsequent trauma prevents her from building an emotional connection with the children. Consequently, Jojo models himself after his maternal grandfather Pop, who feeds him with machoistic narratives, preparing him to survive as a Black man in the South.

The existing discourses on Black boyhood and young adulthood agree that America has excluded Black children, who "may be perceived as innocent only until deemed suspicious" (Goff et al. 541). Writers and scholars of Black studies admit that the white gaze demonizes

Black young adults and labels them as a threat. Approaching childhood through Blackness, Jacob Breslow reflects that Black childhood becomes the site where the discourse of antiblackness is materialized (*Ambivalent Childhoods* 30). To put it succinctly, Black children in America are doubly oppressed; primarily for their liminal temporal category of young adulthood and secondly, for the color of their skin. To substantiate it, the article resorts to a prominent instance in the novel where Ward delineates the subjection of Black young adults in present-day America. Recounting a frightening experience of police brutality, Jojo says, "But then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me. Kicking me. Yelling at me to get down in the grass. Cuffing me. Asking me, "What you got in your pocket, boy?"" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*170) Although this event would immensely traumatize Jojo for the rest of his life, it defines a rite of passage for him as a young Black man growing up in the South.

Adding to Jojo's anguish, Richie's subsequent reflection on his boyhood days in Parchman captures the vicious cycle of violence against young Black boys. Richie declares, "Some people look at boys our age and see somebody they can violate" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 180). Black young adults in America have a troubled relationship with the police as their existence and performances of childhood are misunderstood by authorities as abnormal for not abiding by the standards of innocence set by normative notions of childhood. The decision to handcuff a Black child instead of Misty, the adult white passenger stems from the stereotypical perception of the Black body as the "quintessence of *evil*," (Yancy xxxiv) and the perception of Misty's whiteness as "the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent, and the pure" (xxx). Extrapolating Butler's theory of gender performativity, Garlen argues that childhood is "an identity instituted through habitual acts" (4). The historically privileged notions of childhood like innocence, purity, and protection are not accessible to marginalized children, that in turn resulted in an exclusionary structure. Interestingly, American society does not extend protection

to Black children and often brands them as culprits. Their formative years are defined by such moments of unwanted violence supported by the normative codes of white supremacy.

As the novel explicates, friendship "across color lines" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 35) is not appreciated in Bois, and a power imbalance always exists even in intimate interactions. Although Leonie's only friend is Misty, a white woman, Leonie is cautious about their relationship. This fear extends across all generations in Jojo's family as their existence is anchored in the shared/ unshared grief of his uncle Given's murder by a white man. Given is Leonie's brother, who appears as a spectral presence in the novel each time she gets high, a simultaneously scary and comforting figment of her imagination. To further disrupt the dynamics, Jojo's father belongs to Given's murderer's family. At the age of seventeen, Given was shot by a white teammate in a fit of jealousy, which was later disguised as a "*Hunting accident*" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 50). Given was an enthusiastic football player aspiring to be recruited by the local colleges. Leonie recollects that "Once he told Pop his teammates, White and Black, were like brothers to him," to which Pop responds, "*They look at you and see difference, son. Don't matter what you see. It's about what they do*" (47 – 48). For the white gaze, Given's Black body is outside "the normative schemes of intelligibility" that denote "what will and will not be human" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 146). His Blackness marks his life as disposable, and the murder seems justifiable to a white peer.

While examining the portrayal of the traumatized community in *Sing,* Swartzfager reminds, "This incident [handcuffing Jojo] evokes the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012—and other killings of Black youth by police officers—such as the twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed by a police officer while playing with a toy gun in 2014" (320). Historically, the racial profiling of young adults in America hardly ever invited public disapproval. Young Black people are considered abhorrent resulting in racially motivated police violence. For the white counterparts in Ward's novel, Given's life is neither "livable" nor grievable" (Butler,

Precarious Life 146) and therefore does not matter whether he lives or dies. Drawing two parallel events that created traumatic rupture within the family, Ward portrays the permutations and combinations of the ongoing public disavowal of Black lives. Through the humiliation and torture meted out to the young adults, she evokes the brutal murder of Emmet Till, who was lynched and mutilated by the white mob in Mississippi. Although decades after the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter, young Black bodies continue to be seen as disposable.

To further her argument, Ward deconstructs the racialized criminal justice system through the depiction of Parchman prison by employing the perspectives of Richie and Pop. The prison is a looming reminder of slavery and the faulty justice system. Ward herself reminiscences her childhood nightmare saying, "I dreamed the country police had come to the house to take all my uncles and my father away to jail" (*Men We Reaped* 99). Previously a slave plantation, the prisoners of Parchman were forced to work in large cotton fields and made to live in inhuman conditions, suffering shackles and starvation. Historians record that "it resembled an antebellum plantation with convicts in place of slaves. Both systems used captive labor to grow the same crops in identical ways" (Oshinsky). Through testimonies and records, the study reiterates that the prison generated worse circumstances than slavery (Oshinsky). Black young adults aged twelve or fifteen were arrested for petty crimes and forced to work on the farm. At the age of twelve, Richie was sentenced to three years for stealing food for his starving siblings. Pop was fifteen when he was imprisoned for harboring a fugitive. Such young adults are often monitored by ruthless gunmen who treat them like "*plowing horse*" or a "*hunting dog*" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 22). Richie believes that Jojo is naïve and distant to the past lives of his people, as he notes, "When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I knew that metal shackles could grow into skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt" (185). Both Pop and Richie tell Jojo about the torture at Parchman and how "*That was no place for hope*" (139). The justice system was unfair, where Black young adults were jailed for

stealing food; on the other hand, "a white man had to murder" (139) to be sentenced in Parchman.

Ward addresses the history of widespread lynching in the South through Richie, who haunts the Parchman premises, imploring salvation. Although Pop was young, he served as a father figure to Richie and was the only person to treat him with love and affection. In the initial chapters, Pop repeatedly recounts his young adulthood and the time spent in Parchman, talking in "circles," (248) but never shares what happened to Richie. Eventually, Richie coerces Jojo into prompting Pop to finish the story. These stories eventually become fundamental to Jojo's growth. Anna Hartnell observes that "the population of ghosts [Given and Richie] in Ward's novel constitutes the knowledge Jojo needs to survive" ("From Civil Rights to #BLM" 309). Pop ensures Jojo is old enough and recounts the violent annals that eventually led to Richie's death.

Ward weaves a narrative of familial kinship through Pop, who desperately strived to protect Richie from harsh punishments. He knew a boy like Richie could not survive a jailbreak. He reminisces that "He wasn't nothing but a boy, Jojo. They kill animals better than that" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 255). In a frantic attempt to save Richie from an angry mob that would ultimately lynch him, Pop stabs Richie to give him a kinder death. The watchdogs of Parchman later feeds on Richie's body. Since then, Pop has been living with immense guilt, fear, and trauma that he would share with the future generations. By recollecting the events in a cathartic mood, "Pop is finally able to release the trauma he has been holding since childhood" (Cohl 29). Moreover, Jojo's kindness and acceptance absolve him of his enduring guilt.

Through retelling a violent event, Ward depicts the precarity that encompasses the lives of Black people, forcing them into dire and desperate actions to save their loved ones from white mobs. Although Richie learns about the excruciating truth of his death, the story of Pop's attempt to protect him comforts Richie, and he decides to linger in Jojo's yard. As the novel

concludes, Ward brings in the ghosts of multitudes of people who were starved, lynched, murdered, raped, mutilated, skinned, and denied justice even in death. They all "perch like birds" (Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* 282) on the trees, looking for comfort. Being a part of the unpleasant events, Jojo recognizes the violent past of his ancestors, the untimely death of his uncle, the root cause of his mother's addiction and the burden of being young, poor and Black in the South.

The young adults in the novel (Richie, Given, and Jojo) are perceived as "pathological deviants" (Drake 448) by police, white friends, shop owners, and neighbors. The stories of Given and Jojo suggest, the "cultural contours of human at work" (Buter, *Precarious Life* 32) [here childhood] often dehumanize and dispossess Black children. The "ontological truncation of the Black body" (Yancy xiv) renders their lives "ungrievable" and leaves them "in a state of suspension between life and death" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 36). The constant over-policing and profiling further impede their self-perception, resulting in the internalization of their subjection. The children in Ward's novel must fight the narrative that demonizes them to claim their place in society. In Jojo's case, being prepared to face death and hiding his ineptness and fear are parts of his handbook to being a man in the South. As the events detailed in the novel depicts, precarity pervades Black children's lives. Butler notes, "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life . . .. It is already the unburied" (*Precarious Life* 34). By portraying children who are mutilated and murdered, Ward's novel encapsulates this statement by singing for the unburied.

3.5 Conclusion

By examining Black children's representation in the selected novels, the chapter expounds that the adverse experiences fuelled by systemic racism afflict Black childhoods in America. Through Joshua, Christophe, Jojo, Given, Richie, Esch and her brothers, Ward reconstructs Black childhoods which dwell outside the normative discourses of childhood. As depicted in

the novels, the narratives of anti-Blackness and deep-seated systemic racism curtail Black children's access to a just performance of childhood. Society induces precarious living conditions and stereotypical perceptions, driving Black children into unfortunate endings. By portraying childhood experiences that are deemed "incompatible with childhood" (Breslow, *Ambivalent Childhoods* 43), the selected novels depict Black children emerging resilient in the face of precarity that predisposes their lives. *Where the Line Bleeds* delineates the alarming economic precarity that renders Black children's lives insignificant. *Salvage the Bones* depicts resilience ensuing from precarity through the fifteen-year-old female protagonist, Esch. On the other hand, in *Sing*, Ward portrays how precarity molds the protagonist's childhood. As the chapter demonstrates, understanding Black childhoods through the lens of precarity exposes the history of racial injustice meted out to the community. The children in Ward's novels belong to the temporal category of the child, yet their bodies are weaponized and maimed. As overt and covert violence against Black bodies continue, it is vital to elucidate these visceral representations of childhoods amid the ongoing movements for Black dignity. At the current moment in history that presents the interconnected crises of climate disaster, racial injustice, and global pandemic, children deserve liveable futures irrespective of their ethnicity (Nxumalo, "Disrupting Anti-Blackness" 1193).

Chapter 4

Brown Girl Dreaming: a Black girl's microhistory of the 1960s

4.1 Introduction

"The people who look like me / keep fighting / and marching / and getting killed / so that today – / February 12, 1963 / and every day from this moment on, / brown children like me can grow up free" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 2). The inaugural poem of Jacquline Woodson's verse memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) is a testimony to a young Black girl's unwavering hope in adversity. Woodson strings together such endearing vignettes of her childhood in creating a unique memoir about growing up during the Civil Rights Movement era. As America's popular young adult fiction writer for three decades with her efforts in creating an equitable space for voicing diverse childhood experiences, she won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature by writing the aspirations of a Black girl into pages of history.

Having written works ranging from picture books, poetry, young adult fiction, and novels for adult audiences, she engages with a diverse readership through a conscious selection of themes, enabling conversations on sensitive topics. *Brown Girl Dreaming* tells the story of her family from young Jackie's perspective. The memoir is divided into five parts, each exploring distinct periods of her childhood. Woodson explores the varying degrees in which memories shape an individual. She explicates the blurred boundaries of personal memories, documented history, reality, and storytelling by employing free verse haikus as a storytelling strategy to unearth the anecdotes of her family. The present study attempts to read *Brown Girl Dreaming* as a record of a tangential microhistorical narrative contributing towards a Black cultural memory.

Woodson refers to herself as an activist who works to represent the realities and perspectives otherwise unrepresented in literature. Her strong presence in the literary landscape

of America has contributed to marking diversity in the arena of young adult literature. She confronts the prevailing white hetero-normative teleological narratives of American coming-of-age and establishes her style by writing non-normative representations of childhood (Dawson, "We Knew We Were Being Watched"). Consequently, Woodson is hailed for transforming the front of children's literature and inspiring numerous young Black writers to tell their truth (Chow). Her passion for writing stems from her inquisitiveness; she says, "I write to learn. I write because I have questions, not answers" (Watson). Woodson's strategy of representation is intricately connected to fostering empathy. She notes that as a young Black girl growing up in America, she had "more windows looking into the white world than mirrors of her own" (Derhak). Consequently, her praxis involves Rudine Bishop's theory of children's books as windows and mirrors. The windows and mirrors metaphors explore children's literature's role in teaching empathy. Windows provides insights into diverse people's lives while mirrors reflect the reader's own lives in the pages of a book ("An Invited Dialogue").

In 2020, Woodson received the Hans Christian Anderson Award for her "lasting contributions to children's literature" ("Hans Christian Anderson"). Her work has been endorsed by social movements engaging in anti-racist activism, such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks and Black Lives Matter reading circles. Moreover, Woodson's texts have been widely incorporated into the school curriculum for their carefully assorted themes. While some of her books are challenged for the content, Woodson does not forgo honest depictions of police brutality, racial profiling, systemic racism, and deportation. According to her, the reductionist adult point of view often frames her works into restricted narratives, making them "a vehicle of our own [adult] prejudices" (Watson), thus forbidding children's and young people's interpretations of her corpus.

As dialogues emerge toward building a sustainable environment for Black children's growth, a work like *Brown Girl Dreaming* opens avenues for many interpretations. Howard

interprets the text beyond its personal and political significance and instead focuses on the politics of form by employing the term "collage effect" (326). The study explores Woodson's employment of varied sources such as free verse haikus, photographs family documents and heirlooms. By focusing on the silences and the voice within the text, Lierop-Debrauwer analyzes the memoir as a political autobiography, addressing a diverse audience of adults and children. The article approaches the work as a "human rights narrative" and as a "narrative of personal growth" (104) inviting the reader to participate in "literary communication" (107). Research also elucidates the text as potential teaching material to initiate conversations on diversity while simultaneously serving literary experience (Bedard and Fuhrken). Studies also employ the memoir as a tool to interpret African American girls' ambitions (Turner and Griffin) through case studies.

Woodson believes in the role of young adults as social agents; hence, she makes her writing comprehensible to a young audience. By addressing significant themes related to race and sexuality, she recognizes the need to "ease the dialogue" (Bishop 32) on such topics by making it engaging for young adults. However, despite the constant presence of her works in the academic domain, critical inquiry into Woodson's body of work is sparse. Consequently, this chapter engages with *Brown Girl Dreaming* as a contextual work to her corpus embodying the politics of telling stories of marginalized people. The chapter argues that microhistory as the history from below is in tandem with the child's perspective that Woodson employs in *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Woodson's narrative self, Jackie, is a Black girl growing up in a family of four children. The memoir sifts through Jackie's perspectives as she tries to navigate her immediate surroundings. Despite being a marginalized demography, Black girls' impressions of society are seldom explored through frameworks grounded in history, microhistory.

4.2 Black microhistory, cultural memory, and childhood

"For much of American history," Stern notes that "those who were not straight, white, literate, property-owning, and male often did not generate sufficient records to enable modern historians to capture their lives on chapter in any significant detail" (129). Glimpses of Black people's life in various junctures of American history remain largely underexplored due to the limited institutional support. Consequently, African American cultural productions counter this unfortunate reality through a wide variety of ego documents in the form of memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and letters. These source materials function as tools to interject documented modes of history. In this context, Woodson, a Black woman, furnishes a record of her life, tracing her family's history back to seven generations. The methodology of microhistory enables researchers to interpret such captivating accounts of marginalized communities, women, Black people and children to draw broader conclusions about the social fabric of their lives.

Microhistory draws attention to seemingly inconsequential events, individuals, and communities to demonstrate their relationship with larger social scenarios. In certain instances, its controlled focus on marginal subjects remains unrealistic, resulting from the persistent lack of documented history of Black lives. Etcheson maintains that "African American history may be one of the last fields to receive a micro historical treatment" (392). However, a decade later, microhistorical investigations on African American schools of thought still need to be addressed. Consequently, this study attempts to adopt the methodology to contribute to the existing limited discourse on African American microhistory. Microhistory shares close connections with oral history, cultural history, memory studies, ethnography, and anthropology. Predicated on the afterlife of slavery, Black life narratives inevitably invite microhistorical perspectives of inquiry.

Microhistory emerged as a subject of academic interest through the contributions of Italian historians Giovanni Levi, Carlo Ginsberg, and Edoardo Grendi. The field of inquiry emerged as a response to interpret social scenarios that normative history failed to engage. However, microhistory not only functions as a response but also complements the narratives of normative history. It is regarded as the history from below, supplying epistemological evidence of marginalized individuals' everyday histories that engender obscure details and perspectives. Such microhistorical accounts manifest "the agency of ordinary people in the arena of 'everyday life,' which, examined in detail, forces a rethinking of major historical developments and reveals them to be contingent" (Gregory 102). Therefore, employing a microhistorical lens to read *Brown Girl Dreaming* opens up avenues to critically engage with watershed events in Black American history.

Illuminating the significance of literature, scholars of microhistory note that literary works complement microhistory by providing details that are not included in historical records (Robisheaux). Literary representations of individual lives often rely on microhistorical details contributing towards evocative descriptions of marginalized communities. A rich terrain such as African American literature, with its strong foundations in oral tradition, inevitably becomes a fertile node of microhistory. Moreover, as Cardell and Douglas remark, "Life stories have long offered a backbone to history, particularly in linking communities and in forging and recording experiences and identities" (1). Having grown up in a period she terms as the remnants of Jim Crow (Lehrer) and the Great Northward Migration, Woodson's life history becomes a nuanced record of the "fragmented and local nature of human experience" (Robisheaux 13) with its focus on the tumultuous American society and its reflections on the microcosm of family.

Woodson is driven by the need to tell the truth, and therefore, her writing is a response to the history of silencing of Black narratives. Her commitment to writing about Black people and their ordinary lives arises from growing up "in a time when my [her] ordinary life wasn't

represented" (Chow). Her memoir sifts through the narrative gaze of her younger self, who is observant and keen on bringing change in the world surrounding her. By tracing her lineage and preserving the memories of her family, Woodson is eager to understand herself "in the context of American history" ("Writing Worlds"). While acknowledging the privilege of tracing her family history, Woodson also prompts her readers to comprehend their individual histories ("Writing Worlds"). Woodson is intrigued by how history echoes in individual lives, a significant feature of microhistory. Microhistory underlines that the shift in the external world is often experienced through "personal networks or small scale interactions" (Robisheaux 13). Microhistorians note that reducing the scale of observation results in renewed "epistemological problems" (Robisheaux 20) and reveal concealed truths of people whose stories have been historically misrepresented. Conceding to the crux of microhistory, Woodson reduces the scale of observation by illustrating the lives of a primarily Southern Black family and their engagement with the repercussions of the period. Studies interpreting microhistory in terms of children's lives are meager. A few projects investigate the microhistory of children's participation in social movements (Keating). Sliwa scrutinizes Jewish childhood experiences in Krakow to understand the events surrounding the Holocaust (Sliwa). The work unpacks the everyday lives of children in ghettos, navigating the horrors of the Holocaust. Wroblewski analyses school essays of Polish children as records of microhistory featuring World War II. The existing literature suggests that any investigation of Black children's quotidian life is absent from academic discourse, thus opening avenues for scrutinising their experiences.

Microhistory paves the way for constructing and recontextualizing cultural memory. By documenting her family life in relation to larger political shifts in American society, Woodson contributes to creating a Black cultural memory. Amponsah theorizes Black cultural memory as a mediated process accentuated by storytelling, philosophical discourses, and cultural artifacts ("Towards a Black Cultural Memory"). Incorporating poetic storytelling, Woodson

explicates cultural memory through recollections on racism in the South, incarceration, and the Great Northward Migration. It reflects the ways in which racism is ingrained in the South and its effect on her life as a child growing up in a single-parent family. She relies on shared experiences and knowledge within the family and community to achieve the goal. Childhood studies scholar Kate Douglas notes that "minority memoirs become tools of cultural memory—challenging the dominant experiences of national identity" (11). This statement encapsulates the role of *Brown Girl Dreaming* in creating alternative interpretations of American history.

Woodson's preoccupation with memory work and literary activism should be interpreted with regard to the efforts of Black Lives Matter Movement. The movement's ethics resonate with numerous Black authors who published their memoirs to hold a mirror against the contemporary experiences of young Black people. Interestingly so, *Brown Girl Dreaming* was published in 2014 as Black Lives Matter demonstrations gained public acceptance. Black Lives Matter involves a reinspection of the collective amnesia and mnemonic practices. The movement has influenced how communities perceive their silenced histories. It responds to America's national memory that refuses to acknowledge the horrors of trans-Atlantic slavery and the ongoing victimization of its Black people and inspects the politics of memory. The movement promotes Black cultural memory, integrating experiences of oppression, resistance, and resilience in everyday discourses surrounding America. Consequently, the memoir embodies the spirit of the movement in initiating conversations on social injustice.

Woodson's contribution towards preserving Black cultural memory is also inherently related to the absence of memory. Erll argues that "Cultural memory entails remembering *and* forgetting" (238). As the memoir portrays, young Jackie navigates the absence of information and the forgetfulness of her family members. The lack of documented records on Black experiences further complicates Woodson's recollections. She notes, "Memories don't come back as straight narratives. They come in little bursts with white space all around them"

(Galanes). This white space further translates to the form she chooses to narrate her history, the free verse haikus. Moreover, Woodson leaves numerous fragments and gaps in the narrative for readers to interpret and construct meaning, thereby fostering an intimacy between the reader and writer (Howard, "Black Girlhood").

The intimacy is accentuated through narratives of childhood from a time when Black children's experiences were considered dispensable. Douglass argues that "autobiographies of childhood are products of, and in confrontation with cultural memory" (20) and that it is conceived by the shared recollections of the past. Woodson writes against the dominant Black narratives of childhood that often presented a deficit understanding. Instead, she employs her childhood to discuss agency and the lack thereof, hope, and history. Douglas reiterates that autobiographies of childhood are a way of "breaking silences (for example, about the family) that may have been enforced upon children during their infancy and youth" (30). Further, stories of childhood are a mode of imbricating self into history (Douglas), a duty that Woodson undertakes to position herself in American history. Considered as "members of subgroups of society" (Sliwa 3), investigations into Black children's lives and their unique experiences remain sparse. The racial construction of childhood continues to unfold in America, and Black and Brown children's experiences remain understudied and underrepresented. Their lack of agency and participation in the adult world often makes us overlook their historical perspectives and contributions. The subsequent sections of the chapter explore Woodson's memoir as a microhistorical record of the turbulent periods of American history.

4.3 The world of a brown girl

Brown Girl Dreaming focuses exclusively on Woodson's childhood. Through her narrated self, Jackie, Woodson follows her life as one of the four children of Mary Ann Woodson. The memoir explores her pre-teen years as the family navigates their life in multiple towns in America. Woodson's mother hailed from South Carolina, while her father belonged to Ohio.

Although she was born a century after slavery was abolished, the repercussions of racial segregation painted her childhood experiences. Woodson's father moved her mother to Ohio in an attempt to escape the rampant racism in the South. The troubled relationship between her parents soon resulted in a divorce when Woodson was nearly one, and consequently, the children grew up under the care of their maternal grandparents for an extended period. Woodson's mother eventually moved to New York in search of better job opportunities and living condition, transplanting the children again to unfamiliar surroundings. Although Woodson and her siblings remain at the receiving end of such decisions, they adapt to city life with tenacity. As she grows up, she gains awareness of the Civil Rights Movement, the far-left organization of Black Panthers, and emerging feminist movements. The memoir concludes as Woodson acclimates to her school, her friendship with Maria, her Puerto Rican neighbor, and her newfound passion for writing.

Oral histories of subaltern communities respond to excessive silencing of their voices; nevertheless, their personal memories play an active role in retellings (Kabalek). In preserving the orality of Black cultural compositions, Woodson rejects non-fictional prose, a common form of memoir. By choosing the form of free verse haikus, she embraces a counter-hegemonic methodology to narrate her life. Moreover, she notes that "I wrote in verse because that's how memory comes to us" (Flynn). In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson plots the politics of representation against her experiences of reading *Stevie* (1969) by John Steptoe and the power of witnessing people like her on the pages of a book. Consequently, Woodson presents a sensitive portrayal of her childhood experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and history. Her careful depictions of the child's perspectives can facilitate nuanced interpretation of Black childhoods in a historical context. By voicing the experiences of a Black girl child from the margins of society, Woodson exhibits her enduring determination as a child despite the anti-Black climate of the period.

As racial killings of Black children persisted, harbingers of numerous anti-racist movements held distinct opinions about the children's role in society. Invoking the Bible, Martin Luther King said, "A little child shall lead them," encouraging children's active participation in the Civil Rights Movement (King 155). At the same time, James Baldwin held on to the power of hope and love, despite his anguish. Despite their divergent approaches, "adults made wishful projections for their progeny's future" (King 155). Such wishful projections balanced the racist narratives with hope (Patton 3), an act materialized in Woodson's memoir. Amponsah notes that "Black people's engagement with memory involves much more than trauma, suffering, and oppression" (32). It exhibits futuristic and survivalist notions rooted in resistance. Adhering to this statement, Woodson's memoir envisions a positive outlook toward her future. She also highlights the significance of other people's memories in contextualising her life in the history of America. Researchers of microhistory such as Ginsberg, Poni and Szijártó identify its main features as the "investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object most often a single event, or a village community, a group of families, even a person," and its undue focus on the individual agency (Robisheaux 9). Moreover, scholars argue that the study of the exceptional normal forces one to gauge the normative understandings of the working of the world (Robisheaux).

Microhistorians are interested in "Social groups normally dismissed by historians as 'uninteresting' or 'unapproachable'" (Magnusson 133). In this context, Woodson positions her racially marginalized family in the socio-political context of America. However, her investigation often underscores the confusion of a child. The memoir opens with her birth as the third child of Mary Ann and Jack Woodson. She writes her infancy into the persisting segregation, as she notes, "I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital / Columbus, Ohio, / USA – / a country caught / between Black and White" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 1). Further, she iterates the fact that her great-great-grandparents owned and worked "unfree" and

"unpaid" (1). She exhibits a heightened awareness of the period by stating that despite emancipation, people are not free, and "the South explodes" (1), indicating the Civil Rights Movement and the political turmoil of the period. She alludes to Martin Luther King Jr's march on Washington in 1963 for jobs and freedom, a significant Civil Rights demonstration. Malcolm X's revolutionary speeches to organize Black people against years of segregation. She comments on Rosa Parks' contributions to igniting the Civil Rights Movement and James Baldwin's relentless writings on the African American experience. Woodson highlights Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old girl's entry into "an all-white school" (4) in Louisiana. She marvels at the demonstrations all over America and ponders the path she might choose to "change the world" (7). Her quest to be a part of the Civil Rights Movement encourages young Jackie to take up writing.

Woodson boldly asserts that her father's family can trace their history back to Thomas Woodson, the son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings. Thomas Woodson played a pivotal role in the Underground Railroad and supporting fugitive slaves. Their family consists of successful individuals who became doctors, lawyers, war veterans, and teachers. While tracing her paternal lineage, Jackie also finds a resemblance with the family's elders by combing through family photographs. She reinstates that her mother instills within her to remember the history of Willliam Woodson, an ancestor who was the first Black boy in an all-white school. "*You'll face this in your life someday*, / my mother will tell us / over and over again. / *A moment when you walk into a room and* / *no one there is like you*. / *It'll be scary sometimes. But think of William Woodson* / *and you'll be all right*" (14). Examining her family's history, Woodson situates her life in relation to history, a recurrent theme explored in the memoir.

By predicating her life on the memories of others, Woodson shows that her "identity is built on reclaimed or inherited memory" (Creet 75). Exploring the often-contradictory inherited memory, the memoir maintains the inherent ambiguity of a microhistorical account. While one

may employ such an ego document to understand the social structure, it inevitably harbors ambiguities regarding its presentation of facts. Woodson provides multiple contradictory narratives about the time of her birth. The lack of proper documentation of her time of birth later confuses her. Her mother, father, and grandmother all have conflicting narratives about her time of birth. Her mother believes she was born in the "late afternoon" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 17), whereas her father recollects that she was born at night. Contradictory to both her parents' memory, her grandmother remembers Jackie being "born in the morning" (17). Woodson expresses her disappointment over the lack of clarity "amid other people's bad memory" (18). Piecing together memories of her family members, Woodson explores a time when she was an infant. She notes that her mother moved with the two toddlers and baby Jackie to the back of the bus as they traveled to South Carolina each winter. She coaches the children to "*Sit up straight*" (30) and not to look white people in the eye. Her mother chooses her battle wisely and decides not to be concerned over segregation while she travels with the children. To protect her children, she coerces them to follow the politics of respectability, a "twentieth century black middle-class ideology" (Harris 33). It emerged as a set of self-correction practices meant to "uplift the race" to secure social recognition. It has now metamorphosed into a "governing philosophy that centers on managing the behavior of black people" (33). The yardsticks of respectability often victimize Black youths and curtail their socialization.

The New York Times review of *Brown Girl Dreaming* criticizes the title for "it seems to confine the book in too narrow a box" and expresses concern over "limiting its audience" (Chambers). This chapter contradicts the view by highlighting the facet of microhistory that focuses on the scale of analysis. By limiting the scope of analysis, Woodson pinpoints a singular Brown girl and her dreams. The smaller scale of observation reveals more about a Black family's journey in the 20th century. Moreover, the reduction of scale discloses the aftermath of social movements of the period. As Renders and de Haan note, "reduction in scale brings

someone into focus not just as politician or artist, but equally as the resident of a village or the member of an extended family" (6). Analysing a subject from a reduced scale also enables microhistorical research to conclude broader social structures. Scaling down the focus of analysis, marginalized experiences such as that of a Black girl child are illuminated, thereby aiding Woodson's project of representation.

Microhistory identifies individual agency and thus refuses to perceive people as mere statistical accounts. Microhistorians believe that "large-scale studies often lose sight of agency" (Robisheaux 13), therefore they are engaged in inspecting agency of their subjects. The focus on agency "provides for a unique but essential vantage point" in contextualising lives that are not investigated by normative historiography (Mierau and de Haan 5). This translates to Jackie's perspective that Woodson employs in the memoir. As a child on the periphery of family decisions, Jackie cannot make sense of her parents' divorce and the eventual move to South Carolina. Nevertheless, she quickly adapts to life with her grandparents. Despite her marginal position, she is observant of the family dynamics. Although Jackie's grandfather Gunnar works in the press as a foreman, the white people disrespect him. On the other hand, her grandmother has to work as a domestic help to support the family. Woodson notes, "When she returns in the evening, her hands ashen from washing other people's clothes / . . . her ankles swollen from standing all day" (*Brown Girl Dreaming* 56). The children care for their grandmother each day when she returns from work. As iterated in the previous chapters, studies show that "Black children are also taught responsibility in the home and are more integrated into household activities than White children are, because they perform more domestic and child care work" (S. Hill 497). Children from low-income families are often required to take up adult responsibilities as the families lack social support meant for their well-being, a case that Ward also discusses in her memoir.

Jackie learns about the Civil Rights movement through the stories her grandfather narrates. He explains the reason behind marches "all over the South" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 72) and the history of slavery, emancipation, and segregation. Through his recollections of personal experiences, he creates awareness about the deep-seated segregation in the South. Moreover, the children collect information through the radio, and travel to local towns to witness peaceful demonstrations. Studies contend that racial socialization is a significant part of African American parenting (S. Hill). African American families engage children in countering "pervasive, destructive stereotypes and myths about Black people" (S. Hill 498). Gunnar inculcates racial pride in his grandchildren and reiterates the significance of social movements through bedtime stories. He empowers them about their role as future makers contributing towards a better tomorrow.

The aftermath of segregation is; however, pervasive in the South. Jackie experiences racism as the shop owners follow them around or when she notices "white only" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 92) signs that are painted over. She recollects schools being burned as the students marched in Civil Rights demonstrations. They witness their mother participating in Civil Rights demonstrations and relatives attending training programs for protests. Moreover, her grandmother continues to move to the back of the bus. Although Jackie retorts that they pay the same price for a ticket as whites, her grandmother says, "Easier to stay where you belong" (237). She notices Black people traveling sitting at the front of the bus and aspires to bring forth change. Her grandfather reiterates that by being Black in the South, they are intrinsically part of the movement. He says, "*But be ready to die . . . / for what is right*" (237). Woodson notes, "So there's a war going on in South Carolina / and even as we play / and plant and preach and sleep, we are part of it" (74). Although the children cannot fathom an abstract concept like death, they try to make sense of the events.

Woodson believes that "part of not letting history repeat itself is remembering history" (Sabatier). Consequently, she discusses her family's experience of the Great Migration. Jackie notes, "We watch them catch buses in the evening, / the black shadows of their backs / the last we see of them" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 93). The mass exodus of Black people towards the Northern parts of America enabled people to leave oppressive conditions and the lousy economy of the South. Researchers note, "Historically, the southern economy had offered few opportunities for African Americans" (Tolnay 1214). Using "their networks of families and friends," Black people learnt about amenities in the North, propelling them to migrate to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Moreover, studies show that Black children were less likely to live with their mothers during the period (Tolnay), as in the case of Woodson. Her mother left for New York in search of better opportunities, leaving the kids under the care of their grandparents, promising to move them soon. Moreover, research says that Black women had "their own gender-specific reason" to immigrate (Trotter 32). Through such a displacement from the South, she sought to end their "Southern subservient days" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 69) and find better opportunities in New York.

When her mother returns from New York, she brings along Jackie's "new baby brother" (148). As the youngest child who is outside the agential framework, Jackie despises the baby and is clueless about his origins. Once again, the family shifts to New York, leaving South Carolina behind. Young Jackie fantasizes about city life, fabricating the stories she hears from the people around her. She notes, "They say the City is a place where diamonds speckle the sidewalk. / Money falls from the sky" (93). Eventually, when the children are moved to New York, their expectations are unmet. She describes the dingy house they could afford, the collapsed ceiling, and the paint peeling off the wall. She says, "Maybe it's another New York City / the southerners talk about. // Here there is only grey rock, cold/ and treeless as a bad dream. / Who could love this place" (13). However, despite the initial disdain, the children made

peace with the place, and New York functioned as a launching pad for Woodson and her siblings. Once settled in New York, they travel to South Carolina each summer. In between the back-and-forth moves, Jackie cannot make sense of the idea of home. She notes, "Our feet are beginning to belong in two different worlds" (194) capturing her complex sense of belonging.

Employing a microhistorical lens provides "a path to understanding other ways of living and being" (Robisheaux 13). Extrapolating this statement, the book also captures her family's distinct and complex choices of faith, and it functions as an opportunity to explore children's agency and the lack thereof. Literary representations have rarely explored the group of Jehovah's Witnesses in African American communities. Although the children were brought up by their mother under the premise that they are free to choose their faith upon growing up, when she leaves for New York, Jackie's grandmother "pulls us [them] further into religion" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 112). Her grandmother reinstates her power over the children as she says, "*In my house. . . you will do as I do*" (112). As Jehovah's Witnesses, their lives are centered around the faith and thus the children are forced to promote it.

Moreover, the children had little choice but to obey their grandmother's rules. They are obligated to attend the Bible study on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights at the Ministry School, with the promise of growing up to become preachers someday. Saturday morning, they are mandated to knock on every door in the neighborhood preaching about Armageddon[5] with copies of 'Watchover and Awake', an illustrated religious magazine. Sunday, again, they attended classes on 'Watchover and Awake' at the Kingdom Hall. In an interview, Woodson recollects that she was scared of Armageddon as a child, in the same way kids worry about "the wrath of a parent" (Gross), suggesting the authoritative role of religion in children's lives.

[5] Jehovas Witnesses believe that Armageddon is an apocalyptic battle between forces of Satan and God

As a part of their beliefs, they were not allowed to pledge allegiance to anything other than the Bible or celebrate birthdays and holidays like the rest of their classmates. As children, Jackie and her friends yearned to fit in. She notes, "We will never taste the sweetness of a classroom birthday cupcake" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 164). Although she left the belief system as a teenager, Woodson later recollects that she enjoyed knocking on the doors and talking about her faith. She says that in those moments, while she was away from adult supervision allowed her to be herself and creative. She also acknowledges the time spent in Kingdom Hall fuelling her creative potential by helping her weave stories out of boredom. Even after moving them to New York, she continued participating in the Kingdom Hall activities.

Microhistorians agree that the domain "search[es] for answers to large questions in small places" (Robisheaux 9). Woodson tackles this aspect of microhistory by writing about Bushwick, her neighborhood in Brooklyn. She grew up in Bushwick, a neighborhood with primarily Black and Latina populations. She has said on multiple platforms that the narratives surrounding Brooklyn are flat and expresses her frustrations over the lack of acknowledgment of the city's history. Resultingly, Woodson brings forth the untold histories of Bushwick and contextualizes its past. Jackie is taught in the class about various settlers in Bushwick from Germany, Italy, and the Dominican Republic before white people populated it. She reinstates that it was discovered by Franciscus, a former slave who bought his freedom (Davenport). Despite the history of the place, she recollects with terror that in Bushwick there are areas that a Black person cannot cross. By writing lesser-known facts about her childhood neighborhood, Woodson acknowledges the rich past of Bushwick.

Jackie comes to learn about the widespread incarceration of Black youths through her uncle Robert's life. He is the only person to encourage Jackie's storytelling. His visits to Bushwick stop when he is arrested, sent to Riker's Island prison, and eventually to Dannemora. Jackie pieces together the fact that something unfortunate happened to her uncle, but she resorts

to lying to her friend that he "moved upstate" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 266). The children fear the prison compound and the frisking they undergo each time they meet their uncle. Having understood the fate of a Black man in America, young Jackie shows concern for her brothers, as she notes, "as quickly as THAT! He can become a number" (271). Her uncle is no longer the joyful person he used to be once. She notices how the carceral system has changed his demeanor. As a child, there is more that Jackie cannot deduce. For example, she is also confused about the absence of her father. When asked, she lies about him to escape the embarrassment. She fabricates multiple tales that say her father died or sometimes that he is going to visit them soon. Moreover, Jackie likes to make up stories. Research notes that children tend to tell lies when they readjust to new social circumstances and navigate undesirable environments (Talwar and Crossman). Her "lies tend to be simple and self-protective, used to avoid imminent punishment or to obtain a reward, motivated by a desire for material or social benefit" (Talwar and Crossman). However, Jackie's mother who could not encourage Jackie's creative spirits often threatened her not to write about their family or that "If you lie, one day you'll steal" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 176). Jackie feels utterly confused and misunderstood by her mother's accusations.

Another intriguing detail is Woodson's difference in her learning and reading abilities. Jackie cannot grasp her lesson as quickly as her sister. Therefore, she exerts her agency through imagination. She says, "It's easier to make up stories than it is to write them down" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 217). Citing research on children's autoethnography, Hohti notes that children's classroom documents "can be seen as embedded in larger cultural narratives" (9). They converge to form "small stories" that harbour the "intensity of daily life in the classroom through fragmented, quickly changing and sometimes overlapping events" (Hohti 9). Despite her lack of agency in society as Black girl child, she plays an active role in shaping her everyday life through her small stories. Jackie's first possession was a composition notebook that she

received, and the adults do not believe her when she says she is writing a book. Moreover, Jackie's mother forbids her from writing about their family. For her vacation projects that asked the children to write about their summer vacation, Jackie wrote about her imaginary vacation with her family on Long Island Beach. Jackie writes, "in my stories, our family is regular as air, two boys, two girls, sometimes a dog" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 295). She tries to fit into the normative assumptions of the family by bringing in an imaginary stepfather, a church instead of Kingdom Hall, a car, and new dresses.

The final part of the memoir is titled "Ready to Change the World" (309), where Jackie grows fond of her writing and gains the confidence to show it to the world, although they hardly encourage her. Jackie's teacher, Miss Vivo, tells her for the first time that Jacke is a writer and encourages her to write more. Jackie finally receives the validation she deserves for her writing. She learns about feminism from Miss Vivo who introduce the students to Angela Davis. Jackie and Maria watch Angela Davis's interviews and integrate the period's spirit into their games. They imitate Davis with their raised fists walking through the streets. Moreover, her mother educates her about the Black Panthers and their contributions to Black children in California. Consequently, Jackie's dreams to go to California and join the Black Panthers. The memoir ends as the Civil Rights Movement ignites a passion in Jackie to join the movement through her writing and work towards ensuring a dignified life.

4.4 Conclusion

Microhistory answers larger historical questions through multiple methods, finding answers in odd details by selecting exceptional documents. Creet reiterates that the work of examining a singular person's history is to draw an allegory of culture as a whole (2014). Concurrently, Woodson frames the period's history from a personal perspective and underlines that the histories of marginalized communities are couched in individual memories. By narrating her life in a period when the anxieties and aspirations of a Black child are not documented, the

memoir provides a regional and localized take on the historical events of the 1960s. Etcheson notes that microhistory reveals "how a life, often a very ordinary one, defied societal patterns or lived up to them in unexpected ways" (393). This statement translates to Jackie's hope to become a writer and contribute towards social transformation. Although Jacquie exists on the margins of society as a Black girl at the receiving end of social changes, she dares to dream and work towards achieving it. As the reality of Black girls continues to remain unexplored, Woodson presents windows and mirrors to multifaceted experiences that shape the contours of Black girlhood in America. She concludes the memoir by situating her identity as a product of memory and history (Creet). In the author's note at the end of the memoir, Woodson notes, "I am often asked if I had a hard life growing up. . . I think my life was at once ordinary and amazing" (*Brown Girl Dreaming* 325). This statement encapsulates the idea of microhistory as the study of exceptional normal (Robisheaux) that inspires Woodson to illuminate her ordinary and amazing life.

Chapter 5

Witnessing trauma: childhood across ages in Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*, *Harbor Me*, and *Red at the Bone*

5.1 Introduction

Historical trends suggest that the Black community's collective susceptibility to oppression exposes them to social injury and eventuated annihilation. As explored in the second chapter, literature is indispensable in reframing the community's contexts through narrativizing their lived reality. African American Young Adult Literature is a substantial genre that explores themes of race, history, loss, trauma, and resilience through realistic and futuristic perspectives. The genre continues to battle the enormous presence of white ideologies of self-actualization and orient itself in the broader domain of Young Adult literature (Wilson). Works of popular Black authors such as Jacqueline Woodson, Angie Thomas, Colston Whitehead, Renee Watson, and Ta-Nehisi Coates oppose the stereotypical representation of Black children as older and less innocent than their white counterparts (Goff et al., "Essence of Innocence"). They engage with young audiences in creating awareness about race and resulting unjust structures, thereby participating in children's racial socialization. With a career that spans over three decades, Jacqueline Woodson belongs to a category of young adult writers who have revolutionized the genre through her commitment to social justice. Her oeuvre emerges from the responsibility to bear witness to persistent atrocities against Black communities. Consequently, this chapter investigates Woodson's selected novels to scrutinize the role of children as witnesses of traumatic ruptures inside and outside the locus of family.

As a writer who represents the paradigmatic shift in narratives of Black childhood, Woodson's copious body of work is an excellent choice to interpret childhood across decades.

Her colleagues agree that "Woodson has spent her career challenging the industry to help children understand themselves and their surroundings" (Chow). Narratives of coming-of-age have historically promoted a white hero's idea of a heteronormative world. In opposing this trend, Woodson's protagonists accentuate American society's structural disadvantages. To situate themselves in the cultural context of their surroundings, Woodson tasks her protagonist with healing the wounds of the past. Her young protagonists traverse unfavorable circumstances with resilience rooted in the communal history of Black people. She delineates Black children's experiences with varied degrees of trauma and breathes life into their childhoods otherwise trapped in "a muzzle of silence" (Pastourmatzi 199).

African American literature has historically captured the essence of bearing witness to annihilation. Moreover, narratives of Black bearing witness "provides proof of the many eras of anti-black racism, in all of its perverse mutations" (Richardson xiii). However, there exists a condemnable absence of trauma studies dedicated to the aftermath of slavery. Graff reminds that "Refusal to remember, denial, disassociation, and disavowal are all echoed in the absence of slavery from the trauma literature" (183). While discourses on trauma and witnessing burgeoned in the field of Holocaust research, African American literature equally invites interpretation of trauma in the aftermath of slavery. Moreover, research on the impact of trauma is a relatively young domain, and Black children's perspectives remain largely underexplored. In this context, the chapter amalgamates significant discourses on trauma and its ramifications with the often-neglected demography of Black children. The chapter also extends its perimeters to incorporate aspects of inevitable resilience and reconciliation stemming from witnessing trauma.

The chapter explicates Woodson's engagement with witnessing trauma by drawing on Michael G. Levine's theorization of belated witnessing. Jacqueline Woodson's corpus offers a fertile field to explore the literary representation of trauma and memory in the life of Black

communities. As discussed in the previous chapter, Woodson perceives memory as inherently elusive with gaps around it, which she calls "white space" (Galanes). Concurrent with this idea, Michael G. Levine elaborates the complexity of witnessing trauma in *Belated Witness: Literature, Testimony and the Question of Holocaust Survival* (2006). The chapter explores the liminal space of childhood concurrent with Woodson's idea of white space from the theoretical framework of Levine's belated witness. Levine dissects Art Spigelman's graphic novel *MAUS* (1986) to elucidate the implications of witnessing Holocaust trauma. He interprets the gutter space between the comic panels as a locus where belated witnessing of trauma occurs. Such a liminal space (analogous to Woodson's white space) initiates the reader or witness to indulge in radical ways of storytelling and possible reparation for the event. The study shows that belated witnesses include survivors, descendants, historiographers, journalists, and readers who consciously or passively participate in the narratives. Levine concludes by commenting on the co-responsibility of the belated witness in reshaping such "traumatic memories into social acts" (7). He explores the role of writers in working through the trauma and creating narratives of social change.

Woodson's novels are recognized for diversifying children's literature, inviting considerable research on early childhood education. Researchers explicate the significance of Woodson's body of work as reimagining the white canon, in the context of social movements such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks. As cited in the previous chapter, research papers also survey the form in which Woodson conceived her memoir to challenge the traditional modes of coming-of-age narratives. Moreover, Woodson's focus on the politics of representation also becomes a source of critical engagement. Further, scholars inspect Woodson's works as inspirational texts from the vantage point of children's literature as windows and mirrors (Gruce; Howard, "Black Girlhood" and "Collage, Confession"; Barnwell; Bedard and Fuhrken). Studies explore the social construction of Black girlhood in *Another Brooklyn* and problematize

the protagonist's girlhood as a site where diverse notions of oppression manifest (Kinnunen). Research also studies the unreliability of memory and the loss of childhood in *Another Brooklyn* (Lapinska). Peacock examines *Another Brooklyn* (2016) as a critique of Brooklyn gentrification. Woodson's works inevitably appear in studies on queer children's identities and introducing social justice to primary school children (Kavanagh et al.).

Transcending the scales of domestic novels, Woodson delineates conversations on race, generational wealth, the legacy of loss, trauma, memory, and sexuality. Her works are set in Brooklyn, therefore becoming inevitable records of the city's history. The selected novels *Another Brooklyn* (2016), *Harbor Me* (2018), and *Red at the Bone* (2019) are all set in Brooklyn in various periods of history. The subsequent sections of the chapter illustrate a detailed analysis of the novels to explore how one belatedly witnesses a troubled childhood, how children perform their role as belated witnesses, and what happens when childhood becomes a site of belated witnessing.

5.2 Belatedly witnessing a lost childhood in *Another Brooklyn*

Another Brooklyn (2016) is birthed from the author's journey to delineate "what it means to grow up girl in this country [America]" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 171), in which she attempts to capture "the slow-motion ferocity of the end of childhood" (171). Although *Another Brooklyn* is Woodson's "first adult novel in twenty-years" (Gonzales) she does not bid farewell to her inclination toward representing young adult characters. It portrays the story of a childhood in retrospect, thus situating the novel as a work of belated witnessing. The novel opens as the protagonist August returns to her hometown for her father's funeral. The journey stirs up uncomfortable memories of the past, and the plot thickens when August encounters her high school best friend Sylvia on the subway. The novel follows August's retrospection of her life in Brooklyn in the 1970s as a young Black girl navigating poverty, loss, dysfunctional family, and friendship. August and her brother are uprooted from Tennessee and planted in Brooklyn

by their emotionally absent father. The children believe that their mother will join them soon. However, that is not the reality.

Woodson's description of Brooklyn in the seventies is inspired by her experiences of growing up in Bushwick around the same period. Chaos erupts as drugs, crime, and unemployment were rampant during the period. While *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2013) discussed the Great Northward Migration that brought countless Black families to New York with the promise of a better life, *Another Brooklyn* delineates the family's tale in the backdrop of white flight. In response to New York's diversification in the period, many white families fled the city to more homogenous parts of the suburbs. In these socio-political circumstances, August navigates her new life without her mother. We learn that her mother becomes mentally unstable after her brother died in the Vietnam War. Her constant hallucinations and conversations with her dead brother drive August's father to move the kids away from her presence. Although August realizes that her mother committed suicide by drowning, she refuses to reconcile with the tragic reality.

For most of the initial days in Brooklyn, August and her brother spend time gazing out of the window, unattended by their father. Eventually, her father and brother devote their time to the "Nation of Islam," (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 2) while August finds solace in her friends group comprising Angela, Gigi, and Sylvia. Like August, her friends have also moved to Brooklyn from different places. In the absence of her mother, her friends function as a support system in her journey from childhood to young adulthood. However, the friends group split up in the aftermath of a series of events that started with Angela's mother's death and her eventual move to a foster care. On the other hand, Sylvia starts dating Jerome, August's ex-boyfriend, causing a rift between them. Despite the bitterness in the group Gigi retains her friendship with Sylvia and August. In a desperate attempt to unite the remaining friends, Gigi invites them for her play. However, they do not show up pushing her to depression and, she commits suicide.

August's life hence becomes surrounded by traumatic losses that she never processes due to the lack of a supportive environment and resources. She later recollects, "Death didn't frighten me. Not now. Not anymore" (Woodson 9). Eventually, August leaves Brooklyn to pursue college in Rhode Island and builds a life far away from her family.

The novel portrays August's metaphorical journey to her past through splintered memories imbricated in a literal journey to her father's apartment in Brooklyn. Levine identifies the belated sense of shock as a derivative of such journeys and labels it as a feature of witnessing one's troubled past (*Belated Witness*). The conversation between August and her brother is rare, occupied by silences and gaps suggesting the collective trauma of their past. Dawson notes that the novel functions as August's autobiography that progresses without chronology ("We Knew" 100). Although August initiated her ruminations on childhood, Sylvia's unexpected presence in the metro caught her off guard. Consequently, August jumps out of the subway before her station arrives, refusing to address the past. She notes, "the station and everything around me felt far away" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 12–13). Nevertheless, this unsettling encounter forces her to address some buried parts of her childhood. According to Brown, quoted in Hinrichsen, the traumatic experiences of minority groups often remain underexplored. They call for expanding scholarly understanding of trauma to incorporate insidious experiences and their ripple effect. Brown defines insidious trauma as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Hinrichsen 608). The trauma of Vietnam war that unjustly victimised Black people, the aftermath of Jim Crow laws combined with the political and economic unrest further accentuated by the unsafe environment took a toll on the adolescents growing up in the period. In this regard, the novel unpacks August negotiating the insidious trauma of growing up Black in Brooklyn.

Her father's emotional unavailability and her mother's struggle with mental health relate to the generational effects of trauma that later sediment in August. Moreover, as a young girl growing up without a mother, she is traumatized by death, abandonment, and the adultifying gaze that she encounters early in her life (Dawson, "We Knew"). Nonetheless, her father arranges for August to speak with Sister Sonja, a therapist cum member of the "Nation of Islam," (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 2) to help her process the grief. August meets her weekly for forty minutes trying to respond to Sister Sonja's question, ultimately failing to work through the trauma. Contemplating her attempts to talk to Sister Sonja, August notes, "Where words had once flowed easily, I was suddenly silent, breath snatched from me, replaced by a melancholy my family couldn't understand" (2). Throughout the novel, August subtly indicates that she is seeking her father's validation of her trauma, rather than a clinical circumstance driven by Sister Sonja's investigation. Moreover, August believed that it was too late to talk about it, thus nudging the reader towards the belatedness of trauma.

For a long time, August was in denial of her mother's death which Kasper and Levine identify as "temporal delay" (381) associated with belated witnessing. Throughout the novel, there are instances of delayed realizations, acceptance, and witnessing. August notes that her mother underwent a long labor, and her birth itself was delayed by two days; she says, "I started my way into the world two days before July ended but didn't arrive until August" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 17). Her delayed birth got her the name August. Further, to accentuate August's position, Woodson carefully employs the language of memory that harbors a "spectral grasp" (Levine 177). August frequently informs the listener/reader through a refrain that "This is memory" (*Woodson, Another Brooklyn* 16) to emphasize memory's fragmented yet powerful nature. Her narration exhibits her awareness and resentment towards revisiting her past. Research shows that when "loss is associated with cruelty and pain, then the survivor must relive not merely the suffering of a loved one but also her helplessness in the face of it"

(Byerman 29). For August, recollecting her memories means addressing the helplessness of an eight-year-old girl who yearned for her family's protection.

After their move to Brooklyn, August refused to accept the overwhelming presence of her past and her mother's tragic death. She rebels against it by building friendships with the girls, as her mother used to warn her against female friendships. She notes, "I was sure no ghost mothers existed in their past" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 35). Eventually, August learns that her friends are also struggling in their ways. However, the friendship provided them with safety and comfort that their families and parents could not offer. At home, August's brother is too young to understand the loss and bear witness to her grief, and her father is reluctant to listen. On the other hand, she is comfortable to unpack her loss with her friends, and in turn they open up about their troubled families. As young Black girls who exist in the margins of their families, their friendship provides them agency to vocalise their pain. She notes, "We opened our mouths and let the stories that had burned nearly to ash in our bellies finally lives outside of us" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 55). Levine notes that, by listening to the survivor, the belated witness "opens a space in which the impact of that testimony is given a chance to register as if for the first time" (21). August's friends enable her recollections of her early childhood in SweetGrove, Tennessee and in their willingness to listen to her trauma, they foster acceptance and empathy. By providing a non-judgemental space and listening to each other, their friendship becomes a site where their testimonies are born.

Throughout the novel, Woodson employs specific narrative techniques that reflect the belatedness of August's trauma, acknowledging Levine's idea of a "non-linear temporal structure of belatedness" (170). Her narration abruptly shifts from childhood memories to college days to her present and the family's time in Tennessee, seamlessly merging into a singular narrative. Moreover, the novel opens abruptly, indicating her fragmented and non-linear memories. The constant reminder that the narratives are memory-driven directs our

attention toward August's "unclaimed experience and elements of discontinuity" (Levine 106). Studying the authorial presence in trauma literature, Zeitlin notes, "Narrative chronology is often fractured and fragmented; there are abrupt shifts in direction, in both time and space, frequently punctuated by the narrators' tormented thoughts and sober reflection" (15). Underlining this statement, August punctuates her recollections through recurrent comparisons to burials and grief rituals she came across in her research.

Ballan reiterates that the belated witness "is a narrative figure, different to the survivor him or herself, who enables and supports testimony to trauma" (67). In the novel, August's father cannot be a belated witness to her testimony. She later describes him as a man "so deep in his grief" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 160), which impedes him from being present for her. The result is estrangement between the father and the daughter. The absence of conversation between the duo also suggests that he is also traumatized by the death. When August attempts to make a conversation about her mother indicating the urn that carries her ashes, her father avoids it. To conceal his emotional unavailability, he delegates the task of listening to Sister Sonja. Ballan notes that belated witness enables the survivor to tell their story, and although Sister Sonja tries to perform the role, August cannot form a relationship with the listener. Moreover, she asks August, "Who hasn't walked through a life of small tragedies" (2). Sister Sonja's attempts at listening to the testimony are rooted in her religious beliefs. However, it invalidates August's journey. Although Sister Sonja also fails to "serve in the capacity of belated witness" (Ballan 69), August finally talks to her about her mother's death.

As a young girl, August could not articulate her grief to Sister Sonja. However, as an anthropologist who specializes in bereavement, she is now able to verbalize her pain. She has learned the intricacies of Latin that capture her loss. She notes, "There was a time when I believed there was a loss that could not be defined, that language had not caught up to death's enormity. But it has" (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 147). Throughout her life, August

experienced her childhood as a passive bystander. The present journey to Brooklyn forces her to witness the past belatedly. Growing up, August noticed that the trauma hindered her from experiencing the moments at present. She says, "I knew I was lost inside the world, watching it and trying to understand why too often I felt like I was standing just beyond the frame–of everything" (95). This feeling of "standing beyond the frame" translates to the estrangement and isolation she experiences as a witness of trauma. However, in this literal and figurative journey, August inserts herself into the frame, becoming a belated witness to her childhood.

5.3 Children as belated witnesses in *Harbor Me*

Unlike the other two novels selected for this study, *Harbor Me* (2018) is written for middle-grade readers. Nevertheless, this novel also embraces the narrative structure that gives significance to memory, testimony, and listening. The novel opens abruptly as one of the central characters Haley is about to navigate a significant shift in her life. Despite her anxieties over the changes that await her, Haley is adequately prepared for what is ahead by a group of friends who support her by building a circle of empathy. As a novel meant for young adult readers, *Harbor Me* bypasses the perspectives of adult characters with the narrative gaze of children. Woodson deals with the young protagonists with uniqueness and complexity, thereby voicing contemporary themes of police brutality, deportation, incarceration, and immigration in the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The six children, Haley, Holly, Amari, Esteban, Ashton, and Tiago, are students at a Brooklyn public school who find learning challenging. Haley says, "our learning felt like a race we were losing while the other kids sped ahead" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 5). Consequently, their teacher, Ms. Laverne, assembles them in a classroom to talk to each other. Despite the awkwardness, the bond between the students grows, and they grow comfortable sharing their deepest shame and secrets. They learn the significance of listening, recording their testimonies, and the support they gather from fellow human beings.

Pastourmatzi notes that "one way to liberate the self from the burden of victimization is to transform traumatic experiences into public narratives and through fictionalized portraits to show that healing is possible even if memory remains corrosive" (221). This statement resonates with Woodson's motive in *Harbor Me.* In narrating their experiences with oppression, these children attempt to create a constructive way of bearing witness to trauma. Haley, the narrator of the novel, is a biracial girl whose mother passed away when she was three, and her father is in prison. She grows up in the care of her uncle. Her protective best friend Holly and her mother function as Haley's guardians. Esteban, who drives the narrative, is from the Dominican Republic, and his father is an undocumented laborer who has been deported recently. Amari is a Black boy trying to negotiate America's anti-Black climate. On the other hand, Tiago is a Puerto Rican boy and is unhappy with the treatment he receives from American society. Ashton is the only white boy in the group whom senior students bully. Ashton's opinions about race are naïve and rather harmful. However, the group provides a non-judgmental space for each other to discuss complex issues with their childhood wisdom.

In *Another Brooklyn* and *Harbor Me,* Woodson highlights the significance of spaces where survivor testimonies are heard. While bringing them together in "A Room To Talk" (Woodson, Harbor Me 2) (ARTT), where they are encouraged to share their thoughts without adult supervision, Ms. Laverne notes, "What I'm trying to do is give you the space to talk about the things kids talk about when no grown-ups are around" (16). The children get together every Friday for an hour to talk and their Friday sessions eventually prove to be a transformative space in their lives. Woodson encourages the repetitive quality of such testimonies and reiterates the significance of "listening to silences and unsaid things" (Wilcox) as the students vocalise their anxieties and apprehensions of growing up as a marginalized demography. As children of color belonging to various strata of society, their experiences are seldom shared in public domain. This forum, however, provides a space for the testimonies like August's friends group. By

incorporating newer themes of social significance, Woodson reinstates the importance of preserving testimonies. Haley requests her uncle to buy a recorder to record her friends' testimonies, thus conserving their anecdotes. Throughout the novel, Esteban's poignant narration that begins with the statement, "*We think they took my papi*" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 1) functions as a refrain, reminding the reader of the fragmented and repetitive nature of traumatic narratives. Establishing Woodson's affinity towards presenting splintered memories, the novel employs disjointed narratives by multiple narrators and the significance of preserving them.

Baackmann reiterates that "aesthetic and philosophical stylizations of children rob the child of an effective agency . . . More precisely, they relegate the child to a space that is both apolitical and asocial" (181). Opposing this trend, Woodson presents the children as representative members of different strata of American society who are affected by deep-seated systemic racism. The novel deconstructs problematic depictions of childhood as a site of innocence and vulnerability and, therefore, represents the contemporary experiences of children that "reflected their lives" (Wilcox). In giving voice to these marginalized groups of children, Woodson reframes their childhood as a product of their socio-cultural context (Graham). Instead of portraying them as adults in the making, these children are shown to navigate their everyday lives and redefine agency. In bringing together a diverse group of children and their varied understanding of their surroundings, Woodson deconstructs the often-homogenized representation of marginalized children.

Studying the epistemic injustice children face in the context of witnessing and testimony, Baumtrog and Peach note that "Children are often perceived to be less credible testifiers than adults" (213). They are considered amateur, and their truths are rarely credited due to their liminal position as vulnerable members of society. The credibility deficit that children encounter in the adult world is driven by age-related perspectives (Baumtrog and Preach). The study

illustrates a scenario where a Black man's opinions are not valued simply because of his race. Such a lack of credibility results from an identity prejudice. Extrapolating this to understand the position of children as testifiers, it is apparent that children face "epistemic injustice" (Baumtrog and Peach 213) that stems from an age-based lens. This is further accentuated in the case of a Black child who is often associated with negative stereotypes. In presenting these children from an agency-based lens, Woodson declares them as "competent witnesses to their lives" (Graham 1306) who are capable of presenting their testimonies.

Levine argues, "The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (5). Until Ms. Laverne brought them together in ARTT, they were isolated and lacked a listener to their testimonies. Haley describes their testimonies as "the stories we finally trusted each other enough to tell" (2). She says that once they are together, "what matters most is that we were heard" (2). Despite the comfort of their group, with much reluctance, Esteban opens up about his father's deportation. His "father works in a factory in Queens sealing video games in plastic" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 42). His family does not have access to the State institutions that could protect them, therefore leaving the family dispossessed and desolate. Esteban's testimony originates from the presence of earnest listeners. Haley, on the other hand, is traumatized by the loss of her mother and her father's subsequent imprisonment. Their trauma silences both Esteban and Haley. Consequently, Haley exhibits a heightened awareness of his situation when he first speaks about it. She expresses her familiarity with the absence of her parents, "*It won't always feel like the first day. It won't always feel this bad*" (9).

Ms. Laverne prompts the group to share their testimonies, saying, "*what's unfamiliar shouldn't be scary. And it shouldn't be avoided either*" (17). This statement suggests the significance of working through trauma and the role of testimonies. In convening this informal group of listeners, Woodson illustrates the significance of "eyewitness accounts" and

"storytelling" (Byerman 22). They indulge in difficult conversations on race and unpick each other's limited understanding of race, freedom, and power. Holly believes that they live in a post-racial society and their futures are secure. However, Amari contradicts her, saying that her economic privilege makes her rather myopic in terms of the intersectional identities created by race and class. He says, "*Can't even walk around with your hood on if you want*" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 51). He goes on to critique the respectability norms that Black children are forced to follow. Amari ponders on the 'Talk' his father gave him about the racial profiling of Black boys. He says, "*You can't be running around the playground with that water gun, for one. Or that Nerf gun, or that little light-up key-ring gun thing you got from your aunt last year*" (67). While talking about his own experiences, he alludes to the murder of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy who was shot for holding a toy gun. The group agrees that children should not be punished for being Black and critique the anti-black nature of childhood (Breslow, "Adolescent Citizenship").

In discerning the ongoing anti-Black climate of the period, the group listens to Ashton's opinions. Ashton is represented as a complex character whose lack of awareness of racial oppression locates him as an implicated witness. While Ashton is a victim of bullying, he is also a perpetrator of harmful ideologies, although he does not have "direct responsibility" for violence (Baackmann 169). He "brushes against both victim and perpetrator position" (168) with his lack of awareness of the complexities of race. While Amari shares his experiences with racism, Ashton comments, "does everything have to be about black versus white? I mean, what if people just stopped talking about racism" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 88). The group recalibrates his perceptions about race by showing him their lived realities. Moreover, they stand up to Ashton's bullies, showing him solidarity despite their different opinions.

Explicating the role of listeners of testimony, Dori Laub notes, "Bearing witness to trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to occur, there needs

to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other-in the position of one who hears" (Levine 199). With the group's permission, Haley recorded their testimonies in her voice recorder as they spoke. She plays the recordings at her home to honor her friends' memories. Haley's efforts in recording their testimonies highlight the significance of contemporary ways of bearing witness while being Black. The novel highlights its importance through Amari's comment that "nobody would have known about it [the murder of the Black boy] if somebody hadn't recorded it on their phone" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 73). Despite recording her friends, it took her a long time to be able to work through her trauma. She finally gathers the courage to talk about her father's imprisonment and her mother's death. Haley felt understood by her friends the same way August found solace in her female friendship. Baackmann notes that narratives "centered on child witnesses" (172) often suspend historical contexts and focus on the character's innocence. However, in *Harbor Me,* Woodson dismantles age-based perspectives that often brand children as innocent and naive to build an agency-based outlook on contemporary childhoods. Conceding with Levine's remarks, "the belated witness "implicitly commits himself to the task of assuming co-responsibility" (Ballan 72). In listening to each other's testimonies, they become responsible belated witnesses who believe their unity can bring about tangible societal changes.

5.4 The role of belated witnesses in *Red at the Bone*

Red at the Bone (2019) narrativizes generational trauma through prototypical characters from three generations navigating the effects of vicarious trauma. The novel delineates the intimate history of a family juxtaposed with two pivotal moments in America's national history. Although the events are separated by decades [the September Eleven attacks and the Tulsa Massacre], one was instrumental in rewriting national history, while the other hardly ever found representation in public accounts. Embracing her penchant for microhistorical narratives, as discussed in the previous chapter, Woodson explores the ramifications of events in the domestic

sphere. The novel underscores the silences created by traumatic ruptures through the tale of two Black families forced to unite by a teenage pregnancy.

Red at the Bone commences in 2001 and effortlessly traverses perspectives and temporality, nevertheless losing its grip on the family drama. It contextualizes the events preceding Melody's coming-of-age ceremony. Melody is a sixteen-year-old, "once illegitimate child" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 19) of young couple Iris and Aubrey. Iris is the single child of relatively functional and wealthy parents, Po'Boy and Sabe. On the other hand, Aubrey stays with his mother, supported by the government's financial assistance. The novel opens as Melody's parents, after years of separation, have gathered in her grandparent's Brownstone in Brooklyn to celebrate her coming-of-age ceremony. The disagreement between Melody and Iris over Melody's choice of song soon reveals their dysfunctional relationship. Their detachment is rooted in Iris's decision to leave Melody in the care of her parents and Aubrey to pursue college away from her hometown. The novel exposes that Iris's decision to leave does not only arise from her traumatic birth experience but also a tragic family history. On the other hand, upon finishing high school Aubrey chooses to become Melody's guardian. Woodson initiates discussions on Black wealth by situating Iris and Aubrey in diametrically opposite class positions. Moreover, she confronts the damaging stereotype of an absent Black father by placing Aubrey as Melody's primary caregiver.

Sabe's postmemory of the Tulsa massacre forms the premise of Iris's childhood and later Melody's. Here, the study resorts to Hirsch's work on postmemory. Sabe's position correlates to "postgeneration," categorized by the "personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5). Sabe's mother, Melody, was injured when the white mob burned down the family's home and business in Tulsa. Melody belonged to an affluent Black family; hence, despite losing everything, they fled to Brooklyn. She carried the physical manifestation of the traumatic memory through the deep scar on her face. Therefore, the immediacy of the scar

enabled communicative memory of a relatively undocumented event through constant retellings of Tulsa Massacre. Further, to keep her mother's memory alive and contextualize their lives in Brooklyn, Sabe feels obligated to narrate her limited information about the traumatic history. Studies support that for marginalized communities whose histories do not find representation in public discourses, the presence of transgenerational narratives "seek to bridge the generational gap and to conserve communicative memory in the absence of a collective memory" (Anastasiadis 2). Consequently, she engages in racial socialisation by obsessively narrating the second-hand testimonies to prepare Iris and Melody for impending racial discrimination.

Researchers define transgenerational trauma as "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted from one generation to the next" (Dass-Brailsford 5). The ripples of the Tulsa massacre spread across Melody's cross-generational family through conscious and unconscious retellings. Sabe receives the accounts of the massacre from her mother that she later compulsively re-narrates to her daughter and granddaughter. The affluent Black neighborhood of Greenwood, Tulsa, also known as Black Wall Street, was massacred by angry white mobs in 1921. However, history has consistently documented the event as a riot, appropriating the undocumented perspectives of the Black families. Consequently, Woodson embarks on an ethnographic journey by contradicting the institutional memory of the event through Sabe's communicative memory. Sabe notes, "History tries to call it a riot, but it was a massacre" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 80). The chronicle of the massacre is inadequately represented in American history, and projects of exhumation are still in progress. However, the decades of silencing and motivated forgetting resulted in a myopic understanding of the cruelty. In this context, Woodson delineates the transgenerational trauma through the novel's central characters.

Sabe's retellings of her mother's trauma occur in fragments, resulting in Iris's bewilderment. As a listener who belongs to the post-generation, Sabe's effort is to bridge her past and present. Her intentions result in an "obsessive quest to assume the burden of memory" through which she "become[s] a witness oneself" (Zeitlin 6). Consequently, she cannot help but overidentify with her mother, Melody. Sabe recollects, "I must have heard it a hundred times by the time I was school age. I knew. And I made sure Iris knew. And I'm going to make sure Melody knows, too because if a body's to be remembered, someone has to tell its story" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 80–81). Her sentiments toward the massacre can be interpreted with Levine's exploration of the listener's psyche

> By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (5)

In this regard, despite not being physically injured by the massacre, Sabe experiences the mental agony that her mother Melody and her family experienced. Captivated by the "overwhelming inherited memories" (Hirsch 5), Sabe's life stories are displaced or even evacuated by the oppressive magnitude of her postmemory (Hirsch). Apart from impeding her life experiences, the postmemory compels her to bestow the burden of listening to her daughter and granddaughter. Therefore, by reiterating the significance of bearing witness, Sabe situates young Iris and her granddaughter Melody as forced belated witnesses. Levine delves into "what *happens* in the very act of testifying" of narratives "*unwittingly accessed and unconsciously performed*" (4). He remarks that the listener shall assume a responsible role, wherein they become "participant and co-owner of the traumatic event" (5), a role that Sabe easily assumes.

Having empathized with Melody's vulnerability, Sabe becomes the co-owner of the trauma. She cannot recollect anything constructive from the past as she reflects, "seems all I had from them was the memories of fire and smoke" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 83). Moreover, the readers are unaware of her adulthood experiences as well. The reader is only informed about the loss of her first child and further traumatization through a passing remark made by Po'Boy. This confirms Hirsch's findings that the descendants risk being annihilated by the stories of their ancestors. Their family becomes the site where the effect of trauma is belatedly witnessed. In response to Sabe's fixation with the trauma, her communication with Iris consists of "silences and obliquities" (van Alphen 477), resulting in a dysfunctional environment. The constant anecdotes of the event make Iris and Melody the co-owners of the trauma, requiring them to negotiate the "fluid space of transmission" (Levine 4), in this case the dysfunctional family.

Although Iris and Melody do not relate to the story, Sabe considers them victims, designating them as belated witnesses. She notes,

> Everyday since she was a baby, I've told Iris the story . . . And even though it happened twenty years before I was even a thought, I carry it. I carry the goneness. Iris carries the goneness. And watching her walk down those stairs, I know now that my grandbaby carries the goneness too. (Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* 85)

As the receivers of generational trauma, children hardly have a choice but to assume the "position of belatedness" (Ballan 68). In addition to this, as the second chapter indicates, the precarious position of Black children in families as well as in larger society renders them vulnerable to trauma. Further, their gender and temporal positions restrict them from breaking the cycle of transgenerational trauma. As a demography that largely exists outside the framework of "the adult world" (Natov 191), they inevitably become carriers of their parents' trauma. Living with Sabe, who underwent postpartum depression and was also traumatized by her family's past, Iris grows detached from her. Nevertheless, as a carrier of a legacy of loss,

Iris is the family's sole hope in redefining their history. Commenting on parenting patterns in the post-Holocaust period, Plunka notes, "Parents were often cold and unemotional with their children, even in the formative years" (3). Concurrently, Sabe conforms to an authoritarian parent, hoping that Iris will grow up to be an obedient child. However, this further estranged young Iris from her family.

Building on Dori Laub's exploration of witnessing and testimony in Holocaust narratives, Levine explicates the "hazards of listening" (6). He adds that in sharing trauma narratives, "the boundary separating the speaker from the listener is always in danger of dissolving" (6), resulting in confusion and bewilderment in listeners. The speaker and listener share a unique experience, resulting in "avoid[ing] the intimacy entailed in knowing" (6). Consequently, the listener often estranges from the speaker. This encapsulates Iris's and Sabe's relationship as the listener and speaker of trauma. The perpetual re-telling impedes the duo from establishing a healthy relationship. Salberg notes that children imbibe parents' emotional presence and absence in their search for attachment (79) as in the case of Iris's complicated relationship with Sabe. Negotiating Sabe's unpredictable emotional availability and authoritative parenting manifests in Iris's teenage rebellion.

Iris dismisses Sabe's testimonies by saying, "*That's your history, not mine!*" (Woodson 105). As a teenager who rebels against her mother, Iris cannot "serve in the capacity of the belated witness" (Ballan 69). She shows an "inability to bear witness to the witness" and an "unwillingness to listen" (Ballan 71). It is also noteworthy that the ancestral trauma and confusion adultify Iris, which results in rejecting her parents' aspirations. Iris cannot commit to her family, and she opposes it through her teenage sexual rebellion against the "exertion of one-way intergenerational power" (Dawson, "We Knew" 202). When the family finds out about her pregnancy, Iris resists their suggestion of abortion. Sabe pleads to her, saying, "*You're fifteen. . . There's so much, Iris. So much more*" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 43). However, Iris remains

firm against the disagreement from her school and family and remains insistent on her decision to give birth. Further, the chapter argues that Iris's decision to give birth to Melody is also her way of shifting the responsibility of witnessing to a new individual.

Iris is confined in her struggle to break the cycle of trauma while attempting to unearth her past. Albeit refusing to accept the family's legacy, she names her daughter Melody, the name of her great-grandmother, who was injured in the massacre. In studying the transgenerational patterns of Holocaust survivors, Plunka finds that the second-generation survivors were seen as "memorial candles" (1) of the exterminated members of the family. Comparably, both Sabe and Po'Boy are pleased with Iris's decision to name the baby Melody. By naming her, Iris creates an awareness in the family to acknowledge the past. The family can only "figure each other out" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 183) if they address the past together. Plunka notes, named after the victims of the Holocaust, "The child is thus tasked with the responsibility of mitigating the past, changing it toward a different outcome, restoring a positive identity for the parents who feel guilty and lack self- esteem, and providing meaning in their parents' lives" (4). In this light, Melody is perceived as a child who is meant to gratify an "enormous emotional void" (Plunka 2). During her coming-of-age ceremony, Melody realizes this, as she notes, "I and everything around me was their dream come true now" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 18).

Sabe's excessive sentimental narratives prevent Iris's individuation. Consequently, she aspires to reclaim her life and be independent of her family at Oberlin College after the birth of her child. Iris also misemploys her family's history to appeal to Jamison, who was Iris's lesbian partner for a short period. While introducing herself, Iris says, "*Brooklyn, Chicago before that. And a couple of ancestors from Tulsa.* Until then, she hadn't pulled Tulsa out of her pocket . . . But here, somehow, Tulsa felt like it could add a depth to her story" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 104–105). However, Iris cannot recall the narratives due to the fragmented nature of the

memories. She can only recollect some snippets, "Something to do with black folks and losing. Fire. Destruction of black futures" (105). As Shoham comments, the traumatic memories of the past are communicated to younger generations "through selective silences, related stories, and more" (60). Although Iris tries to retell the past, she is unsuccessful in reconstructing the narrative, essentially in accepting her failure as a belated witness.

Melody is also portrayed as troubled by the haunting presence of ancestors and their traumatic memories. She feels alienated from the family as Iris once felt; Melody asks, "*This house and these people. Who the fuck were they anyway? I didn't know Iris*. But truly, did I know any of them? Honestly? Deeply? Skin, blood, bone, and marrow?" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 18). This contemplation displays her position as a belated witness. She is burdened with the task of "mitigating the past" (Plunka 4) while positioned as a listener to her mother's story of teenage pregnancy. Moreover, Iris yearns to experience the ceremony and vicariously relive her lost teenage years. She tells Melody, "*I want to see me in you because* Me *in that dress was over a long time ago. Sixteen was gone. Then seventeen, eighteen-all of it*" (Woodson 15). The belatedness is further accentuated as Melody wears the attire made for Iris. Moreover, the ceremony, in essence, is a practice to recall the past; as Melody notes, "This ritual of marking class and time and transition stumbled back into the days of cotillions, then morphed again until it was this, some forgotten ancestor's gartered corset" (4). Despite her bewilderment, young Melody also exhibits her imminent awareness that her existence could have been erased. She says, "Maybe this was the moment when I knew I was a part of a long line of almost erased stories" (15) indicating the history of the massacre and her grandparents' attempts to convince Iris for abortion.

Sabe is portrayed as burying gold beneath the floorboards of their Brownstone, a generational pattern validated by her mother's traumatic experience. Grandmother Melody's family lost their possessions in the Tulsa Massacre when the mob torched their house. Since

then, Sabe's mother began burying gold under the floorboards, which Sabe eventually started following. As Iris and Melody reconnect upon Sabe's death, they are choiceless as to mend their dysfunctional relationship. While Iris feels "untethered" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 195), Melody responds by saying she is "born ready," reinstating her casualness over adverse life experiences. When the novel concludes, Iris and Melody exhume the gold that Sabe has been hoarding as an inheritance to ensure their future. The sheer deed of unearthing the "gleaming" (Woodson, *Red at the Bone* 196) treasure indicates that both Iris and Melody are finally ready to face the inexorable trauma of their ancestors.

5.5 Resilience and reparation

In transforming her past, August employs her preoccupation with grief and mourning into her interest in anthropology by studying death rituals. She notes, "As a child, I had not known the word anthropology or that there was a thing called Ivy League" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 9). In her desperation to leave Brooklyn and the emotional unavailability of her family members, she resorts to studying. In both *Another Brooklyn* and *Red at the Bone,* the protagonists leave their homes to pursue college far away from home, thus attempting to break away from the cycle of trauma, and they emerge victorious in their endeavors. August feels she was born to fulfill her parents' deferred dreams. She notes, "Maybe this is how it happened first for everyone–adults promising us their own failed futures" (Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* 62). In all three novels, Woodson reiterates that "*We are all a dream come true of the people / who came before us*" (Woodson, *Harbor Me* 168) to remind the children to strive towards better lives.

Researchers define resilience as "*a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity*" (Luthar and Cicchetti 543). They reiterate that apart from creating trauma ripples, testimonies also embody narratives of "courage and resilience" (Weine 18). Moreover, studies show that African American communities have always exhibited elements of resilience (Kalteflieter and Alexander 183). In the case of *Red at the Bone*, young

Iris and Melody sometimes display their "legacies of resilience" (Moore 103), which are inevitable in reconciling with their traumatic family history. Here, their role as belated witnesses undertaking responsibility culminates in "vicarious resilience" they gathered from their ancestors who "reassembled their shattered life" (Arjan 234). Levine states that the belated witness is "implicated in the belated effects of trauma, the acting-out and possibly the working-through, within and around the testimonial transaction, of that in the traumatic event which was never assimilated" (Ballan 178). Extrapolating the argument, the chapter also finds that August and Iris confront the "intergenerational fossilization" (Ozturk 888) with their progressive outlook. They set out to build a career, thereby challenging the patterns of traumatic attachment.

5.6 Conclusion

By incorporating Michael G. Levine's theorization of belated witnessing, the chapter demonstrates the precarious site of Black childhood as a locus of traumatic precipitation. The chapter explores such "*unwittingly accessed and unconsciously performed*" (Levine 4) chronicles that define the protagonists' childhoods. The detailed analysis of the novels indicates the protagonists' transformation from reluctant co-owners of trauma to belatedly witnessing and assuming responsibility for their lives. Woodson notes, "One thing you learn about writing for young people is there has to be hope somewhere. There doesn't have to be a happy ending, but they have to close the book and feel hopeful" (Wilcox). In *Poetics of Childhood*, Natov says stories discussing trauma, shame, and secrecy should illuminate how children survive and make amends for their unfavorable circumstances (220). If Iris, Melody, and August strived to move forward while negotiating their troubled pasts, so could the children in *Harbor Me.*

Chapter 6

Black childhood studies: a way forward

"As I gazed on his face – his jaw a thin blade, his eyes dark and serious, too big in the way that children's eyes are – I saw a child. . . Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old child, legally and biologically" (Ward, *The Fire This Time* 3).

"We got onto subway cars and people moved off the subway cars. As an adult I've seen it with loud teenagers getting onto subway cars and people choosing another car. And me thinking, they're teenagers, this is what teenagers do" (Morgan and Woodson).

This study analyzed the representation of childhood in the novels of contemporary African American women writers Jesmyn Ward and Jacqueline Woodson to explicate the facets of Black childhood. As the quotes mentioned above illustrate, both writers believe that Black children are ostracized from the social construct of childhood. Black children's performances of childhood are considered suspicious, and their bodies are weaponized. Consequently, these writers portray such instances of overt dehumanization and microaggression meted out to Black children in their body of work. The present proliferation of anti-Black violence consolidated people around the world to demand social justice under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this context, Woodson and Ward join the community by illuminating authentic portrayals of Black lives. Moreover, their proclivity towards representing childhood and children navigating unfavorable circumstances arises from their quest for representation, having grown up without an authentic portrayal of Black childhood in literary works.

This thesis is situated in the broad domain of childhood studies, and the conceptual chapters unite theoretical frameworks drawn from diverse disciplines with an overarching focus on Critical Race Theory. The selected texts reiterate that race is embedded in every structure of

society and race interacts with "sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation" (Ladson-Billings 39) to create unique individual identities. Moreover, the novels depict how the aspect of age also interferes with race in creating vulnerable childhood identities. The four core chapters of the thesis scrutinized selected works of each author and their respective memoirs to trace the contributing factors of Black childhood in their literary representations. The study analyzed childhood as a lens to understand the lives of Black communities and how children expand meanings of agency and resilience in their immediate circumstances. The individual frameworks of counter-storytelling, precarity, microhistory, and witnessing proved to be effective conceptual tools for analyzing the selected novels. Employing Judith Butler's theorization of precarity illustrates rural Black childhood in a neoliberal economy. On the other hand, the theoretical foci of microhistory and witnessing have been employed in Holocaust studies to scrutinize the ripple effect of historical social injustice in intimate locations. This study extends its scope by incorporating those frameworks in African American canon to explicate the lives of America's acutely marginalized demography.

Ward writes about her childhood experiences as a Black girl in a low-income family in the rural South. Consequently, her young protagonists are portrayed as navigating the lull economy, the compelling need to sell drugs, recurrent environmental disasters, and lack of access to proper health care and education in the twenty first century. Conversely, Woodson channels the consequences of The Great Northward Migration, White Flight, and Civil Rights Movement. Although her works delineate the everyday experiences of Black children, they are often set against watershed events in Black history. Nevertheless, Ward's and Woodson's writing philosophy concerns the repetitive nature of history. Consequently, they engage in a wide variety of storytelling through memoirs, novels, picture books, verse novels, and essays to address the question. Ward asks, "how does past bear fruit" and she writes "around that question again and again with different sets of characters" (Ward and Taylor 267). Woodson writes about

childhood predicated on the ghosts of the past to locate contemporary Black childhood in the historical landscape of American childhood. This thesis, therefore, weaves the evolution of academic discourses on Black childhood to situate the significance of their oeuvre.

Academic discourses on the twenty first-century African American canon witness a burgeoning study on Ward's corpus. However, the facet of childhood remains understudied despite being a driving force of her narratives. Similarly, studies explicating Woodson's works that are primarily tethered to the triply marginalized space of Young Adult Literature (Johnson) exist in a latent phase. Therefore, this thesis unites both writers' works to explore the undertheorized aspects of their works. Moreover, the detailed literature review underlines the sporadic nature of research on the literary representation of Black childhood. Further, the study incorporates newer methodologies regarding discourses on the marginalized space of childhood. In narrativizing the reverberations of the past through precarious living conditions, transgenerational trauma, and legacy of loss, the novels situate contemporary Black childhood in the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 6). Consequently, the thesis argues that Black childhoods, as represented in the fictional works, sit at the intersection of precarity, trauma, and resilience.

The study attempts to fill the gap in the ongoing research on Black childhoods by contextualizing it in the broad domain of childhood studies. Recent research invites engaging methodologies to scrutinize the multifaceted site of childhood. The absence of such discourse hampers a comprehensive understanding of Black and marginalized childhoods. Studies substantiate the significance of addressing structural issues to ensure their growth and development in a nurturing environment. Researchers recognize various systemic drawbacks in approaches toward Black children in the early education context and reiterate the significance of collective action (Lopez and Jean-Marie; Pimentel et al.). Consequently, attempts are made to dismantle Eurocentrism at a grassroots level by incorporating Afrocentric and Black feminist approaches in teaching and pedagogy to integrate Black children and their experiences into

school curricula (Nxumalo; Wynter-Hoyte and Smith). Therefore, this study incorporates theories that are rarely employed to illuminate childhood experiences. Moreover, approaches rooted in Critical Race Theory expect to deconstruct the perception of Blackness as inferior and open windows to the inner lives of Black children and their abundant histories.

In Ward's edited volume, *The Fire This Time* (2016), which brings an array of Black writers and their literary responses to the ongoing racial climate of America, she notes that despite the overbearing weight of the past and the hopelessness of the period, literature drives the narratives for social justice forward (Ward, *The Fire This Time*). Woodson shares the same sentiment that the resulting anger of the anti-Black period inevitably invites change (Parrot and Toth). Following this philosophy, their fictional works operate change, stimulating discourses of social change. Consequently, by scrutinizing revisionist retellings of dehumanized Black childhoods, this thesis joins the broader narratives of social justice.

6.1 Limitations and future directions

The position of Black children and their experiences of childhood is rendered precarious in American society amid racial profiling, gun violence, and a racially motivated criminal justice system. Moreover, researchers contend that recent critical discourses employ the methodological assumptions of Black social death and deficit approaches toward Black childhood. The proponents prompt researchers to engage in various methodologies to investigate sites where re-imaginations of Black childhoods are possible. This includes incorporating Black futurity and fugitive futures to inspect speculative fiction where possible Black futures are reimagined and free from "anti-Black formations" (Nxumalo and Cedillo; Nxumalo; Nxumalo and ross). Moreover, researchers are encouraged to inspect Indigenous children's interactions with non-anthropocentric entities to form a relational perspective of children in childhood research. Such discourses on relationalities can inevitably contribute to knowledge creation in the future of Black childhood. Significantly, the current times require

scholars to inspect Black children from a decentered lens that can dismantle the deficit approaches in Black childhood studies.

While this study limits its scope to the works of selected authors, it could initiate discourse on urban and rural childhood experiences, and gendered experiences of Black childhoods. Despite methodological advancements, interdisciplinary research and collaboration remain a limitation in childhood studies. Scholars of childhood studies suggest the need to bring forth interdisciplinary dialogues on Black childhood. Moreover, employing mixed methodologies can also push the limits of research, and implementing "affective methodologies" (Alanen et al.) potentially contributes to acknowledging the diversity of children's voices. Current findings suggest a lacuna of discussions on the significance of children's friendships and other interpersonal relationships in formulating a diverse understanding of their social lives. Moreover, scholars should respond to the call for incorporating an integrated yet intersectional lens in childhood research (Cueves-Parra) while keeping their privileges in check.

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