



**Grau d'Estudis Anglesos**

TREBALL DE FI DE GRAU

CURS 2020-2021

**“There is a great darkness bearing down on our lives, and  
no one acknowledges it”: The Struggle of Black Mental  
Health in Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped***

**STUDENT: Carla Campillo Masip**

**TUTOR: Cristina Alsina Rísquez**

Barcelona, 16 de juny de 2021



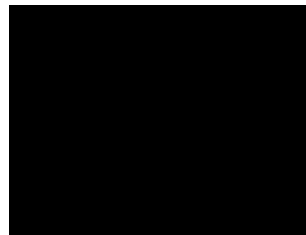


## Declaració d'autoria

Amb aquest escrit declaro que soc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18 del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 16 de Juny de 2021

Signatura:



*To my parents.*

*My dad, for being my biggest cheerleader even though he will not understand most of what is written here. My mum, who hugs and protects my soul every day of my life. It all started with you.*

*To my Sisters, for being my lighthouse.*

*To Dr. Cristina Alsina Rísquez, it has been an absolute pleasure to work with you. Your knowledge and kindness have made this process much easier.*

## Abstract

In her memoir *Men We Reaped*, American author Jesmyn Ward depicts the lives of five men from her community to illustrate the experience of being Black and living in the south of the United States. Said experience is conditioned by the deep roots of racism which end up affecting the mental health of the people depicted in the memoir. This paper analyses how, in *Men We Reaped*, psychological issues are not only a consequence of racism and impoverishment, but also a cause of drug addiction, mistrust within the Black community and, in the case of the five men, death. By analysing, in a chronological way, how these consequences affect the lives of the different men included in the memoir, it is the feeling of worthlessness what comes to be the cause and the aftereffect of the mental struggles that the people depicted in the memoir go through.

**Key words:** *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward, mental health, racism, Black Lives Matter memoir

## Resum

Al llibre de memòries *Men We Reaped*, l'autora americana Jesmyn Ward descriu la vida de cinc homes de la seva comunitat per il·lustrar l'experiència de ser Negre i viure al sud dels Estats Units. Aquesta vivència està condicionada per les arrels del racisme que acaben afectant la salut mental de les persones que s'inclouen en el llibre. Aquest treball analitza com, a *Men We Reaped*, els problemes mentals no només són una conseqüència del racisme i l'empobriment, sinó també la causa d'addicció a les drogues, desconfiança dins la comunitat Negra i, en el cas dels cinc homes, la mort. En analitzar, de manera cronològica, com aquests problemes afecten la vida de les persones descrites a les memòries, és el sentiment de ser insuficient el que acaba sent la causa i l'efecte dels problemes mentals de les persones incloses dins l'obra de Jesmyn Ward.

**Paraules clau:** *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward, salut mental, racisme, memòries de "Black Lives Matter"

## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Mental health issues as a consequence	3
2.1.	Racism during childhood and in the education system	3
2.1.1.	The school-to-prison pipeline	5
2.2.	Impoverishment	6
2.3.	The burden of history	8
3.	Mental health issues as a cause	10
3.1.	Stigma and eventual mistrust within the Black community	10
3.2.	Drug use and addiction	12
3.3.	Death	14
3.3.1.	Death as a lurking figure	16
4.	Conclusion	18
	References	20

## 1. Introduction

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer seemed to show, once and for all, the true structural nature of racism. However, there had been many victims of police brutality before—and have been after—Floyd. Why is it then that his death was the one that seemed to awaken society? It may be a result of many factors: the recording of the murder being posted on social media and, consequently, the impossibility of people denying it had been the policeman's fault, a society which has been faced with too many examples of racism to ignore; the possibilities are endless. Despite the exposure of the brutal act, the public debate seems to have been focused on the violence that, in many cases, follows racism. Little has been said, however, about how this constant outbreak of violence can affect Black<sup>1</sup> people's mental health. Even though the Covid-19 global pandemic has put mental health issues on the spotlight, not many of the debates that have been held after Floyd's murder have been about how racism conditions Black people's psychological wellbeing.

Given that my mental health has been my main focus of attention during the last few years, I have been able to see that, despite mental illnesses gaining more and more exposure, in many cases, they are still underestimated when compared to physical illnesses. Consequently, I thought that it would be interesting to focus my End of Degree Paper on the relation between racism and mental health. To do so, I started to look for memoirs about racism which, hopefully, would tackle psychological issues. I preferred to look for memoirs rather than any other literary genre because, since the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement and society's witnessing of the structural characteristics of racism, the need to read about real stories and social justice has been made more obvious. That is why, when I found Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped*, the choice of text was made.

In her memoir, Ward narrates the lives and deaths of Roger Eric Daniels III, Demond Cook, Charles Joseph Martin, Ronald Wayne Lizana and Joshua Adam Dedeaux, along with her experiences to illustrate how racism permeates every aspect of Black people's lives, including their mental state. When the author was asked why she chose to write about the deaths of five men in her life, she stated, "I believe in the power of sharing the story [...] I

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, Black and Blackness will be written with capital "B" to, as *The Seattle Times* states, represent the "shared cultures and experiences" of the Black community (2019, para. 6).

believe that sharing the story and becoming a part of this conversation [...] has the potential to lead to real change” (Politics and Prose, 2014). Her memoir could then be defined as a Black Lives Matter memoir<sup>2</sup>. Inspired by Gavan Lennon’s Black Lives Matter elegy—which Lennon defines as “a shared, intersectional poetics of public grief, in which poets develop the traditional elegiac balm of personal consolation to incorporate an aesthetic that mobilizes public grief to political action” (2019, 193)—, the BLM memoir could be defined as a written record which, through the narration of a person or a group of people’s life, depicts the experiences of the Black community as a way to foster social change.

Through the memoir, Ward is able to expose how Black people’s mental health is tainted by the deep roots of racism while also talking about the consequences of mental illness in both her and the five men’s life. Still, the author does not reduce the five men to victims. The biographical aspect of the memoir allows Ward to, without idealising the lives that were lost, portray both the lights and the shadows of the different men. However, in many cases the constant presence of racism, the constant witnessing of death, violence and pain within the Black community was what took a toll on her and her community’s mental health. Still, for Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* is what Gavan Lennon defined as the “balm of personal consolation” (2019, 193), as Ward herself states how the memoir was “the kind of work I should’ve been doing in therapy” (Politics and Prose, 2014).

Consequently, this paper aims to analyse how, in Ward’s *Men We Reaped*, mental health issues are both a cause and a consequence of further issues in Black people’s lives. To do so, this project makes close reference to the primary source while also quoting experts in psychology to understand how the mental state of the people depicted in the memoir is conditioned by the circumstances they have to deal with for being Black. This paper has been structured to follow a chronological order. It begins with the first cause of mental health issues—the witnessing of racism during childhood—, then it follows the early years of adulthood of the people depicted in the novel and, finally, the paper reaches death, the ultimate consequence of mental health issues.

---

<sup>2</sup> Self-created term. The concept is also inspired by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele’s *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. In their book, however, the authors use the term to make reference to the process of creation of the Black Lives Matter movement but not, as it is done in this paper, to define a literary genre.



## 2. Mental health issues as a consequence

Only this loss, this pain. I could not understand why there was always this.

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, 41)

Many studies have found a direct correlation between discrimination against the Black community and psychological distress, which can end up giving way to chronic depression, anxiety disorder or anger (Williams et al., 2003). This correlation is best understood when said discrimination is not seen as a single phenomenon but as a part of a system which, through the institutionalisation of racist policies and legal practices, has made racism structural. Jesmyn Ward painfully describes the psychological burden of this system when she states, “I was so depressed by the subtext I felt, so depressed I was silenced, because the message was always the same: *You’re Black. You’re less than White. And then, at the heart of it: You’re less than human*” (2013, 195, italics in the original). In her memoir *Men We Reaped*, Ward illustrates the toll racism took on both her and her community’s mental health by depicting episodes of discrimination suffered as early on as during childhood, examples of the school-to-prison pipeline and scenarios in which impoverishment affected her community. The author also shows how the inhumanity and racism on which US history is based end up being a common thread among her and her community’s mental health issues.

### 2.1. Racism during childhood and in the education system

Studies have disclosed that children and teenagers who are exposed to racial discrimination are likely to suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Pachter et al., 2009). Moreover, structural racism can result in internalised racism which “can unconsciously erode self-perception and capacity” (Trent et al., 2019, 4).

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward’s earliest witnessing of the effects of racism traces back to her childhood years when she already had nightmares about the county police coming to her house and sending her uncles and dad to prison (2013, 99). The reason behind these nightmares is explained by Ward herself when she states the following:

As a child, I listened to my grandmother when she worried about her sons, about them being stopped by police and searched for no other reasons than they were Black and male, about them getting into fights with White men and being arrested for assault while the White men they fought went free. (2013, 99)

This feeling of constant anxiety was exacerbated by the responsibility that was placed upon her by her mother to take care of her brother and sisters since her father was, for the most part, absent.<sup>3</sup> On those occasions when she could not meet her mother's expectations, her disappointment to herself along with the anxiety she already suffered affected her self-esteem. During her preteen and teenage years, her self-awareness kept being conditioned by racist comments. For example, one classmate started a "joke" by saying: "What does one nigger say to another nigger when...?" (2013, 192) and another classmate said: "*I don't believe in the mixing of the races*" (2013, 207, italics in the original), all while being in her presence.

The sense of worthlessness and isolation that Ward experienced during her school years was also a product of the intersection between Blackness and class. For many years, Ward was the only Black girl in her school. The other Black boy was upper-middle class, which made his culture "totally alien to [her] own, one of government assistance and poverty and broken homes" (2013, 183). This class difference—the other Black boy was accepted by his white classmates—conditioned Ward's low self-esteem as the lack of an equal figure in her school made her see herself as a misfit. Moreover, this sense of not belonging was reinforced, this time within her community, after her mother's boss paid for her to go to school, alienating her from the rest of the kids in her community. Years later, when she was in college, she would relate this feeling to W. E. B. Du Bois's *double consciousness*, as this concept helped her explain:

how it felt to witness my mother at work, [...] how I saw her in a broader context, as a Black cleaning woman, almost cowed, and [...] how I was very conscious in that moment of my dark skin [...] and how I was aware that the wife was talking to me like an intellectual equal. [...] How the privilege of my education, my eventual

---

<sup>3</sup> In many cases, absent parenthood and parenthood based on violence are consequences of structural racism. However, it will not be dealt in this paper due to lack of space. For further information, see "Father Stories" in David Marriott's *On Black Men*.

ascent into another class, was born in the inexorable push of my mother's hands.  
(2013, pp. 202-203)

The constant witnessing of racist behaviours, the responsibility that was placed on her since she was a kid and the absence of her father made Jesmyn Ward “[see herself] a walking embodiment of everything the world around [her] seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor, Black woman” (2013, 135).

### 2.1.1. The school-to-prison pipeline

The American Civil Liberties Union<sup>4</sup> (ACLU) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as:

A national trend wherein children are funnelled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out. (para. 1)

According to Libby Nelson et al., even though the school-to-prison pipeline may not always lead to incarceration, “students who are suspended are more likely to repeat a grade or drop out than students who were not” (2015, sect. 4).

In Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*, the effects of this trend are made evident in three of the five men whose life is depicted. Roger Eric Daniels III, known as Rog, and Charles Joseph Martin, known as C. J., both dropped out of school because, like many other Black young men, they were “branded as misfits”, “pushed to the back of the classrooms and ignored” (2013, 26). Roger found a job in California which he loved but, at the same time, made him be in a constant battle between the freedom that the West coast gave him and the longing for his home town. When he went back home, however, he could feel the burden of being a Black man in the South, of how “[his] community [was] falling apart” (2013, 31). On the other hand, C. J. was not lucky enough to get a taste of Rog's freedom, but both men still experienced the same daunting feeling. Being denied the American dream, C. J. saw all

---

<sup>4</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union is a non-profit organisation that seeks to protect the rights of those who have been wrongfully sentenced in the United States.

“those who still lived and those who’d died, and didn’t see much difference between the two: pinned beneath poverty and history and racism, [they] were all dying inside” (2013, 121).

Joshua Adam Dedeaux, Jesmyn Ward’s brother, is an example of how the American educational system isolates those who have different learning needs. Joshua was not referred to a specialist who might have helped him to graduate successfully. As a consequence, he dropped out of school when he was fourteen. In his case, just like in his sister’s, class also played a role given that, since he was living with his father who could not always provide for him, he had the responsibility of having to find a job. Factory jobs were becoming more and more of an exception in the United States of the late 1990s, early 2000s and, as a consequence, Joshua had to start selling drugs to make ends meet. He was ashamed of his situation but, as he kept on selling, he saw, just like C. J. did, that the American dream was not for them. Ward describes it when she says, “both my brother and I were coming up against something larger than us, and both of us were flailing against it, looking for [...] an opening through. And both of us were failing” (2013, 208).

## 2.2. Impoverishment<sup>5</sup>

In the previous section, class has been seen as a trigger element for low self-esteem and mental health issues such as anxiety. Moreover, as an effect of structural racism, the previously mentioned school-to-prison pipeline is one of the causes of poverty in Black neighbourhoods. Roger and C. J. are examples of how, when being denied access to higher education and, consequently, the opportunity to have better job prospects, the already oppressing feeling of living in a society which is based on the discrimination of the Black community becomes fatal for their mental health. This section is going to focus on how poverty and the violence that, in some cases, it leads to have strong effects on the mental health of the people described in *Men We Reaped*.

Joongbaeck Kim, a professor of sociology in Kyung Hee University, states, “residents of neighborhoods with the concentration of poverty and female-headed households are at

---

<sup>5</sup> In this section, impoverishment is used instead of poverty because, in many of the cases that are included, Black people were victims of a system that made sure they remained in poverty. Consequently, it is a situation that is imposed on them.

higher risk for depression” (2010, 260). During her childhood years, Ward already witnessed the effects of poverty in her neighbourhood when she saw two family friends, who were supposed to be taking care of her and her sisters, snort a line of cocaine. At that point she did not understand why they did it. It would take her some years to understand that that was what “grown-ups who were poor and felt cornered and at their wits’ end did to feel less like themselves for a time” (2013, 98). This need to disassociate by using drugs will be explored later.

In the memoir, poverty is not only witnessed to be affecting people, but also the facilities of the neighbourhood. For example, the community park in Ward’s neighbourhood was expected to become an extension of the cemetery, eliminating in that way a space for socialisation for the community. Ward describes this transformation of communal space as a process by which “one day [their] graves will swallow up [their] playground” (2013, 127). This correlation between poor facilities and death is made even clearer in the episode that describes C. J.’s death. C. J. died after being hit by a train whose arrival should have been announced by flashing lights and the ringing of a bell, which, at that moment, did not work. Ward argues that since the lights were located “in a mainly Black area, no one really cared about fixing them” (2013, 125). This episode which initially does not seem to have a connection with mental health is, in fact, necessary to understand why the common feeling among Ward’s community was one of worthlessness. After all, they were constantly reminded that, since they were Black *and* poor, they did not matter.

One of the main problems of poverty —or impoverishment— is the violence to which it can lead (Iceland and Hernandez, 2017). According to Brandon D. Hollie and Deborah Coolhart, people who witness crime and violence in their neighbourhoods are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (2020, 330). In Jesmyn Ward’s case, impoverishment and violence cohabited from the moment she was born. Firstly, Ward had to share her father’s attention with his pit bulls<sup>6</sup>, one of which nearly attacked her to death. Secondly, after having witnessed how drugs and violence, which were a consequence of impoverishment in her community, affected her neighbourhood, Ward “was scared to walk through the neighbourhood, and never did so without [her] father and [her]

---

<sup>6</sup> The relationship between manhood, violence and pit bulls is further explored in Claudia Alonso-Recarte’s “Pit Bulls and Dogfighting as Symbols of Masculinity in Hip Hop Culture” (2020).

siblings” (2013, 199). This anxiety and need to be in constant tension just in case violence broke out explains how, in Ward’s words, Roger may have been feeling when he started medicating with drugs and alcohol: “the pines and the thick air felt like the walls of an invisible room to him, closed on all sides” (2013, 32). This sense of confinement could, in some cases, lead to more violence which, again, could cause mental health issues.

### 2.3. The burden of history

This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.  
—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008, 14)

Throughout *Men We Reaped*, Ward talks about a presence that looms over her community, one that is bigger than them but that she does not know how to define. The first time it is mentioned in the memoir is after Roger’s death, when Brandon, Ward’s ex-boyfriend, says, “They picking us off, one by one” (2013, 38). After this statement, Jesmyn Ward is left wondering who that “they” “that wrote [their] story might be” (2013, 38). After Ronald’s death, Ward goes back to that idea. This time, however, she goes from using Brandon’s personification of this presence as a “they” to describing it as a nothingness. She understands that it was this nothingness what made Ronald take his own life. Ward goes on to develop the definition of nothingness by exposing the effect it had on “all [their] families and [their] communities, all the institutions of the South and the nation driving it” (2013, 176). Later in the memoir, in an attempt to come to terms with Ronald’s death, Jesmyn Ward defines, once again, this nothingness as an “endless rigging and ropes and set pieces behind [them], manipulated by many hands” (2013, 180). Finally, the author approaches the end of the memoir with a last reference to this entity: “there is a great darkness bearing down on our lives, and no one acknowledges it” (2013, 250).

To analyse this nothingness properly, it is helpful to look at Saidiya Hartman's definition of the new form that slavery<sup>7</sup> has taken in the United States of the 21st century:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of [B]lack America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because [B]lack lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. (2008, pp. 13-14)

By analysing Hartman's definition, the sense of worthlessness that is depicted in *Men We Reaped* should not be understood as an exclusive product of the circumstances that surround Ward's community. Instead, it should be analysed as a consequence of the racist policies that American governments have been launching during the last decades. Thus, Ward's use of the term "nothingness" should not be interpreted either as an exclusive consequence of her community not knowing what is lurking over their neighbourhood. Instead, since the causes of this nothingness have been institutionalised, it should be seen as a feeling too big to reduce to one concept and, consequently, to express in some occasions.

In fact, throughout the memoir, Ward mentions many of the causes that have led to the creation of this nothingness. To begin with, the author mentions slavery when talking about her father's absence:

This tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty. Sometimes color seems an accidental factor, but then it doesn't, especially when one thinks of the forced fracturing of families that the earliest African Americans endured under the yoke of slavery. (2013, 131)

She talks about the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline when, referring to C. J., she says, "the fact that he was a Black male barely scraping by in his classes meant he was seen as a problem" (2013, 111). She talks about how the constant racism took a toll on the self-esteem of her community and how that pressure was "weighing on [them] all" (2013, 169). Ward also talks about the degradation that Black men face after being constantly stopped by the police and how "seven percent of African American men develop depression" (2013, 175).

---

<sup>7</sup> This paper uses the term "slavery" not in the sense of the historical burden that started with the exploitation and murder of Black slaves and permeated into today's American policies but, as Hartman does, to define a system that constantly oppresses Black people for the colour of their skin.

Consequently, this nothingness that Ward constantly mentions is precisely the overbearing presence of the traces of US history in the lives of the author's community<sup>8</sup>. One could analyse the moments in which she does not know how to define this nothingness as an overwhelmed response to years and years of being the victim of blatant racism. To put it in another way, the anxiety she develops as a consequence of being constantly attacked for the colour of her skin is what, in some cases, stops her from seeing the bigger picture.

### 3. Mental health issues as a cause

Mental health issues have been historically stigmatised within the Black community since many health providers have let their racism permeate their practices when treating Black people. According to Williams et al., "A report based on rates of mental illness from the 1840 Census falsified Black insanity rates to show that the further north Blacks lived, the higher their rates of mental illness. This was interpreted as evidence that freedom made Blacks crazy" (2010, 268). This trivialisation of Black people's mental health explains why many of them refuse to seek help as they know that, in many cases, they will be misdiagnosed by the healthcare system. This mistrust is what ends up causing the stigmatisation of mental health in the Black community. In *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward shows how mental illness is also a cause of drug use, death, and stigma and mistrust within the Black community.

#### 3.1. Stigma and eventual mistrust within the Black community

My entire community suffered from a lack of trust [...] And even as we distrusted the society around us, [...] we distrusted each other.

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, p. 169)

---

<sup>8</sup> For further information on how the historical burden affects Black people's mental health, see Dr. DeGruy's *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing* (2005).



According to Brandon D. Hollie and Deborah Coolhart, “some reasons African Americans seek services inconsistently is related to not wanting to show weakness to outsiders, fear of the lack of cultural understanding such as racism and community trauma from White providers, and fear of misdiagnosis” (2020, 322). The previously mentioned trivialisation of mental health issues in the Black community by white healthcare workers is what initially caused the stigma around mental health within the Black community. As Black people fear they will be misdiagnosed, they keep what they are mentally going through to themselves which, in turn, leads them to mistrust both their community and the mental health system as they feel like nobody will understand them. Thus, difficult situations that could be dealt with by sharing them with their community end up becoming critical mental health issues when dealt on one’s own. Consequently, the stigma that starts being a consequence of mental health struggles ends up becoming a cause of further mental health issues.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward explains how this mistrust affects her whole community when she states, “We did not trust our fathers to raise us, to provide for us. Because we trusted nothing, we endeavoured to protect ourselves, boys becoming misogynistic and violent, girls turning duplicitous, all of us hopeless” (2013, 169). This need that men had to protect themselves and their loved ones can be seen in Jesmyn Ward’s father. Growing up, the author was able to see how he was always a loving father to her and her sisters but, with her brother Joshua, he was the opposite. Ward’s father disciplined his son because he knew what it was like to be a Black man in the South. He knew that, in order to survive, one needed to look and act tough. He did not explain this to his son, however, because that would entail having a conversation about the psychological struggles of being Black and male. This necessity to be tough was caused by the stigmatisation of mental health, as talking about one’s feelings was seen as being weak. Ward’s mother is another example of how being vulnerable was seen as a sign of fragility. During the years her husband cheated on her, she resorted to cooking as a way to cope with what was happening in her family. She did not have a conversation about it with her children but, instead, kept what she was going through to herself.

Taking Jesmyn Ward’s parents as an example, the stigma around mental health that Ward’s generation was being a victim of can be understood as a product of a generational reluctance within the Black community to share their feelings as well as a lack of trust in the

healthcare system. Both the mistrust and the stigma are made evident in the way Ward narrates her story as well as that of the five men. Ronald, C. J. and Roger all wore a mask to make their loved ones believe they were doing just fine. Still, in moments of extreme vulnerability, they opened up to express what they were going through. For example, C. J. went as far as to confess to Ward's sister that “[he] got a feeling [he] ain't going to be here long” (2013, 120, italics in the original). However, nobody responded to what could be defined as a cry for help because nobody knew how to, because everyone in the community was going through the same struggles. This inability to help one another was what eventually lead to “the community falling apart” (2013, 31). As a way to deal with this distancing within their community, many people in *Men We Reaped* turned to drugs.

### 3.2. Drug use and addiction

All I wanted in the world was for it to go dark [...] I wanted to black out again.

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, 74)

Due to the stigmatisation of mental health issues and mistrust towards the healthcare system and within their own community, Black people might feel like they are the only ones who are going through psychological struggles. Consequently, they are left on their own to look for strategies to cope, which increases the likelihood of drug use (Ullman et al., 2013). In *Men We Reaped*, drugs are used by some people in Ward's community to cope with a reality that oppresses them.

To understand why drugs are such a big issue in the memoir, historical context needs to be taken into account. Even though the memoir is set during George H. W. Bush's presidency, the effects of the War on Drugs that both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan launched are still present. As Angela Davis states in the documentary *13th*, “It was with the Nixon era and the Law and Order period when crime begins to stand in for race” (2016). Moreover, as cocaine started to be introduced in the neighbourhoods, Black people faced a double stigma: drugs were not socially accepted in general but, were specially criminalised when related to Black communities as the media had developed a racialised image on

criminality and drugs. This stigma is represented in Ward's memoir when she explains why people in her community did not consume cocaine at parties:

Because the spectre of the cousin or the uncle or aunt or the mother or father who couldn't stop partying, whose teeth were burned brown from the pipe, sits next to them [the young in DeLisle] at that table. Young people who do coke lie about it, attempt to hide it, and often fight it. (2013, 34)

Thus, drugs are a double-edged sword since they are both the consequence of mental health issues and the cause of stigma and mistrust within the Black community which, in turn, leads to further psychological issues.

In *Men We Reaped*, the consequences of the stigma that existed around drugs is also seen in the way that, since none of the people depicted talked about why they were using them, no one realised that drug addiction was a social issue and not an individual one. For instance, the first person who is said to do drugs in the memoir is Roger Eric Daniels III. Roger consumed drugs and alcohol to, as has been previously mentioned, escape from the burden of being a Black man in the South. Moreover, he was a victim of the stigmatisation of drugs as he tried to hide the fact that he was doing coke (2013, 34). In fact, it was not until several years later that, in a conversation with her sister Nerissa, Ward was able to see how "Rog and [her] cousins here doing too much coke because C. J. had just died" (2013, 35). Jesmyn Ward, however, only realised that she too was addicted to drugs—alcohol, in her case—when she was writing the memoir, specifically while she was writing Roger's chapter. During her teenage years she failed to understand why people in her community were doing drugs. Later, however, she connected "the relief [she] felt when [she] drank with the drugs others were using" (2013, 34). In her case, Ward used alcohol to escape the self-destructive thoughts that she had been experiencing as a consequence of racism. In the section about impoverishment, it has been mentioned how Ward, as a child, had already seen how grown-ups did drugs to cope with both their economic situation and what it meant to be Black in the US. Looking at these three scenarios, a common pattern can be inferred: they were all trying to disassociate from a reality in which their Blackness conditioned their education, their job opportunities and, as a consequence, their health—both physical and mental.

Ward's community was also doing drugs to cope with the deaths that had begun to strike their neighbourhood. During the first half of 2004, three of the five men that are

depicted in the narrative died. These numbers are important to know because, even though death will be analysed on its own, they directly affected the mental health of the people in the memoir and, consequently, how they dealt with what they were going through. Bearing in mind that they all were in their twenties, the common feeling was one of despair, as they felt that, if racism had taken away their childhood, death was robbing them of their youth. Drugs, then, became their coping mechanism against an existence based on constant losses:

We'd lost three friends by then, and we were so green we couldn't reconcile our youth with the fact that we were dying, so we drank and smoked and did other things, because these things allowed us the illusion that our youth might save us. (2013, 64)

Thus, alcohol, and drugs in general, provided them with an alternate reality in which they did not have to deal with grief. As Ward states, "we could laugh when we were drunk, even in the summer of 2004" (2013, 29).

### 3.3. Death

Men's bodies litter my family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from the beyond, makes them appear as ghosts.

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, 14)

Death is the ultimate consequence of mental health issues. In *Men We Reaped*, two of the five men depicted committed suicide. While it is a fatal consequence, it is also a common one for Black men. Ward herself states it when she quotes "Souls of Black Men: African American Men Discuss Mental Health" to say that Black men are twice as likely to die from suicide than Black women (2013, 176). This is explained by the fact that one of the causes of suicide for many Black men is the isolating feeling of hopelessness (Jones-Eversley et al., 2020, 259). In this section, my analysis is going to focus on how death came as a consequence of mental health issues for Roger Eric Daniels III and Ronald Wayne Lizana.

Firstly, Ronald killed himself after an argument with his girlfriend in which he already told her he was going to commit suicide. To look at Ronald's death as a desperate act to try to stop his girlfriend from leaving him would be superficial and inaccurate. Ronald, like many

others in his community, created a cheerful public persona to hide what he was going through:

the endless struggle with his girlfriend, the drugs that lit his darkness, the degradation that comes from a life of poverty exacerbated by maleness and Blackness and fatherlessness in the South—being stopped and searched by the police, going to a high school where no one really cared if he graduated and went to college, [...] the promises that had been made to him at All God’s Creature day camp were empty and he didn’t have a world and a heaven of options. (2013, 175)

According to Ward, this overall sense of hopelessness made Ronald believe that if he killed himself, the pain of living under his circumstances would stop (2013, 175). Moreover, by the time Ronald chose to end his life, he had already experienced the death of Ward’s brother, Joshua. Not only was Ronald trying to cope with the effects of racism and coexist with death in his community, but he also felt the need to do it in secret. This is where the combination of the stigmatisation of mental health issues and the use of drugs becomes lethal. Ronald died on his own after shooting himself. When the author is trying to deduce what might have led Ronald to kill himself, she says that she did not know what Ronald was going through both mentally and emotionally, yet she is able to come up with a possible answer as it is similar to what she was going through at that time. If mental health issues had not been such a taboo, Ronald and Ward might have been able to talk to each other to express the anxiety they were both feeling because of the state their community was in. Ronald, however, was left to deal with it on its own. In his case, the daily darkness became too overwhelming to keep on fighting.

Secondly, Roger died of a drug overdose. While it is true that it is not known whether he overdosed willingly or not, the reasoning behind him taking drugs is related to what he was mentally going through at that time. Thus, his death could be analysed as a side effect of mental health issues. For Roger, his hometown had become his prison. In California, he had been able to find a job and get away from his demons. This difference between California and DeLisle, his hometown, is explained by Roger himself when he tells his cousin: “Cuz, you know, it’s a better place for me out there. [...] I’m ready to change, ready to go, [...] I’ll be straight out there, but here...” (2013, 32). In DeLisle, Roger could not escape the sense of worthlessness that had been ingrained in him since middle school. Moreover, before his

death, Roger had had to grieve the deaths of Joshua, Ronald, C. J. and Demond. For him, death had already become a lurking figure. Just like in Ronald's case, the combination of the stigma around mental health and the one that surrounded drugs, specially cocaine in Roger's case, became lethal for the latter. Both factors ended up causing him a greater sense of isolation, which, in turn, lead him to use drugs as a way to cope. This endless circle, however, turned out to be fatal for Roger.

### 3.3.1. Death as a lurking figure

I wondered if we were courting death: If we weren't, why did he keep following us,  
insistently, persistently, pulling us to him one by one?

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, 127)

According to Debra Umberson, a sociology professor in Texas University:

Racial disparities in exposure to the deaths of friends and loved ones is a unique type of stress for [B]lack Americans that not only obliterates important social connections, but also launches a lifelong cascade of psychological, social, behavioral, and biological consequences that undermine other relationships, as well as health, over the life course. (2017, 3)

This is exemplified in *Men We Reaped* as, even though death is the final consequence for the five men depicted in the memoir, it is also the cause of many mental health issues for the people they leave behind.

Umberson also affirms that the premature death of young Black men can cause a feeling of vulnerability as well as a sense of threat amongst their closed ones (2017, 3). Ward expresses this anxiety when, during her drive back home in the summer of 2004, she thinks “*I hope nobody dies this summer*” (2013, 21, italics in the original). By then, four of the five men she talks about in the memoir had died. This sense of threat, however, goes back to Ward's childhood as, from the beginning of the memoir, the author describes how death has always been present in her family history: “We were young people living in houses seemingly more populated by ghosts than by the living, with the old dead and the new” (2013, pp.

67-68). Her childhood and teenage years gave way to her young adult years, which were also conditioned by the presence of death. The first one, and most devastating, she experienced as a young adult was her brother's. Ward was denied a peaceful grieving process as, eight months after her brother's death, his killer was found not-guilty of manslaughter. A little over a year after the killer's acquittal, Ronald killed himself. The presence of death was felt by the rest of Ward's community as, before dying, Roger talked with Charine, Ward's sister, about "how [they] felt like death was stalking [them], driving [them] from one another" (2013, 31). This lurking nature was made even more evident in the summer of 2004 when Demond and Roger died within four months of difference. Ward expresses this feeling of being chased by death when she says that, at the beginning of that summer, "we knew we were old; by the end of the summer, we'd know we had one foot in the grave" (2013, 30).

If the sense of worthlessness was already present in Ward's community, the deaths of C. J., Demond and Joshua exacerbated it even more. C. J.'s death has already been described as a consequence of Black neighbourhoods being neglected. Demond was allegedly killed because he was going to testify in a drug dealer's case. I use the word "allegedly" because no police investigation was carried out to discover why he had been killed and by whom. Joshua was killed in a car accident in which a drunk white driver charged him from behind. In his case, the driver was only sentenced to five years of prison for having run away, not for killing him. Thus, if, in the case of Ronald and Roger, death had been the last tool to end this feeling of not being enough, in the case of Joshua, C. J. and Demond it was death what made Ward's community feel insignificant. Given that no justice was made after Joshua and Demond's deaths, the community saw that, even after they died, they would still be worth *less* to society.

This constant exposure to death did not end, unfortunately, in Ward's early years as an adult. At the end of the memoir, she narrates how "death spreads, eating away the root of our community like a fungus" (2013, 240). She then goes on to list people in her community that have also passed away during the last few years. For Ward, going home to DeLisle is being reminded of everyone she has lost. When she is away, the burden of death becomes psychological, never allowing her to feel safe, making her be in a constant state of worry about her loved ones. Thus, death —just like mental health issues— is both a cause and a consequence. It makes Black people feel like, for them, life is never guaranteed.

#### 4. Conclusion

We are never free from self-loathing. We are never free from the feeling that something is wrong with us, not with the world that made this mess.

—Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2013, 240)

Having analysed Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*, the main conclusion I have drawn from it is that all the mental struggles that the people described in the memoir go through stem from a feeling of worthlessness. During the first years of each person depicted in the memoir, they are already made to feel inferior to their white equals. From receiving racist comments to having to drop out of school because they feel like nobody cares about whether they get their education or not, the five men depicted in *Men We Reaped* along with Jesmyn are left with a sense of being worthless. This feeling is what that leads them to suffer from low self-esteem and, in most of their cases, depression. These psychological issues make the people in the memoir look for ways to silence this inner voice that is constantly telling them they are not enough. For many of the people in Ward's community, drugs are the solution. However, it is only temporary as, once they overcome that high, they are left with the same depressing feeling. Moreover, the stigma around mental health exacerbates this worthlessness as, since they feel like they are the only ones going through mental struggles, they also feel like they are the weak ones and, thus, their self-esteem is lowered even more.

Moreover, while I was doing research, I was able to see how white privilege can also be seen in scientific research as I found that, in some cases, the scientific articles I was reading could not provide conclusive results when it came to Black *and* poor people's mental health. For example, when talking about the school-to-prison pipeline, Emmons and Belangee talk about how, in order to prevent Black children from dropping out of school, it would be necessary to know their mental their "mental health issues" (2018, 136). Yet, they are unable to further prove their statement as "many questions arise when considering these matters, but there seem to be few and inadequate answers" (2018, 136). While it is understandable that studies as thorough as Emmons and Belangee's do not have conclusive findings for every aspect they deal with, it is also noticeable that the amount of scientific knowledge that there is on Black people is significantly smaller than the one on white people. This shortage of



knowledge on Black mental health can also be seen in the recentness of the secondary sources I have used, as when I was looking for scientific articles, the vast majority had only been published during the last decade.

Consequently, the main lesson this research paper has taught me is that the first step to end this feeling of worthlessness and, thus, to get rid of the stigma around mental illness within Ward's community and the Black community in general, could be to invest more public money in the research on Black mental health. The psychological methods that should be used to ensure mental wellbeing to Black people cannot be the same as the ones used for white people. This is because the Black community not only carries a historical baggage that white people do not, but they also have to face daily attacks for their colour of their skin. By carrying further research on Black psychology, the diagnosis that Black people would receive would be more accurate which, consequently, could lead them to start trusting the health care system after many years of wrongdoing. The improvement of the relationship between Black people and health practitioners would lead to the final—and desired—consequence: the normalisation of seeking psychological help within the Black community. Then, Black people like Ward's community could hopefully feel safe enough to open up to others in their neighbourhoods and, as a consequence, begin the process of healing decades' worth of generational wounds.

## References

- Alonso-Recarte, C. (2020). Pit Bulls and Dogfighting as Symbols of Masculinity in Hip Hop Culture. *Men and Masculinities*, 23(5), 852–871. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X20965455>
- American Civil Liberties Union. (n.d.). “School-to-prison Pipeline”. Retrieved from <https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice/race-and-inequality-education/school-prison-pipeline>
- DeGruy-Leary, J. (2005). *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America’s legacy of enduring injury and healing*. Uptone Press.
- DuVernay, A. (Director and Producer) & Varish, H. & Averick, S. (Producers). (2016). *13th*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Kandoo Films.
- Emmons, J. M., & Belangee, S. E. (2018). Understanding the Discouraged Child Within the School System: An Adlerian View of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 74(1), 134–153.
- Hartman, S. (2008). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Macmillan Publishers.
- Hollie, B. D., & Coolhart, D. (2020). “A Larger System is Placing People in this Predicament”: A Qualitative Exploration of Living Amongst Urban Violence and the Impact on Mental Health and Relationships in the Black Community. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 42(4), 319–334.
- Iceland, J., & Hernandez, E. (2017). Understanding trends in concentrated poverty: 1980–2014. *Social Science Research*, 62, 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.001>
- Jones-Eversley, S. D., Rice II, J., Adedoyin, A. C., & James-Townes, L. (2020). Premature Deaths of Young Black Males in the United States. *Journal of Black Studies*, 51(3), 251–272.
- Khan-Cullors, P., & Bandele, A. (2021). *When They Call You a Terrorist: a Black Lives Matter memoir*. Canongate.

- Kim, J. (2010). Neighborhood disadvantage and mental health: The role of neighborhood disorder and social relationships. *Social Science Research, 39*(2), 260–271. <https://doi-org.sire.ub.edu/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.08.007>
- Lennon, G. (2019). Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy. In A. Drix & P. Templeton (Eds.) *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation*, 193–209. Routledge. [doi.org/10.4324/9780429342684-12](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429342684-12)
- Marriott, D. S. (2012). Father Stories. In *On Black Men* (pp. 95-116). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Nelson, L., & Lind, D. (2015, October 27). The school-to-prison pipeline, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/24/8101289/school-discipline-race>
- Politics and Prose. (2014, October 11). *Jesmyn Ward "Men We Reaped"* [Video file]. Youtube. Retrieved May 15, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjqNA3yY9ZU>
- Pachter, L. M., & Coll, C. G. (2009). Racism and child health: a review of the literature and future directions. *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics : JDBP, 30*(3), 255–263. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e3181a7ed5a>
- Seattle Times Staff. (2019, December 19). *Capital-B 'Black' becomes standard usage at The Seattle Times*. The Seattle Times. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/capital-b-black-becomes-standard-usage-at-the-seattle-times/>
- Trent, M., Dooley, D. G., & Dougé, J. (2019). The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health. *Pediatrics, 144*(2), e20191765. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1765>
- Ullman, S. E., Relyea, M., Peter-Hagene, L., & Vasquez, A. L. (2013). Trauma histories, substance use coping, PTSD, and problem substance use among sexual assault victims. *Addictive behaviors, 38*(6), 2219–2223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.01.027>
- Umberson, D. (2017). Black Deaths Matter: Race, Relationship Loss, and Effects on Survivors. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 58*(4), 405–420.
- Ward, J. (2013). *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Williams, D. R., Costa, M., & Leavell, J. P. (2010). Race and mental health: Patterns and challenges. In T. L. Scheid & T. N. Brown (Eds.), *A handbook for the study of*

*mental health: Social contexts, theories, and systems* (2nd ed., pp. 268–290).  
Cambridge University Press.

Williams, D. R., Neighbors, H. W., & Jackson, J. S. (2003). Racial/ethnic discrimination and health: Findings from community studies. *American Journal of Public Health, 93*, 200–208. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.93.2.200>