Doctoral (Ph.D.) Dissertation

Narratives of Survival: Memory, Trauma, and Healing in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing

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Summary in English

The dissertation examines the multiple aspects of memory and trauma in Jesmyn Ward's two critically acclaimed novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). I argue that Ward recovers past and more recent memories and traumas to turn them into narratives of individual and collective survival and healing. The major mechanism of survival/healing Ward emphasizes is *reconnection:* to the past, nature, the family, and the community. The reward of such reconnection is a grounded sense of identity and community through a reconfigured knowledge of the past.

In light of key notions related to memory and trauma studies that I explain in the first introductory chapter, the dissertation identifies four major tropes in Ward's two novels addressed in four respective analytical chapters: haunting, ecomemory, motherhood, and familial care. The trope of haunting reads the ghost figure from two different perspectives and identifies two major functions in connection with it. While most critics tend to link the ghost figure to magic realism or to the Southern Gothic tradition, I examine it, first, from an Africanist perspective to define it accordingly as a tool for cultural reclamation. Second, the ghost plays the role of historical "revisioning" by invoking individual and more historical traumas, slavery and lynching in particular, while connecting them to their ongoing legacies in the present lives of the main characters. Haunting proves also important in the way it instigates healing, allowing traumatized characters to face their violent past, verbalize their traumas, and ultimately come to terms with them.

The trope of ecomemory offers an ecological reading of memory and trauma in the two novels based on Kimberly Ruffin's "ecological beauty-and-burden paradox." It shows, in the first part, the symbiotic and healing relationship between the characters and their Southern landscape in *Sing*. As a female healer and Vodou practitioner, Mam, the matriarch of the family in the novel, cultivates a spiritual connection with the land. Her masculine counterpart, Pop, maintains a similar harmonious relationship with nature in line with his African, Christian, and Native American beliefs and worldviews. Moving to the burden aspect of Ruffin's ecological dichotomy, the second part of the chapter focuses on environmental racism and ecological trauma in *Salvage*. It examines the Batiste family's "disposability" in their environment as well as their struggle with Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster that I also read as an individual and a collective/cultural trauma.

The third aspect relates to motherhood as a central topic in Ward's cultural narratives. While the experience of motherhood is represented as intrinsically traumatic in the two novels, it also emerges as a source of strength and power for the Black female. Through two contradictory maternal figures—the two female protagonists in *Salvage* and *Sing*, Esch and Leonie, respectively—Ward emphasizes the role of motherhood to cope with trauma by showcasing the redeeming potential of reconnection with motherhood and underscoring the cultural dissociation that results from the disconnection from the motherline.

The last aspect of care reveals the strength of the Black family and stresses the healing power of familial/communal love. Through the example of two poor yet resilient Black families struggling with both past and current traumatic instances, Ward forges in her two novels a culture of care that centralizes familial bonds, including sibling relationships and the nurturing role of the Black male in affecting healing on the individual, familial, and communal levels.

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Introduction

> *I sing under my breath, let their words rise like smoke. This is how I know our stories. I look upward, through spring mist. I follow the dim crush of stars. I am the last bearer of our songs*.—Jesmyn Ward, *Mother Swamp*

Jesmyn Ward's fiction attests to the turmoil of Black self-redefinition occasioned by the socio-cultural and political shifts that followed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In Black expressive culture, the end of the Civil Rights Movement created two main different approaches to the literary and artistic representation of Blackness. For some writers and artists, the radical changes brought by the Civil Rights Movement marked the beginning of a new era in Black culture, which Trey Ellis calls in his 1989 *Callaloo* article the New Black Aesthetic (NBA), and Nelson George and others (like Thelma Golden, Bertram Ashe, Mark Anthony Neale, and Touré) define as the Post-Black or Post-Soul Aesthetic (PSA), a period that "generally refers to art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement" (Ashe 611).[1] Connected primarily to visual culture, the Post-Soul or Post-Black Aesthetics—as the terms may suggest—declare especially a post-modern evolving understanding of Blackness which "does not signify the abandonment of or moving past blackness" (Ashe and Saal 12), but rather endorses "a hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity" (Ashe 614) by "call[ing] attention to, appropriat[ing] even, the experience of 'difference' and 'otherness'" (hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" 51).

While post-soul or post-Black writers and artists have opted for a more liberatory, free-floating, and plural view of Blackness which tends to "break free"—to use Touré's expression

[1] Although the New Black, Post-Soul, and Post-Black Aesthetics designate distinct categories, they are often used interchangeably due to their overlapping characteristics. As philosopher Paul C. Taylor pointed out, "We might take these expressions as synonyms, as different names for the same complex reality" (625).

(4)—from the restricting strictures of the past and "racial prescriptiveness" (Leader-Picone 7), other writers and artists of the new Millennium, including Jesmyn Ward, Colson Whitehead, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Natasha Trethewey, Bernice McFadden, Kiese Laymon, and Rivers Solomon have followed a distinct literary approach by choosing to remain grounded in history and to turn to the past in their representation of the African American cultural identity. In particular, these writers carry on in the fashion of their predecessors—especially Black writers of the Soul era who came to their literary maturity in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and some of whom even continued to write up to the early decades of the new century—the tradition of remembering and reconfiguring old histories to investigate the continuities between past and more recent processes of racialization. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* (2019), and Jesmyn Ward's latest novel *Let Us Descend* (2023) are all examples of new literary works that exhibit this historical turn, exploring the experience of transatlantic slavery mainly through a speculative lens. The attempt by these new literary voices to recover a "documentable black past" and to reclaim "what has been lost or suppressed" (Byerman 1) summons major works and writers like Earnest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sherly Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), who dedicated their literary efforts, especially through their neo-slave narratives, to the reconstruction of what Morrison calls the Black "interior life that was not written" ("Site of Memory" 93) in American masteranarratives.

Hailed as the "New Toni Morrison" by *The American Booksellers Association*, Jesmyn Ward is one of the twenty-first century's most prolific American writers. Born in 1977, Ward published her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*, in 2008, almost five decades after the end of the

Civil Rights Movement. Since her debut novel, Ward has written several pieces of fictional and non-fictional works of different genres: her subsequent post-Katrina novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), an edited collection of essays titled *The Fire This Time* (2016), her third novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), a self-help book called *Navigate Your Stars* (2020), and her latest historical novel *Let Us Descend* (2023). In addition, Ward has written and published several essays in online literary magazines, mainly her *Time Magazine* article "My True South: Why I Decided to Return Home" (2018) and her *Vanity Fair* essay "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic" (2020).

Even though based on the historical timeline of the New Black Aesthetic era Ward ought to be considered a post-soul or post-Black writer, a careful study of the main features of her writing makes it implausible to classify her as one. One of these most important features is Ward's stand on the question of race and racism. While "in its most pernicious form, post-black politics shepherds post-racialism" (Leader-Picone 24), hence regards race as a minor component in Black identity formation, Ward's writing centers the racial dynamic as the key defining factor of Black contemporary identity politics. For instance, besides her explicit engagement with the biopolitics of racialization in her post-Katrina narrative *Salvage the Bones*, Ward does deal with the "cultural mulatto" archetype[2]—a core element of the post-Black artistic expression—through her writing of Jojo's character in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Yet unlike post-Black artists and writers, she does not

[2] Coined by cultural critic Trey Ellis, a "cultural mulatto" is "just as a genetic mulatto . . . a black person of mixed parents who can often get along with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world . . . We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black" (613). Contrary to the traditional stereotypical notion of the "tragic mulatto"—designating a Black and white mixed-race person with a conflicting identity and who feels unable to fit neither in white nor in Black society—the "cultural mulatto" refers to a bi or multi-cultural individual who does not face racial tension nor feel a pressure to identify with a specific racial group. Despite its importance in expanding confining notions of Blackness and of cultural identity itself, the post-Black "cultural mulatto" archetype remains mostly idealistic due especially to the blatant persistence of racialization in American society.

represent him as a flexible subject who can "navigate easily in the white world" (Ellis 613), but rather as a person who struggles with racial discrimination and fails or refuses to integrate the white side of his identity by identifying primarily as Black. In so doing, Ward questions and ultimately negates the delusionary sense of "valedictory optimism voiced by authors across the post-era" and the "post-racial fantasy" prompted by Barack Obama's election as president (Leader-Picone 67, 4).

Although some post-Civil Rights African American literary works have been classified as post-Black due to their experimentation with the idea of "troubling blackness" (Ashe 614),[3] critic Stephanie Li rightfully argues that the notion of post-Blackness "simply cannot be applied to literature because narratives are fundamentally concerned with historical experience even when texts purport to tell about the future . . . to sever that tie, that crucial mooring, is to cease to be part of the black literary tradition, or, in fact, any literary tradition" ("Black Literary Writers" 50). In other words, as historically constructed and culturally embedded, Blackness remains a deeply-rooted identity concept. Moving post or beyond Blackness threatens, therefore, to become not only "a dangerous abdication of history" (Li 45), but of Black historicity itself.

Commenting in the same article on Ward's and other writers' position regarding the post-Black issue, Li adds:

> Recent novels by Jesmyn Ward, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, and many of the authors previously mentioned are not easily classified as post-black because they return to concerns specific to the black community. In Ward's acceptance speech for the 2011 National Book Award, which she received for *Salvage the Bones*, a novel set in New Orleans immediately

[3] Examples include Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), Touré's *The Portable Promised Land* (2002) and *Soul City* (2004), and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005).

> before Hurricane Katrina landed, she stated, 'I wanted to write about the experiences of the poor and the black and the rural people of the South [quoted in Italie 2011]. Ward echoes concerns about racialized representation and marginalization that are centuries old. (46)

By establishing the rural South as the cultural and geographical epicenter of her literary works and centering the experience of poor, rural Black Southerners, Ward constructs her representation of Black identity "on the cultural foundations of Southern Blackness" (Leader-Picone 6). Indeed, unlike most post-Black artists who generally come from socio-economically privileged backgrounds—whom Trey Ellis describes as "a minority's minority mushrooming with the current black bourgeoisie boom" (234)—Ward herself grew up in a poor family and, as a writer, she belongs to what Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry call the "Rough South" (224) to designate Southern writers from lower social class who strove to become writers with or without the benefit of higher education. Ward's writing from within the community gives, therefore, her cultural narratives on Southern Blackness an extra sense of cultural proximity and even authenticity.

Along with her insistence on the persisting racialization of Black people in the US South, Ward strives in her fictional narratives—contrary to the post-Black discourse which celebrates racial individualism (Leader-Picone 7)—to reestablish a sense of "authentic" and rooted Black identity. She does it mainly by foregrounding a cultural space incorporating both an African ancestral and a regional Southern heritage (especially in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*), as well as by emphasizing the power of the family and the community in sustaining individual and collective identities (as mostly revealed in her post-Katrina narrative, *Salvage the Bones*).

However, Ward's preoccupation with the racial question along with her triumph for the communal should not be misunderstood as reflective of a monolithic or essentialized view of Black identity to which the post-soul and post-Black discourse objects. Contrarily, Ward's fictional

representations reaffirm the diversity and complexity of Blackness, particularly in its racial interplay with other intersecting axes of identity, mainly gender, class, and place or region. Ward centers the Black Southern poor and rural experience as not the only, but rather as one of the multiple experiences of being Black for, as argued by Paul C. Taylor, "There have always been many ways of being black, shaped by region, class, occupation, theological commitment, sexual orientation, and more" (635).

Taking its cue from Ward's mnemonic interest, the present dissertation examines multiple aspects of cultural memory and trauma in Ward's two critically acclaimed novels, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.[4] Set in the contemporary American South, Mississippi specifically, the two novels are connected not only spatially, but also thematically. They both present the everyday lives and struggles of two Black families with past and current traumatic events that affect the characters' lives, subjectivities, and relations. As much as Ward's fictional narratives are grounded in a local Southern sense of place and history by focusing on rural Black Southerners and reworking Southern cultural memories/traumas, the cultural scope of her texts extends beyond the regional to reflect on overarching aspects of the past and present Black experience in a wider national context.

The chosen theoretical foci of my dissertation rely primarily on memory and trauma studies, incorporating the "ethical turn" which has developed in conjunction with the reinvention of trauma studies in the 1990s as a product "affecting the humanities" (Craps 52) and aimed at establishing historical justice through "the formation of history as memory" (Best 460). Triggered initially by major traumatic events, such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam

[4] Ward's debut novel *Where the Line Bleeds* is referred to on several occasions in the dissertation, yet it does not form part of the thesis's main corpus. *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* mark Ward's artistic maturation and her coming of age as a writer. The two novels are generally regarded by critics as her most notable literary works thus far.

War (Rico 2), the introduction of trauma theory into Black studies is relatively recent, hence it deserves more critical attention as a growing field of research. Regarding the writer and primary texts, my focus on memory and trauma as a subject of study owes to Ward's particular literary interest in the themes as well as to the complex representation of the African American cultural experience, past and present, in her fiction, which lends itself to scrutinizing memory and trauma in their textual and contextual interplay.

My contention is that in her revisionist fiction, Ward re-enlivens African American cultural memory and trauma to create counter-memories or counter-narratives where—to use Fred Moten's words—"blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity" (2). I argue that Ward recovers past and more recent memories and traumas to turn them into narratives of individual and communal survival and healing. The main mechanism of survival/healing Ward emphasizes is *reconnection:* to the past, nature, the family, and the community. The reward of such reconnection is a grounded sense of identity and community through a reconfigured knowledge of the past. The diverse vectors of cultural memories and traumas presented by Ward and discussed throughout the dissertation are reflective of this multidimensional paradigm which moves beyond the discourse of victimization, that is, the mere representation of Black people as victims of a traumatic history, to endorse a more agentic view of African American cultural resistance, survival, and healing.

Although the critical acclaim Ward has achieved as a fresh and powerful literary voice is remarkably growing, studies devoted exclusively to her works are still scarce. So far, there are only two book-length critical works on Jesmyn Ward: the 2019 *Xavier Review*'s special issue and an edited collection of essays, *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2023, in addition to a special Faulkner/Ward issue published by the American

journal *Philological Review* in 2022. Furthermore, no full monographs dealing entirely with Jesmyn Ward's works have been published up to this point. By offering an interpretation of Ward's literary texts as a memory/trauma space, it is this shortage in critical scholarship that my dissertation seeks to make up for.

The themes of memory and, especially, trauma in Jesmyn Ward's two novels, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, have been the focal point of several articles, MA theses, and Ph.D. chapters. Rick Crownshaw's widely-cited article "A Natural History of Testimony?" reads, for instance, *Salvage the Bones* as a testimonial text, focusing on the novel's depiction of the traumatic experience of Katrina and the disposability of Black lives in the wake of the hurricane. Similarly, Cameron Leader-Picone's chapter "Katrina is the Mother We Will Remember Until the Next: Apocalyptic Storms and the Slow Violence of Structural Racism" in her book *Black and More than Black: African American Fiction in the Post Era* (2019) examines the traumatic effects of anti-Black slow violence by studying two post-Katrina texts, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*, as counternarratives to the idea of racial progress. Zsuzsanna Lénart-Muszka's article "The Weather and the Wake: Maternal Embodiment and Peril in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," in the collection of essays *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*, interprets Hurricane Katrina along the traumatic formation of Black motherhood in *Salvage the Bones*, arguing for the protagonist's (Esch's) struggle to weather both the approaching storm and her upcoming motherhood. A book chapter titled "'This Thing We Have Done Together': Haunted Witnessing in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward" by Eden Wales Freedman in her book *Reading Testimony, Witnessing Trauma: Confronting Race, Gender, and Violence in American Literature* (2020) examines *Salvage the Bones* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as two contemporary works that bear witness to the traumatic afterlife of slavery. In a much similar

fashion, Michelle Stork's article "Reclaiming the Ghosts of Trauma's Past: Witnessing and Testimony as Healing in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*" in *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* uses Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's theories of witnessing and testimony to show how both readers and characters can bear witness to historical and present traumatic events. While all the above-mentioned articles and book chapters, among others, help illuminate different facets of memory and trauma in Ward's *Salvage* and *Sing*, they only touch upon one or the other aspect of the two concepts. The diverse angles from which I examine the notions of memory and trauma in the two novels, that is, haunting, ecomemory, environmental racism, motherhood, and familial care, provide a larger framework of study. The multiple approach I follow will help enrich existing literature by expanding the critical overemphasis on racial traumas in Ward's literary texts to advance a more comprehensive reading that incorporates the healing and survival paradigm put forward by the writer in countering individual and collective experiences of trauma.

In order to cover most of the aspects of cultural memory and trauma in Ward's two novels, I divide the dissertation into five major chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect or trope in relation to memory and trauma. The first chapter, "Theoretical Underpinnings," aims to provide an overview of the notions of cultural memory and trauma in the literature both in general and in more particular African American and Wardian contexts. To that end, I split the chapter into three subchapters: the first is dedicated to the theoretical definitions and delineation of key terms and concepts, that is, memory and trauma, in their intersection with other notions, mainly history, power, and cultural identity; the second subchapter links Black studies to memory and trauma studies to show the relevance of memory and trauma as conceptual tools for exploring the Black cultural landscape; the third and last subchapter provides a brief introduction to Jesmyn Ward as a Southern writer and to her literary topoi in relation to memory and trauma.

The second chapter, "'Cultural Haunting' in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," focuses on the trope of haunting in Ward's novel. Based on Kathleen Brogan's concept of "cultural haunting" (149), I argue that ghosts in the novel can be approached from two different yet interrelated perspectives. First, from an Africanist perspective ghosts represent an all-pervasive element in African-based supernatural and spiritual beliefs that African Diaspora writers appropriate and deploy in their literary works as a means for cultural reclamation. Second, haunting in Ward's text performs, from a trauma perspective, the compelling function of historical "re-visioning" by evoking historical painful events, slavery and Jim Crow in particular, while connecting them to their present iterations in everyday traumatic instances. The subchapter also highlights the healing effect of haunting in line with the two above functions of the ghost trope.

The third chapter, "Remembering in/through Nature: An Ecocritical Reading," addresses memory and trauma in Ward's two novels from an ecocritical perspective. Based on Kimberly Ruffin's notion of the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" (2), I divide the chapter into two different yet related subchapters. The first one is dedicated to the beauty part of Ruffin's ecological paradox by studying ecospirituality as a constituent of African American cultural memory in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and examining the symbiotic, healing relationship between the main characters and their physical landscape. The second subchapter relates to the ecological burden and focuses on Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* as an individual as well as a collective/cultural trauma. It situates the hurricane in a larger African American historical context by looking at its socio-economic and racial dimensions and tracing "the biopolitics of disposability" (Giroux 174) that became more visible in its wake, theorizing them as everyday traumatic renditions. The subchapter ends by highlighting the ethics of survival and communal solidarity that emerged in the aftermath of Katrina.

The fourth chapter, "(Dis)continuing Black Motherhood," focuses on the trope of motherhood as one of the main defining vectors of Black female subjectivity in Ward's *Sing*, *Unburied, Sing* and *Salvage the Bones*. The chapter deals primarily with the two female protagonists of the two novels, Esch and Leonie, respectively. It examines the construction—or the lack thereof—of their maternal identities as impacted by their familial relationships, mainly with regard to their mothers, as well as by other pressing socio-economic, historical, cultural, and environmental factors. By analyzing and contrasting Esch's and Leonie's characterization and maternal experiences in two respective subchapters, the chapter shows how the reconnection with motherhood leads to an affirmation of a feminine identity (such as the case for Esch), whereas the cultural disconnection from motherhood and the motherline results in the dislocation of the Black female self (such as the case for Leonie).

Tightly linked to all the chapters, yet more so to the fourth one, the fifth and last chapter, "Healing through Caring: Community in Resilience" deals with the healing power of familial/communal care to both individual and collective traumas, especially maternal ruptures. Focusing on familial bonds, especially sibling relationships and masculine caretaking due to their centrality as the most lucid survival strategies and healing practices in the two novels, the chapter is divided into two separate subchapters, each dealing with a different book and arguing for the resilience of the African American family in coping with both historical and present-day traumatic experiences.

Although each individual chapter focuses on a distinct aspect of memory and trauma, as a whole the chapters are linked theoretically and textually. The diversity of thematic foci from one chapter to another owes to the very diversity and multiplicity of Black cultural memories and traumas as well as to the cultural richness and complexity of Ward's writing. Collectively, the

analytical chapters prove the relevance of using memory and trauma as conceptual tools to explore the African American cultural core in Ward's literary universe. Though it is impossible to touch upon all the facets of Ward's literary figuration of memory and trauma in her two novels within the scope of the present dissertation, the latter attempts to address the most salient aspects of memory/trauma that help illuminate nodal elements of the African American experience, past and present, in the two novels.

I conclude the dissertation with a reading of Ward's article "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic," a personal piece in which the writer mourns the tragic loss of her husband in the wake of COVID-19. The conclusion explores the essay from the perspective of trauma and healing by focusing on Ward's concept of "Respair"—a Wardian theorem that brings together hope and despair, two notions that can be sensed and traced in all of Ward's fictional and non-fictional works, her two novels*, Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Salvage the Bones*, included.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Underpinnings

> *The memory is a living thing—it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.*—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings.*

1. Memory, Trauma, and Cultural Identity: Notions and Intersections

Although the art of memory (or *ars memoria*) goes back to ancient Latin and Greek cultures,[5] memory studies reemerged as a topic of interdisciplinary interest in the early twentieth century, especially with the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who introduced the concept of "collective memory" in addition to "individual memory." Halbwachs defines individual memory as "inward," "personal," or "autobiographical" and collective memory as "external," "social," or "historical" (*The Collective Memory* 52). While individual memory mainly involves personal recollections, the term "collective" does not primarily suggest that the act of remembering the past is carried out by groups (for in cases of rituals and commemorations, group members can get together to remember), but rather memory itself is collective and shared, that is, it concerns a particular social group, community, or country/nation. Despite the seemingly binary opposition between individual and collective memory, the two remain interconnected for "[w]hile the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 22). In other words, as the act of remembering is performed by individuals as members of certain social groups

[5] For more insights on the etymology of the concept of "memory" and its development in classical Western Latin and Greek cultures, read Frances A. Yates's *The Art of Memory* and Lina Bolzoni's "The Art of Memory and Literary Invention."

or communities, any individual memory is inherently collective, while individual memories may also be individualized and contribute to the articulation of collective memory.

The last point reflects another important aspect of collective memory identified by Halbwachs, namely, its social or intersubjective nature. The act of remembering "does not take place in social vacuum" (Misztal 12), but in society. It concerns a given event, image, or conversation initially acquired in society within particular past "social frameworks" and later reproduced in accordance with other socio-cultural contexts "shaped by the concerns of the present" (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 38, 25). Memory is, therefore, to be understood first and foremost as a "representation" or "reconstruction" of past events in the present social and societal frameworks as they impact the ways of remembering, even though, as Donald Morse contends, "no memory can be an exact duplication of past events but rather each appears as a broken reflection of past events brought forward into present time" (199). This is especially true in the case of traumatic memories, where memory becomes an inexact, imperfect representation of the past.

People are generally prompted to remember via their individual activities and in their social life, the defining points of which hinge upon socially verified events. Since the past is recalled based on the "beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (Halbwachs, *La Topographie Légendaire* 7), group or community members remember selectively as they make use of some collective memories, or of particular aspects of past collective memories, while intentionally or unintentionally forget or discard other memories deemed not relevant to their present concerns.

This selective aspect does not negate the reliability of memory as much as reflects its dynamic and flexible essence compared to history. Indeed, one of the fundamental differences between memory and history is that memory represents a "perpetually actual phenomenon" that

connects the present to the past (and vice versa), while history is a mere "representation of the past," always unchangeable and unaffected by the changing socio-cultural contexts (Nora 286). Unlike history, which embodies a passive process of retelling the past, memory is an active exercise of recovering, negotiating, and reconstructing past experiences in light of present contexts. History is, in this sense, impersonal, universal, and "situated outside and above groups" (Wachtel 214); memory, on the other hand, is personal, affective, and connected to the cultural identity of individuals and social groups.

Despite their core differences, memory and history are not to be understood in absolute opposition as postulated by Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs.[6] History and memory should, instead, be considered as two distinct yet interrelated "modes of remembering in culture" (Erll 7). In the words of Frank Wilker, "Whether history can emerge entirely without the deliberation of what we can call social or cultural memory—that what is often too easily dismissed as fictional account, emotional disposition or political motivation—must therefore be denied since there cannot be any exact delineation between the two" (49). While the delineation between memory and history is evident and explained above, their intersection is yet incontrovertible. Notwithstanding its ahistorical and fluid nature, collective memory—and especially cultural memory and trauma in this regard—"has its fixed point" as it originates mostly from historically-

[6] Both Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora insist on the contrast and polarity of memory and history. In his article "Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire," Pierre Nora emphasizes this contending that "[m]emory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (285). Maurice Halbwachs, likewise, interprets history and memory as two different concepts and distinguishes between two types of history: learned history and lived history. For him, lived history is a form of collective memory, while learned history is more related to historical academic scholarship. He explains: "Our memory rests truly not on learned history but on lived history. By the term 'history' we must understand, then, not a chronological sequence of events or dates, but whatever distinguishes one period from all others, something of which books and narratives generally give us only a schematic and incomplete picture" (*The Collective Memory* 57).

verified “fateful events of the past” (Assmann and Czaplicka 129), like, for instance, the cultural memory/trauma of slavery in the Black context.

Whereas Halbwachs came up with the notion of “collective memory” and highlighted its social dimension, Jan and Aleida Assmann, among others, built on his concept and took it one step further “into the realm of symbolic mediation” arguing that “our memory has a cultural basis and not just a social one” (Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* 6, 8). In their extensive studies on memory, they distinguish between two major types of memory: communicative and cultural memory. Both communicative memory and cultural memory are considered, for them, as a form of collective memory, yet which are not interchangeable. They explain that “communicative” or “everyday memory” refers basically to short-term lived memory (“mémoire vécue” of 80-100 years), that is three to four generations, and to non-institutionalized or contingent memory which concerns mainly everyday issues, conversations, and informal traditions (Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory” 117). “Cultural memory,” on the other hand, is defined as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (Assmann and Czaplicka 126). Cultural memory acts, in this sense, as a cultural repository comprising the cultural epistemologies, traditions, and values of a particular social group or community. Its preservation and survival rely on both individual and communal processes of remembrance, repetition, and even reinvention.

Accordingly, cultural memories are institutionalized in museums, libraries, schools, and other types of institutions, which Barbara Misztal calls “institutions of memory” (21) and French historian Pierre Nora defines as “sites of memory” or “lieux de mémoire where memory crystallizes and secrets itself” (284). “Sites of memory,” Nora explains, are “material, symbolic

and functional" (295). It means that they are embodied in physical "mnemotechnical devices" (Boer 21); that they have an emblematic significance for a given group or community; and that they serve a main function which is to provide "a store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (Assmann and Czaplicka 130), resisting thereby "historical amnesia" and "block[ing] the work of forgetting" (Nora 295-296).

Besides institutionalization, cultural memory can also be passed down actively and informally from one generation to another, in the form of stories, traditions, or rituals, by different "mnemonic communities" or "memory groups," like the family, ethnic groups, or nations, who "socialize [individuals] into what should be remembered and what should be forgotten" (Misztal 15). This mode of transmission is especially important for subordinated groups or communities—as the case for the African American community—who have no or limited access to memorial power structures and official historical records, thus resort to their own cultural practices to preserve and transmit the knowledge needed for not only their collective self-definition, but for their historical continuity and cultural survival as well.

The last point underscores as it also explains the importance for individuals and communities to remember and transmit the past. The "will to remember" (Nora 291) is first and foremost connected to the concept of identity. Barbara Misztal defines memory as "the central medium through which identities are constituted" (1). Similarly, Jan Assmann identifies "the concretion of identity" as the primary function of memory, asserting that "[m]emory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition" ("Communicative and Cultural Memory" 114). Accordingly, cultural memory satisfies the individual desire to belong to a particular social group or community as well as the

collective need to be identified as a distinct socio-cultural entity with a shared past, a point or points of reference, and a validating force in the present.

Social communities resort to their collective memories to maintain cohesion and unity for, as Lisa Hinrichsen confirms, "communities emerge from the repetition of cultural practices, including dreams, desires, fantasies, and fictions, and from affects and identifications that become naturalized as the signifiers of membership" (*Possessing the Past* 5). Despite the "heterogeneous versions and various interpretations maintained by individuals" (Gaál-Szabó, "Cultural Memory" 78) of their collective memory, their "connectivity" to the "orientating symbols of identity of their social world" (Harth 86) determines their existence as a unified cultural entity. In other words, individuals belonging to the same social group or community feel a certain emotional bonding to a particular culture "by means of emphatic, socio-political and identitary processes" (Rico 26). In this respect, memory and bonding prove to be interdependent and mutually connected. For memory to be embedded and integrated as constitutive of collective identity, it needs to comply with or conform to a previously well-defined identity. Cultural memory, in turn, binds individuals and strengthens group or community cohesion because of its symbolic capacity and collective nature. We can therefore say that memory and identity are "mutually constitutive" (Ryan 156).

Despite its capacity to reinforce identity and ensure cultural unity, memory may become repressive of group identities when infused with ideological values and power relations. To distinguish between the oppressive and liberating functions of memory, it is important to know "who controls and imposes the content of social memory" (Misztal 56) and who decides what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. In line with this, Michel Foucault contends that "if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles" (253). As state-sanctioned narratives of the

past, hegemonic cultural memories are created, in most cases, to suppress or subordinate the cultural memories of minority groups.

Mainstream cultural memories are crystallized and circulated by dominant power structures through different institutions, artifacts, traditions, and narratives. Minority groups or communities in an oppressive society are compelled to internalize memories either unconsciously because it is the only available version, or consciously to validate their place *vis-à-vis* the prevalent status quo. "Mnemonic communities" also play a major role in performing the task of "mnemonic socialization"—an aspect of socialization that minority groups or community members are drastically exposed to. It denotes "the process by which individuals learn to conventionalize, structure and narrativize their memories in accordance with the dominant social mores and beliefs" (Ryan 156). The plurality of memories is, therefore, downplayed to be subsumed by the singularity of the dominant collective memory. While "mnemonic socialization" into dominant memories can be imposed on communities and their members, it is also possible to be socialized into subordinate memories, involving in such case a process of "mnemonic resistance" (Ryan 155).[7]

"Mnemonic resistance" involves the creation of "counter-memories" or what Foucault identifies as the "insurrection of subjugated knowledge" (9). Instead of turning to official history, subordinated communities "tend to look toward memory for authentic stories about their past"

[7] The latter can be thematized in the tripartite framework of responses of subordinated groups and individuals to dominant discourses, that is, assimilation, accommodation, and separation, delineated by Mark Orbe in his co-cultural theory (1998). Co-cultural theory "in its most general form . . . refers to interactions among underrepresented and dominant group members . . . including people of color; women; people with disabilities; those from a lower socioeconomic status, and gays, lesbians and bisexual" (Orbe and Spellers173). In her article "Memory, Power and Resistance: The Anatomy of a Tripartite Relationship," Lorraine Ryan draws a similar tripartite framework of communication outcomes. They are as follows: "1. Hegemonic: memory consumers construe the cultural vector in the manner envisaged by its producer. 2. Negotiated: memory consumers accept the general argument of the vector but deem it irrelevant to their particular circumstances and then proceed to integrate it with their own oppositional view. 3. Oppositional: memory consumers identify the interpretative code being used by the producer and reject it in favour of an alternative one" (160).

(Misztal 14). Cultural resistance and retention through memory represent, in this sense, one way to challenge cultural erasure and historical distortion. By positioning themselves within the narrative of the past, groups or communities can reconstruct their present identity not as conceived by the Other (the dominant power structures), but as lived and experienced by themselves and their ancestors (Hall 225). Using their "will to remember" who they were and where they come from, subordinated groups or communities can create their own version of the past based on their present needs, resisting thus external power structures that work to suppress their identity or impose a self-image.

A key kin concept that has come to prominence in conjunction with the "memory boom" (Winter 363) of the mid and late-twentieth century is the concept of trauma. Theorized originally within the medical field of psychology, trauma "refers to a blow to the tissues of the body, or, more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind—that results in an injury or some other disturbances" (Erikson 455). In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud defines as traumatic "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [of the individual] . . . the concept of trauma necessarily implies . . . a breach in otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli" (23). The traumatic event, he continues, results in the release of a "cathectic energy" binding the individual to the traumatic event and leading to its repression only to come back later to haunt the traumatized person in the form of disturbing dreams or flashbacks in a seemingly endless cycle of "compulsive repetition" that "is supported by the wish . . . to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed" (23-24). These aftereffects of traumatic events on the individual have come to be known today as "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD).[8] As treatment, Freud suggests "cathartic cure" through traumatic recall, that is, by

[8] The American Psychiatric Association defines "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events or set of circumstances.

inducing individuals to remember traumatic events, and "once the original events are brought into consciousness, most importantly along with all the original intense feeling that accompanied it, the symptoms will disappear" (Garland 13).

Building on Freud's theory, Cathy Caruth provides a similar understanding of trauma by embracing Freud's notions of "the cathexis" and "compulsive repetition" (23) that follow a traumatic experience, while insisting on the belatedness of traumatic recognition. She explains: "The [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event" (*Trauma Explorations* 4-5). Caruth also clarifies that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later" (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). For Caruth, it is not the event itself which causes trauma, but the "anxiety of keeping it repressed" (J. Alexander 5) and the consequent failure of bringing it into the realm of representation. In addition, while Freud suggests "verbal working through" (J. Alexander 33) as therapeutic means, Caruth insists on the impossible representability, hence resolvability, of trauma through the ordinary means of remembrance. She argues that the initial inaccessibility or incomprehensibility of traumatic events, the loss of precision, and the desire to push painful memories away, hinder traumatic recall or reenactment, impairing thus "the

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An individual may experience this as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening and may affect mental, physical, social, and/or spiritual well-being. Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat, rape/sexual assault, historical trauma, intimate partner violence and bullying . . . People with PTSD have intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience that last long after the traumatic event has ended. They may relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares; they may feel sadness, fear or anger; and they may feel detached or estranged from other people." Cathy Caruth provides a similar definition as she explains: "While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth, *Trauma Explorations* 4).

transformation of trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and other's knowledge of the past" (*Trauma Explorations* 153-154). Yet, while Caruth does not envision a possible resolution to traumatic feelings in a clinical sense, she does not "oppose or contradict the notion that narrative is curative and that trauma victims may come to terms with their traumatic experiences" (Visser 255), where coming to terms means to "*go on with*" trauma rather than to "*go over it*" (Garland 6).[9]

Yet, Caruth's and, especially, Freud's overemphasis on the possibility of psychological recovery through narrative reenactment remains far-fetched and even misleading in certain contexts. While psychological treatment can be feasible and practical at the individual level of trauma, the process becomes more intricate at the collective or cultural one. When a painful event happens to a particular group of people, the healing of an entire collectivity proves almost impossible. It is even more complicated in the case of cultural trauma, where the catastrophic event is distant in time and experienced vicariously, that is, by individuals who had no personal encounter with or knowledge of the traumatic event. Furthermore, relying on Stef Craps, one might argue that the individualization of social suffering—which Freud's and Caruth's cathartic paradigm seems to presuppose—impedes historical justice and reparation as it not only oversimplifies the process of recovery by making it a matter of "gaining linguistic control" over traumatic pain, but also privileges psychological healing over material recovery (55-56).

Conceptualized originally within the individual and psychological realms, the notion of trauma has recently migrated into the wider social or cultural sphere, leading to the emergence of key concepts such as cultural or collective trauma. Like individual trauma, collective trauma generally emanates from an "invasive or overwhelming event" (Smelser 37), yet which affects the

[9] All italicized citations in the dissertation are in the original unless otherwise indicated.

"social fabric" (Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 4) of a social group or community. Jefferey Alexander explains that "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). In the "event-based model of trauma" (Visser 252), for trauma to be defined as collective or cultural, it has to involve certain features: it first results from a historically verified event that provokes a sense of "acute discomfort entering the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (J. Alexander 10), and, second, it penetrates the cultural memory of the affected collectivity by being rendered symbolic through cultural representation and remembering. Examples of cultural traumas include, for instance, the historical trauma of slavery, the Holocaust, civil wars, pandemics, and even large-scale environmental disasters, as is the case for Hurricane Katrina in Ward's *Salvage the Bones*.

Unlike individual trauma, collective or cultural trauma is vicarious, that is, it does not necessarily involve the first-hand experience of the traumatic event because, as Michelle Balaev indicates, "a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory" (152). Marianne Hirsch coined the term "postmemory" to refer to this mediated, second-hand experience of trauma within the Holocaust context. She writes: "Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (5). The exercise of cultural trauma entails, therefore, the transmission of traumatic memories by

"carrier groups" as "the collective agents of the trauma process" (J. Alexander 11). This process of transmission renders trauma both intergenerational, transhistorical, and even "in illo tempore" as it moves from the mere factual level to the more cultural, that is, the symbolic or even mythical one. It morphs in certain cases into what Dominick LaCapra calls "founding trauma" in referring to a "trauma that is transformed and transvalued into a legitimizing myth of origin" (xiii),[10] such as the case for the "founding traumas" of the Middle Passage and American slavery for African Americans.

As initially developed by major Western theorists, including Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey H. Hartman, Dominick LaCapra, and Shoshana Felman, trauma theory has focused, mainly and almost exclusively, on the traumatic history of the Holocaust. In his article "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response" Michael Rothberg criticizes the Euro-American centrism of "turn-of-the-millennium trauma studies," introducing his concept of "multidirectional memory" (as opposed to "competitive memory") where he calls for the joint traumatic theorization of "the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism as singular yet relational histories" (225).[11] Rothberg contends that instead of competing for the preeminence of one collective memory or trauma over another, it would be more productive to see how multiple traumatic histories connect—due to their power to illuminate the violent practices of dominant structures—without sacrificing the cultural particularities of the suffering communities concerned (*Multidirectional Memory* 3). Stef Craps

[10] LaCapra adds that "[a]crisis or catastrophe that disorients and harms the collectivity or the individual may miraculously become the origin or renewed origin of the myth and serve an ideological function in authorizing acts or policies that appeal to it for justification" (xii).

[11] Defining "multidirectional memory" in his book *Multidirectional Memory*: *Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg states: "Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (3).

makes a similar observation by criticizing the one-sidedness of trauma theory, cautioning against its potential in "the perpetuation of beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities" (53). Eventually, trauma theory has started to open up to non-Western traumatic histories, and its scope of application has recently been extended and revised to include other historical contexts—the African American context as a case in point—making it not only a cross-cultural but also an interdisciplinary concept.

Like cultural memory, cultural trauma is crucial to the formation of cultural identity. While at the very core of the experience of trauma is its disruptive effect on social groups or communities' identities, cultural trauma can paradoxically be constructive. Though anchored in painful historical events, cultural trauma, Smelser Neil contends, "may be community- and identity-disrupting or community- and identity-solidifying—usually some mixture of both" (44). Its "identity-solidifying" potential resides in its capacity to enhance cultural unity by strengthening cultural ties and emotional bonding among the members of the same suffering community. In the words of Kai Erikson, "Trauma shared can act as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common cultural backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of recognition, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed" (459). Earnest Renan even goes further to suggest that "unity is always brutally established" and that "shared suffering unites more than does joy" (251, 261). At the juncture of a social group or community's psychological or cultural dissociation due to a traumatic occurrence, emerges—either voluntarily or spontaneously—a sense of being together (even in pain) and a compact feeling of cultural/emotional identification from which group or community members derive a sense of collective belonging. Cultural trauma becomes, in this respect, a source of empowerment and resistance for oppressed communities to further their identity as a coherent cultural entity.

Both cultural memory and trauma are tightly connected to cultural identity. In the context of subordinated or oppressed groups/communities, remembering the past—even the most traumatic events—becomes the means through which they (re)construct their cultural identities and derive self-definition against and beyond the hegemonic discourses of memory and history imposed by dominant structures. With its capacity to transmit and reproduce knowledge, traditions, and values, cultural memory presents a venue for both cultural affirmation and cultural resistance. Similarly, trauma, itself a form of cultural memory, is important for identity (re)construction, especially at the collective level, because of its foundational, reparative, and strengthening power when symbolically mediated and culturally represented.

2. Remembering the Black (Traumatic) Past

Cultural memory provides a relevant conceptual framework for examining the Black experience from the early Afro-European encounter until the present. While some historical knowledge of the African journey to the Americas and what came afterward exists in the archive, the history of "the Black Atlantic culture" (Gilroy xi) and the "interior life" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 92) of people of African descent remain "so little known" (Gilroy xi). This gap in knowledge is due, first, to mainstream historiography which "only recorded dominant voices or documents stressing the character of African subjects as objects" (Wilker 46), and, second, to the very "scarcity of African narratives of captivity and enslavement" (S. Hartman, "Venus" 3). For instance, first-hand narratives of the Middle Passage or "those early centuries of the 'execrable trade'" (Sharpe 69) are rare, with the exception of Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (1769). The latter offered almost the only "historical" account that provides an "authentic" narrative of the transatlantic slave trade from the point of view of the enslaved, in addition to Zora Neale Hurston's posthumous non-fiction

book *Barracoon: The Story of the Last* "*Black Cargo*," written in 1930 and published only recently in 2018.

Other slave narratives, likewise, remain insufficient because though "they provided the foundation of African-American literary and political history" (Blight 59), they "were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many things" due to the constraints imposed by the dominant political and socio-cultural structures of the day (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 91). That is why African American writer Toni Morrison indicates that her writing on Black cultural history relies mostly on imaginative recollection as for her "the act of imagination is bound up with memory" ("Site of Memory" 98). In the absence of written history, "memory rather than history becomes a fruitful strategy for the recovery of the past" (Dixon 22) and for the generation of a kind of "referential truth" (Whitehead 13) about the Black "interior life that was not written" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 93) in American hegemonic discourses of history and memory.

Addressing African American cultural memory entails studying the intersection of African American culture, on the one hand, and memory, on the other. It requires exploring the different cultural practices through which Black cultural history and memory are preserved, (re)produced, and transmitted throughout generations. In other words, it is useful to ponder and seek answers to the series of questions that Paul Gilroy poses in his book *The Black Atlantic*:

> How do black expressive cultures practice remembrance? How is their remembering socially organized? . . . What part the memory of the terrors and bondage that have been left behind plays in securing the unity of the communities of sentiment and interpretation which black culture helps to reproduce. How do changes in the ways that these terrors are summoned up illuminate the shifting, restless character of black political culture? (212)

Due to limited access to power structures governing the reproduction and circulation of memory, Black mnemonic devices—at least prior to the cultural movements of the 1960s—were confined to informal and mainly oral means of cultural transmission, like stories, traditions, and other socio-cultural practices. As Ralph Ellison writes in his *Invisible Man*, "A whole unrecorded history is spoken" in "the gin mills and the barbershop and the juke joints and the churches" (407). These unconventional and ostensibly "unimportant" memory spaces (the barbershop, the juke joints, and the churches) represent "an environment conducive to unrestrained community expression" (Thornton 76), where "the private or interior life" of Black people is articulated and Black folk culture is performed. Besides informal oral practices, Black people invented their own commemorative festivals and religious anniversaries (Brundage 62) to mark their history (such as Juneteenth and Kwanzaa). Writing—as further explained in the next subchapter—constitutes another major expressive tool for the preservation and transmission of Black memory. The struggle of the African American community for a more inclusive and non-racist representation in the public memory space continues not only through cultural expression, but in other more militant ways as well. The recent topping down and calls for the removal of Confederate symbols and monuments are just illustrative of this ongoing effort to advance Black memory and forge a place for it in American national memory space.

In the same book, Gilroy stresses the role of remembering in (re)forming a Black collective consciousness and (re)establishing historical continuity through the very narratives of rupture. He writes:

> The narratives of loss, exile, and journeying . . . serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory. The telling and retelling of these stories play a special role, organising the

> consciousness of the "racial" group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity—the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity. (198)

Gilroy asserts the importance of maintaining ties, through diverse memorial practices, to Black collective "nodal points" which provided the very foundation for the racial formation of African Americans, yet marked a point of departure for the (re)construction of their cultural identity and their potential emergence as a distinctive—not in the sense of homogeneous—communal entity. Accordingly, the early constitution of an African American community, and, by consequence, of a shared identity and culture, represented not only a means for their (cultural) liberation from bondage, but also a set of references for subsequent generations, a "seedbed" of cultural epistemologies, traditions, and values that emerge mostly out of pain but with a validating potential for the Black individual and community in the present.

Trauma, both psychological and cultural, provides as well a generative conceptual framework to explore the Black cultural history. As the African American past "is one undeniably littered with traumatic acts, laws, and . . . brutal, repetitive acts of violence that include lynching, incest, rape, and murder" (Hinrichsen, "Trauma Studies" 605), the expressive representation of the Black experience often requires the inclusion of Black historical traumas at the center of the memory work. For the most part, this traumatic presence is articulated through what Aida Levy-Hussen calls "a collective racial grief" originating from the "unresolved trauma of the slave past" (11).

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison coined the term "rememory" to describe this "spatiotemporal" (Levy-Hussen 25) persistence and inevitable return of traumatic memories in Black life and psyche. Similar in its insistence on the haunting and compulsively intrusive nature

of the past to both Caruth's definition of trauma and Marianne Hirsh's concept of "postmemory,"[12] Morrison's "rememory" remains yet specific to the African American experience of institutional slavery:

> Some things you forget. Other things you never do . . . Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory but out there in the world . . . Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away . . . the picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. (*Beloved* 38)

"Rememory" for Morrison is a powerful, possessive traumatic force that cannot be forgotten or even repressed. It exists at the intersection of the personal and the collective because it is "out there in the world" for everyone—Black in America—to (re)experience it. "Rememory," Hirsh indicates, "is the same for the one who was there and the one who was not there" (83), that is, like cultural trauma, it is vicarious and intergenerational. The "rememory" of all, slavery, Sethe asserts, is an unceasing traumatic presence, a "real" happening that will always be there in the living memory of Black people. Like a shadow, "it's never going away."

As excruciating as it is, the literary recovery of the African American traumatic past can be redemptive. The recollection or narrativization of traumatic events in symbolic forms helps generate a therapeutic effect by enabling individuals and/or communities to face, reconceive, and—when and if possible—come to terms with their violent histories. Although critic Aida Levy-

[12] In her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2-12), Marianne Hirsh explains the difference between her concept of "postmemory" and Morrison's notion of "rememory." The main distinction she makes is that of "mediation." For her, Morrison's "rememory" describes an inevitable immediate process of "traumatic reenactment and repetition," whereas "postmemory" requires "indirection and mediation," that is, the transmission of memory within the intimate space of the family (82-83). Yet, Hirsh also adds that postmemory risks always to "slide into" rememory due to the shared traumatic nature of the Holocaust and slavery.

Hussen emphasizes the limits of this idea of "reparative return"—or what she terms the "therapeutic reading" of African American literary texts (15)—due to its potential in "manufactur[ing] false hope about the possibilities for historical repair" (5), the recovery of the past remains necessary for the Black individual and community. That owes especially to its power not only in re(con)figuring histories, but mainly in reinstating historical continuity, maintaining collective/cultural cohesion, and affecting healing in the present.

The two major historical "nodal points" or "founding traumas" that keep feeding the mnemonic reconstruction of the Black lived experience are undoubtedly the Middle Passage and enslavement. As "the prime originator of racial slavery and terror for African captives in the Atlantic" (Mozes 197), the Middle Passage emerged as a "defining metaphor" (Wilker 12) and "a pervasive topic/motif in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century black diasporic literature" (Terry 474). Since the people aboard the ships were considered "not as subjects in social history but as objects and quantities" (Smallwood 2), they were excluded from the archives of American history and memory. As Morrison contends:

> It's like the history of the middle passage. All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it is like the whole nation that is under the Sea. ("Interview with Angels Carabi" 38-39)

As she criticizes the "absence of black iconography in foundational symbols in the United States (Hunchard 58), Morrison also emphasizes the duty of Black people to remember and honor their history, as reiterated in her article "The Site of Memory," where she considers the writing about

Black life as the inherent "exercise . . . of any person who is black" (91). Although Morrison in the quote above "identifies the ocean as a symbol of the absence of millions of slaves from the annals of history" (K. Christian 2), the Middle Passage rather appears in Black cultural narratives as an enigmatic, haunting experience with various meanings, including "dislocation, starting point, loss unspeakable or repressed memory, abyss, contact zone, gateway, transformation, common ground, and a site of potential mythic or historical recuperation" (Terry 477-78). The image of the slave ship as a site of memory/trauma and an ambivalent "cultural icon" symbolizing both racial terror and a "distinct mode of cultural production" (Gilroy 16-17) is, for instance, illustrative of the epistemological amalgam produced by the forced experience of transatlantic slavery.

Like the Middle Passage, the "founding trauma" of slavery represents "a cultural marker, a primal scene and a site of memory in the formation of African American identity" (Eyerman, "The Past in the Present" 163). Although as an actual lived experience American enslavement is supposedly well in the past, Saidiya Hartman defines slavery as an unfinished process that has "yet to end" ("The Time of Slavery" 758). She explains:

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. 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. (*Scenes of Subjection* 6)

While Hartman here attributes the traumatic persistence of slavery mainly to its continuing legacies in more subtle forms of racialized violence (embodied especially in structural socio-economic inequality), she emphasizes elsewhere, like Aida Levy-Hussen, the sense of "interminable grief

engendered by slavery and its aftermath" ("The Time of Slavery" 758). As an original trauma connecting the past to the present by engendering more traumatic instances and sentiments, slavery needs, therefore, to be read in a way that does not presuppose "the completed past of a singular event" (Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma" 230), but rather looks at its present iterations by accounting for both the event (slavery) and its afterlife (everyday racial traumas).

In fact, besides its Eurocentric propensity, trauma theory in its initial "event-based" model has been criticized for its claim to both "singularity" and "exceptionality" (Craps 55), that is, its exclusive relatedness to a specific (singular) and overwhelming (exceptional) historical event. The classical model of trauma, Irene Visser observes, "does not account for the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism" (252), neither does it account—I would add—for "the insidious trauma" (Brown 107)[13] caused by quotidian subtle forms of racial violence and injustice in the afterlife of slavery. Indeed, Black everyday traumatic occurrences are but the outcomes of more historical and event-based traumatic experiences, including the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow. Thus, a combined approach that takes into consideration the interrelation of the event-based and everyday trauma—especially as cause and effect—would provide a more comprehensive approach to reading the African American experience of trauma in its interplay between the present and the past.

To treat the African American past and present as traumatic is evident due to the extreme brutality characterizing both of them. Yet, to limit the reading to the traumatic aspects of Black life would be reductive of the African American cultural core. Indeed, the early encounter between Africans and Euro-Americans was far more consequential to be restricted to the rhetoric of

[13] Laura Brown's notion of insidious trauma refers to "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" (107).

dislocation prompted by the "natal alienation" (Orlando 5) of people of African descent, which started off centuries of racialization. The enforced displacement of Africans marked, as well, the "surfacing of an incipient African American culture from the holds of the slave ships" (Diedrich et al. 7). As Stuart Hall points out, "The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy . . . that 'unified' these people [enslaved Africans] across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past" (227). Similarly, Ron Eyerman considers slavery as "a pervasive remembrance that grounded a people's sense of itself" (*Cultural Trauma* 1). For both Eyerman and Hall, slavery was, despite its painful nature, the experience that "collectivized people with diverse languages and cultures into the population we refer to as African Americans" (P. G. Davis 13), hence its mediation and representation through memory is crucial in maintaining their cohesion as a collective entity.

Thus, regarded within and beyond the narrative of historical and ontological rupture, the Middle Passage, along with the ensuing experience of enslavement, emerges "not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas" (Diedrich et al. 8). This idea of cultural continuum has represented a contentious issue among American historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists. The most known controversy is the one between Melville J. Herskovits, who argued for African cultural retention in the Americas, and E. Franklin Frazier, who emphasized the cultural rupture with the African heritage. Herskovits's theory of cultural continuity, I argue, proves relevant to Jesmyn Ward's literary work,

especially her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which confirms the survival—in syncretic forms—of some African-based beliefs and traditions in the Black South up to the present day.[14]

Embodied in cultural retention across the Atlantic, "présence Africaine," to use Stuart Hall's expression (230),[15] features considerably in Black expressive culture. The cultural memory of Africa—not as a geographical space but one embalmed in African cultural practices and philosophies—can be found or traced within a large part of contemporary African American cultural expressive practices. As an integral part of Black cultural memories of a pre-racial (African) and racial (African American) lived experience, the return to ancestral African epistemologies, worldviews, and values carry, as Ward's narratives prove, a healing effect, providing both the Black individual and community with effective indigenous knowledge and a grounded sense of identity.

Memory and trauma offer useful theoretical tools for exploring the cultural intricacies and particularities of social communities. In the African American context, the study of cultural memory and trauma entails reading beyond the binaries of past and present, mythical and real, individual and collective, subjugation and agency as the Black lived experience emerges at the concurrent intersection of all these vectors. The rewards of adopting such a multidimensional and complex approach to Black memory and trauma include "self-knowledge, authenticity, and psychic healing" (Levy-Hussen 3). Accordingly, the pursuit of cultural authentication and recovery

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[14] To read more on African cultural continuity in the Americas, see, for instance, Melville J. Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: "The Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (updated edition 2004)*, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).

[15] Stuart Hall borrows Aimé Césaire's and Léopold Senghor's term "Présence Africaine" to talk about African "presence/absence" in African Diasporic cultural expressions. Like Herskovits who contends for the Africanist retention and survival in the Americas, Hall asserts that Africa—though represents "the site of the repressed" (230) and "the deferred" (232)—exists everywhere in the everyday life, customs, language, music, and religious practices, of the Black Diaspora. Yet, he also indicates that any return Home for African Diasporic people can only be symbolic and by "the route" of memory because "the original 'Africa' is no longer there" (231). He indicates that "this 'return to the beginning' is like the imaginary in Lacan- it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery' (236).

(both in the sense of reclamation and healing) through memory and trauma unfolds as one of the main undertakings of Black literary expression. Thus, it is worth looking first at the role of (Black) literature in the articulation of memory and trauma, hence in the process of cultural representation, authentication, and recovery.

3. Memory, Trauma, and the Literary Practice

3.1 Literature as a Mnemonic Vehicle

As a form of cultural expression, writing or literature, represents a medium for both representing and reimagining the past. Literature, Renate Lachmann argues, "stores and transmits knowledge" (306). Literary works, regardless of genre, embody therefore mnemonic devices, carrying and (re)producing cultural memories. Writers act, in this process, as creators or carriers of memory by crafting a "memory text" (Brockmeier 24) and introducing the readers into the remembered or recreated world. This is not to claim the reader as a passive recipient of the "memory text" for artistic works represent an (inter)active terrain where readers, like writers, contribute to the meaning-making process, that is, to the "creation of memories based on their apprehension and appropriation of literary texts" (Paris 95).[16] In line with this, Morrison insists on the creative function of the reader by comparing the text to a map that "should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale" ("Memory, Creation" 389). As it instigates a "memory work" (Mills and Walker 4-5),[17] where both the writer and the reader take an active role in decoding and

[16] The reader-response theory (leading critics include Ronald Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Norman Holland) emphasizes the active role of the reader as a meaning-maker. Hans Robert Jauss, for instance, argues for a "dialogical" triad relationship as he claims that "[i]n the triangle of author, work, and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy" (19).

[17] For Barbara Mills and William Walker "memory work" has two meanings. First, "it refers to the many social practices that create memories, including recalling, reshaping, forgetting, inventing, coordinating, and transmitting" and, second, to the "interpretive activities that scholars follow when studying social memory" (4). While Mills and Walker's study of memory is archeology-based and rather focused on material culture, literary texts work with the same logic by generating a similar process of memory work, that is, by involving both the "recalling, reshaping, forgetting, inventing, coordinating, and transmitting" tasks carried out by the writer during the writing process as well as the "interpretive activities" performed by the reader.

making sense of the narrative (memory text), the potential of literature goes beyond the limited scope of transmitting memory to rendering it more dynamic and open to interpretive work.[18]

Due to its capacity to transmit and (re)configure memory cultures, literature may be considered "as a complex *lieu de mémoire* with its very own forms and strategies of observation and writing from older memories and their diverse representations" (Eckstein ix). Even the employment of specific rhetorical strategies or storytelling/narrative techniques or tropes (such as the call-and-response and tricksterism techniques in the African American literary context) may itself invoke particular frames of reference and mediate or reproduce certain cultural meanings. By referring to or drawing upon other literary works, whether in terms of form or content, literary texts become themselves "a place of memory" (Lachmann 5), carrying and reworking the original meanings and systems generated by the referent or signified texts. Ann Rigney even describes literary texts as "portable monuments" (383). She contends that due to their dynamism and movability, literary artifacts present, unlike stone monuments, "active ingredients in an ongoing cultural process" (369), that is to say, they can exert power outside the text as they impact, shape, and even (re)invent cultural meanings.

While trauma by definition always already involves a crisis of identity and representation, literature becomes, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub contend, "a witness, and perhaps the only witness" to traumatic histories (xviii). This is not to define literature as a substitute for history, but

[18] Hans Robert Jauss, for instance, highlights this multilayeredness by insisting on the "socially formative" function of literature. He argues that "[a] literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence in a monologue. It is much more like an orchestration which strikes ever new chords among its readers and which frees the text from the substance of the words and makes it meaningful for the time" (21). The flexibility of literary texts argued for by Jauss echoes the dynamic character of memory itself compared to history. After all, as I argue here, literature is one means by which memory is transmitted, hence their similarly elastic nature. In addition, the timelessness of literary works, in the sense that they "can be read and re-read over time" (Lloyd, *Rooting Memory* 15), compares to the definition of memory as a "contemporary phenomenon" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 3), always already embedded in present frameworks of meaning and interpretation.

rather to show how literature, like memory, provides new ways for conceptualizing the past and conveying "structures of feelings or emotional truths which cannot be grasped by the methodological limits set (and, granted, disputed and revised) by an institutionalized study of history" (Wilker 49). Literary texts, except perhaps for historical fiction, do not aim for factual truth as much as they engage "representational revision and correction" (Abdur-Rahman 6) in order to produce a kind of "referential truth or experience" (Whitehead 13). Imagined or imprecise this truth might be, it can provide room for reintegration and possibly closure.

Indeed, Like Freud's notion of "traumatic recall," the fictional narrativization of violent experiences marks a process of transformation from "traumatic memory" to "narrative memory" (Whitehead 140-141). It provides a means for traumatized subjects—be it individuals or collectivities—to recover, reenact, and rework painful memories and for readers to "'read the[ir] wounds' through the aid of literature" (G. Hartman 1), inducing along the way an affective process of "emphatic identification" (Wilker 48), which might, in turn, yield a redemptive effect.

Though trauma, both psychological and cultural, has been an integral part of the African American literary body since its inception with the slave narratives—and key canonical texts invested in representing the horrors and immorality of American slavery like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) or Harriet Jacob's memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)—the critical interest in the study of the Black past from a trauma perspective is relatively recent due to the very recent introduction of trauma theory into the literary field and mostly to its initial exclusive emphasis on the Holocaust history. Published in 1987, Morrison's *Beloved* constitutes a pioneering text that helped create the link between Black studies and trauma studies. Levy-Hussen argues that "*Beloved* is regarded as the unparalleled cultural text that confirms the register of trauma and the topic of slavery as the foremost concerns

of black literary study" (133). Through its complex illustration of the cultural and psychic wounds of slavery, *Beloved* constitutes, as Roger Luckhurst indicates, a "formative text in literary trauma studies" (91). Other Black literary works published before and after Morrison's *Beloved* that have perceptively been read as part of this critical turn to trauma theory within the body of African American literature—texts that display a particular interest in past violent experiences by exploring historical racial injuries in their intersection with other axes of oppression—include Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Alice walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988).

The focus on trauma in Black writing of the late twentieth century extends to the works of major African American writers of the new century signaling an attempt on their part to link past traumatic experiences with more recent ones—an attempt which "supplement[s] the event-based model of trauma . . . with a model that can account for ongoing everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well" (Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma" 226). As a case in point, Jesmyn Ward deals in her literary texts with landmark Black historical traumas both in direct and indirect ways, while focusing on their current reiterations and effects on Black lives in the contemporary American South.

Along with the "traumatic knowledge" (G. Hartman 537) that a large part of contemporary African American literary works use and produce, there is a reassertion of identity and survival. Keith Byerman argues that:

> Contemporary narratives are trauma stories in that they tell of both tremendous loss and survival; they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering . . . The stories told by recent writers are those of ordinary people who are often compelled to live life in

> extremis. Their tales are often represented as suppressed, hidden, forgotten, or distorted. They are not the sagas of great heroes with clearly definable values. (4)

Though it is true that, as Byerman indicates, Black trauma stories describe both loss and survival, they do nonetheless communicate "clearly definable values." These include mainly the notions of "communality" and "spiritual kinship" (Erikson 459) that could emerge out of the very experiences of trauma. Indeed, as much as the remarkable return of Black writing to the past is propelled by a consciousness of the unresolved history of racial violence and its enduring impacts, it also reveals a desire among Black writers to re-enliven a distinct cultural identity and maintain a sense of cultural continuity, even if through stories of trauma. Levy–Hussen confirms that "black writers are summoned by a powerful 'flood' of collective, cultural memory that overwhelms the boundaries of the individual and interrupts the unidirectional flow of time, returning the author's imagination to the unredeemed origins of the African presence in the New World" (2). While Levy-Hussen's statement, like that of Byerman, emphasizes the enduring temporal rupture of Black history and the ontological dislocation of Black subjects, her insistence on the "powerful flood" of collective and cultural memory, and on the memory of Africa itself, endows her rhetoric of loss with a ray of hope in the cultural survival of the African American community.

3.2 Jesmyn Ward and Black (Southern) Memory/Trauma

Jesmyn Ward belongs to a post-Civil Rights generation of Black writers who felt disillusioned by "the steady retraction of civil rights gains, the reinvigoration of both attitudinal and institutional racism" (Abdur-Rahman 4) and by what Byerman calls "current prosperity and deprivation" (4).[19] Although written in the twenty-first century, Ward's fictional works are rather grounded, both

[19] By "current prosperity" Byerman means Black individual achievements and successes that, according to him, do not reflect, and on the contrary, hinder any progress at the collective level because as he explains, "Those who succeed are thus encouraged to forget; part of what they are to forget are those who have not succeeded" (4).

directly and indirectly, in the past and reflect the mnemonic turn taken by many post-Civil Rights Black writers. When asked in one of the interviews about why she writes, Ward answers:

> I think that part of what I am trying to do, especially now as I grow, as I evolve as a writer, is that I am trying to bring stories from that past, that violent past, forgotten stories, forgotten voices, forgotten people, back into the light, back into the conversation, back into the public memory, the public imagination, because I think that, unfortunately, there is a real concerted effort in this country to rewrite that history, to erase that history, to disavow that history, to say that all the violence and pain and trauma, to say that none of that have ever happened. ("Jesmyn Ward, 'Sing, Unburied, Sing'")

In the quote above, Ward emphasizes the omission of Black memory from both the American national memory and the South's regional memory. Thus, like Morrison who considers writing on Black life as the inherent "exercise . . . of any person who is black" ("Site of Memory" 91), Ward insists on her duty as a writer to challenge Black exclusion by reinscribing Black memory into the American national and Southern regional public discourse. As "textual memorials" (Lloyd, *Rooting Memory* 25), Ward's narratives embody, in this respect, a form of "mnemonic resistance" aimed at taking part in "the struggle for representation and incorporation of black memory forms" (Hunchard 56).

Ward's focus on the enduring presence of the past in the American South reinforces William Faulkner's statement that "the past is never dead. It's not even past" (92). Indeed, since her early emergence as one of the US South's major contemporary writers, Ward has been "hailed" by some critics as "heir to Faulkner" (Begley; Vognar; Matthews 34) due to their shared focus on the American South, Mississippi in particular, both as a geographical and cultural space. Ward herself admits, in her interview with Anna Hartnell, Faulkner's "huge influence" on her writing

and her admiration of his work (217). Besides modeling her fictional small community of *Bois Sauvage* on Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha* county, Faulkner's influence on Ward manifests at the textual level in her employment of common Faulknerian narrative techniques, such as the use of multiple narrators, the Gothic, and stream-of-consciousness as well as in her engagement of classical Southern themes that figure prominently in Faulkner's texts, mainly the topics of Southern history, memory, race/racism, rural poverty, family, community, and motherhood.

Despite all their similarities, Ward cannot be labeled as "a mere legatee of Faulkner," as Greg Chase also argues (201).[20] Besides forging her distinctive fictional and cultural space, Ward proves to be critical of Faulkner's representation of African Americans and "the failures of some of his black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion" ("Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*"). Major Black characters of Faulkner, like Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury* or Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, remain—though central to the storyline—narratively undertreated and insufficiently complex, reduced mostly to the stereotypical categories of the "black mammy" (B. Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 8) and the "tragic mulatto," respectively.

In the same vein, Sinéad Moynihan defines Ward's fiction as a rewriting or "recycling" process (551) of Faulkner's text, in which Ward counters Faulkner's restrictive relegation of Black subjects into the margins of the white fictional space and challenges their exclusion from his cultural narratives of the American South. She does so by centering the Black Southern rural experience and "writing blacks back into the shaping of Southern culture . . . into the regionality

[20] Criticizing this tradition of identifying a white literary parent to successful Black writers, Barbara Christian addresses Toni Morrison in her essay "Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison": "Why must you be studied in relation to such writers [William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf], icons of twentieth-century European and Anglo-American literature? Is it that as an African-American woman writer, and clearly a 'genius,' you must have a Western white literary father and mother?" (20).

of the South" (T. Davis), reintegrating thus Black memory into the Southern cultural memory space. In so doing, Ward both reclaims her literary place as a (Black) Southern writer (and subject) and reaffirms Black people's contribution to the making of a culture and a history that have long been claimed, represented, and remembered as predominantly white.

Ward's embracement of her Southern roots shows in her moving back South after years of living in the West, the East, and the Midwest. In his book *Rooting Memory, Rooting Place*, Christopher Lloyd talks about what he calls "Southern narratives of return" and highlights "the potency of the South as a place to return to for contemporary writers" (117). Despite her conflictual feelings about the South, Ward is one of the writers who chose to return. Ward opens her memoir *Men We Reaped* with an epigraph from A. R. Ammon's poem "Easter Morning," which mirrors her own paradoxical love and hate relationship with the South: "I cannot leave this place, for / for me it is the dearest and the worst / It is life nearest to life which is / life lost: it is my place where I must stand" (3). Further describing later in the memoir her "wounds of returning" South after leaving it—to use Jessica Adam's expression (19)—Ward wonders: "How could I know then that this would be my life: yearning to leave the South and doing so again and again, but perpetually called back to home by a love so *thick* it choked me?" (195, emphasis added). Like Sethe's love for the ghost of her daughter, Beloved, is "too thick" (164)—both emotionally fulfilling and depleting—Ward's attachment to the South is at the same time overwhelming and stifling. For Ward, the South presents a complex site of both personal and collective memory and trauma. In the words of Farah Jasmine Griffin, it is "a place that suffers from a racist legacy" but also "a haven of African-American history and community, a site of the ancestor, and for some African-Americans, it is still home" (182). In Ward's case, the South is the place that continuously reminds her of her individual losses (especially the death of her brother) and of more communal ones, but

also the place where she, her family, her community, and her ancestors have lived for generations and formed connections with each other and with the place. This dual view of the South as simultaneously violent and redeeming transpires not only in Ward's vexed sentiment about her homeplace, but more so in her writing about it. Ultimately, Ward's return to the South both physically and in fiction or memory "becomes a powerful symbolic statement of resilience" representing a way for her to "confront both her personal trauma and the regional oppressiveness" (Choiński 176), while reclaiming a Black Southern identity and history.

Despite the significant demographic and cultural changes that characterize the contemporary South due to the effects of migration and economic globalization—which seem to have liberated the South from its spatiotemporal boundedness to the past and set in motion its transition to a "post-regional South," or what has been called as the "Post-South"[21]—the New South as portrayed in Ward's fiction remains a region that bears the traces of the "Old South." It is represented as geographically and culturally "rooted in place" (Lloyd, *Rooting Memory* 9) and defined, even fixated, by its history, the history of slavery and racial division. As Thadious M. Davis contends in her book *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, "Although racial configurations in the twenty-first-century South are no longer reducible to a black-white binary, the residue from the centuries of that bifurcated world persists in its ethnically and racially diverse regions" (6). For Patricia Yeager, the residues of the past are manifested in contemporary Southern women's literary writing, which is "loaded with trauma unspoken, with bodies unhealed

[21] For more insights on the changing cultural and geographical landscape of the South, read, for instance, James C. Cobb's and William Whitney Stueck's *Globalization and the American South*, Scott Romine's *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, and Martyn Bone's *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, to name a few. These critics, yet to different degrees and with different arguments, tend to agree on the South's break with its past as they see little geographical or historical continuity between the old plantation/rural South and the new industrialized, globalized, and transnational post-South. For them, the South as a distinctive geographical and cultural entity/region exists only in imagined/representational rather than real or actual forms.

or uncared for, with racial melancholia" (19). Similarly, despite the looming features of a more culturally diverse and economically globalized South that could be traced in Ward's texts—including the reference to big multinational corporations (like McDonald's, Burger King, and Walmart) in *Where the Line Bleeds* and the incorporation of contemporary environmental disasters (Katrina in *Salvage* and the Deepwater Horizon in *Sing*)—her narrative pictures, especially through its use of the haunting trope, a region that is "*possessed,*" to use Caruth's term, by its unfolding history. In particular, Ward's focus is on how these new thrusting economic forces and environmental issues further compound Black lives in a region that still suffers the remnants of its violent history.

With a similar argument, Lisa Hinrichsen underscores in her writings on the American South the "popular move" of new southern studies to the key concepts of "memory" and history" ("Trauma Studies" 605) and highlights the "potential usefulness of trauma and memory studies in articulating the South as a site of cultural and psychological conflict" (*Possessing the Past* 18). In Faulkner's fashion, but from a different standpoint, Ward's portrays the South as "a space forever traumatized" (Hinrichsen, *Possessing the Past* 4). While, as mentioned before, Faulkner's writing deals with the traumatic construction of the South's history from a mostly white perspective, mainly the destructive impacts of modernity and the Civil War on the Southern regional (white) identity and life, Ward's representation envisions a traumatized South as lived, experienced, and imagined by poor Black Southerners.

In line with her view of the South as a scarred space, Ward's literary body revolves around what Karla F. C. Holloway calls "mourning stories" (32), stories of African American death and grief. In addition to the death stories included in the two novels forming the main analytical corpus of the dissertation, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied Sing*, Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped*

(2013) provides the ultimate illustration of the Black individual as a "death-bound subject" (JanMohamed 2), both socially and physically. The memoir centers around the tragic deaths of five young Black men, including Ward's younger brother Joshua, to accidents, murder, overdose, and suicide. Seemingly unrelated, the premature deaths of these five young men, the memoir suggests, are insidiously connected to a wider and more collective violent racial context.

As "the autobiographical example," Saidiya Hartman affirms in an interview with Patricia J. Saunders, "is not a personal story that folds onto itself . . . it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (5), Ward's memoir—as much as it is private and personal—is also invested in the collective. Ward herself asserts in the prologue to her memoir the intersection of the personal and the communal in her autobiography: "Because this is my story just as it is the story of those lost young men, and because this is my family's story just as it is my community's story, it is not straightforward. To tell it, I must tell the story of my town, and the history of my community" (8). Using her own story and that of her family and community, Ward seeks, in Christina Sharpe's words, "to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake" (8). Due to a shared history and contemporary reality, the individual in the African American context is positioned as always already a member of a larger socio-cultural entity. It is neither to suggest a homogenous Black community nor to impose a social deterministic view where the individual's identity is solely and passively defined by the collective, but to point to a common historical experience and present condition that bring a racial community together and tie its members to shared frames of definition and identification, even if through stories of death.

In addition to the interconnection of the individual and the collective in Ward's works, the fictional and the real converge as well. Ward's life and experience as a poor Black girl growing up in a Southern coastal town in the Mississippi, called DeLisle, the counterpart of her fictional Bois Sauvage, have clearly seeped into the writer's fictional world. The setting, the thematic foci, and even the plot in Ward's cultural narratives comprise elements and sentiments that the writer herself has known or lived through. For instance, *Salvage*'s fictional rendition of Katrina is in a way inspired by the writer's and her family's experience of the hurricane. Also, in *Sing*, the haunting ghost of the dead brother, Given-not-Given, reminds of Ward's own brother, Joshua, who died in a tragic car accident hit by a white drunk man. In terms of themes, poverty, drug abuse, racism in the American South as well as communal and familial love and survival are all topics that can be found both in Ward's fictional and non-fictional writing, including her memoir.

Besides and beyond the traumatic stories of death and grief, Ward's writing constitutes a manifold space where the cultural memories of a rich and complex Black culture are reinvigorated and reclaimed. Grounded in the Black (Southern) literary tradition, Ward's fictional world recalls that of two prominent Black women writers, Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. For instance, Ward's insistence on Black familial/communal traditions and African ancestral heritage evokes Morrison's literary universe, mainly "the funk," or what Andrea O'Reilly defines as "traditional black values" (27). In a *New York Times* article entitled "I Was Wandering. Toni Morrison Found Me," Ward describes in affective terms the way Morrison has inspired her and propelled her love of both Black fiction and culture. Reading Morrison's *Beloved* for the first time, Ward was "blinded. Struck dumb." She found "home," as she confirms ("I Was Wandering"). Thus, her focus on the communal essence of African American life as well as her attempt to illuminate the humanity of her Black characters reveal a desire to craft, in the footsteps of Morrison, an alternative

fictional space inhabited essentially, as Ward indicates, by "people who loved and fought and failed and feared and laughed" ("I Was Wandering"). In addition, Ward's emphasis on the Southern rural experience and her construction of a cultural space based on "black folk" culture, including African American myths, beliefs, and traditions, reinvents Hurston's literary world. Her depiction of Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage* reminds as well of Hurston's portrayal of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, besides the parallels that could be drawn between the two books in terms of their representation of the Black female experience and coming of age in a poor and rural Southern society.

Like Morrison and Hurston, Ward's emphasis on Black culture reveals her belief in its potential to affect healing. Her retrospective approach aims, in this respect, not only to re(con)figure a traumatic historical past that has often been silenced or distorted, but also to revive an ancestral system of rituals, beliefs, processes, and values that holds a restorative power and a sustaining force. In particular, throughout her writing, Ward defines *reconnection* to the past, to nature, the family, and the community as the primary means towards the physical and emotional survival and healing of the Black individual and community at large.

Thus, as much as her fictional world centers around the horrors of the past and their enduring psychological, socioeconomic, and cultural effects on the contemporary Black individual and community in the American South, Ward's fiction models an authenticated Black cultural space. The following analytical chapters will, therefore, reflect Ward's alternation between the traumatic and the redeeming, the horrendous and the exuberant, the grievous and the joyful, at the core of the Black past and present experience. Accordingly, "cultural haunting" in the following chapter relates both to historical trauma and cultural reclamation, ecomemory in the third chapter evinces a paradox of both ecological beauty and ecological burden, and the fourth and fifth

chapters illustrate at the same time the traumatic formation of Black familial relationships, motherhood in particular, and the redemptive potential of familial/communal care.

Chapter 2: "Cultural Haunting" in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

> *What knowledge haunts each body, what history, what phantom ache?*—Natasha Trethewey, "Miracle of the Black Leg."

While Ward's fictional world in *Sing* introduces a myriad of supernatural elements, including "ghosts, spirits, animals, and other phenomena that 'other' the comforts of realism" (Perez and Chevalier 5), the focus in this chapter is on ghosts. Both the ghost of Richie and the ghost of Given-not-Given in Ward's *Sing* are offered a narrative space and agency to tell stories, reflecting mostly images of terror, violence, and death, but also ancestral cosmological views and philosophies. Based on Kathleen Brogan's concept of "cultural haunting" (149), the chapter examines the literary trope of haunting and argues that ghosts in Ward's *Sing* serve a two-fold function. First, they act as a means for cultural reclamation by invoking African-based beliefs and worldviews, and, second, as a tool for historical "re-visioning" by revisiting past traumas and connecting them to their present manifestations.

1. Reviving an African Heritage through Ghosts

A "pan-ethnic phenomenon" (Brogan 151), haunting is a common literary trope in African American literature. The pervasive use of the ghost figure by Black writers is justified by its ability to offer an alternative way of remembering in culture and recovering erased or discredited knowledge. In particular, the presence of ghosts in African American literary works points first and foremost to an Africanist cultural heritage. As Avery Gordan states in her *Ghostly Matter* study, "The significance of ghosts and particularly spirit work in African-American culture and letters no doubt owes some of its origins to their respected place in African life and thought" (151).

Indeed, the belief in the existence of the afterlife and the power of the dead to penetrate and affect the world of the living finds roots mainly in West African societies and cultures.[22]

As the belief in ghosts in African American culture originates partly from an African-based worldview, ghost stories were naturally ubiquitous in the slave community. In his "ghostlore" study, historian Elliot J. Gorn affirms that "ghosts and spirits were a part of [the] living cultural outlook" (553) of enslaved people and that, besides Anglo-Saxon and Celtic influences, "African cosmologies provided an underlying belief structure for black ghostlore" (552). He also explains that folktales of "hants" returning "to give aid and advice, to rectify wrongs, take revenge, protect kin, complete unfinished tasks, or comfort the sick and lonely" (559) were not performed for the sole purpose of entertainment or for coping with the horror of slavery, but primarily reflected a desire to maintain a community of remembering and a bond with a ruptured ancestral heritage. Ghost stories during slavery represented, in this respect, a means of resistance to social oppression and "an affirmative gesture of cultural and communal re-membering" (Chassot 10), enabling enslaved Africans to "see themselves apart from white slaveholders" **(**Glaude 18) and offering them a sense of cultural continuity with their African origins.

Although Ward's use of the ghost trope connects her primarily to the literary tradition of magical realism, Ward has been specific about the cultural roots of her magical world. When asked in one of her interviews about her "first foray into magical realism," Ward answered: "I did a lot of reading about voodoo and hoodoo, and I did a lot of reading about that spiritual tradition because that's what Mam practices. And some of that is informing Richie's experience of the afterlife"

[22] By West African societies, I do not propose that there is one unitary African culture or presume that all African societies are homogeneous or identical. However, there are certain features, traditions, and cosmological beliefs that African and African American studies scholars (such as John Mbiti, Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, Jacob K. Olupona, Crispinou Itayo, Albert J. Raboteau, Yvonne P. Chireau, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., James W. Coleman, David A. Heokema, among many others) identify as common and widely-shared in many African societies. One of these is the belief in the existence of a spiritual world (the belief in the spirits of the dead and the continued presence of ancestors) and its interconnectedness with the material (living) one.

("Jesmyn Ward on Her New Novel"). Ward's response confirms that her understanding of magical realism is primarily grounded in African American spiritualism or supernaturalism. This point has already been highlighted by James Mellis, who contends that "it is more accurate to recognize and characterize [Ward's *Sing*] as part of the body of African-based spiritualist fiction, rather than as work of magical realism" (3). While Mellis's observation is important in identifying the African influences of Ward's magical world, it is more accurate to say, however, that Ward endorses a "culturally specific" (Zamora 499) form of magical realism, that is, Black magic.[23] Although magical realism as a literary trope or genre has originally developed within the body of Latin American literature (Sánchez 18), it has subsequently been deployed as a "cultural corrective" (Zamora and Faris 2) by postcolonial and ethnic minority authors (such as African American, Native American, Asian American, Chicano/a writers) in challenging dominant narratives of Western literary realism. Similarly, Ward's magical world draws heavily upon African and African American "myths, legends and traditions, rituals—that is, in collective practices" (Zamora and Faris 3) as a means for cultural reclamation.

Ward's fictional world is inhabited by the living as well as the dead. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* includes two actual ghosts, Richie and Given-not-Given, with Richie's ghost as one of the novel's three narrators. Similar to Morrison who defines the ghost as a "part of our [Black] heritage" (qtd. in Watkins 46), the way in which the two ghosts are represented in Ward's novel confirms their cultural familiarity, and even naturalness, both to the writer and her characters. Though Richie and Given-not-Given are referred to as ghosts or phantoms in the narrative, they are "not ghosts in the horror-genre sense of that term" (B. Christian, "Fixing Methodologies" 9). Kenyan philosopher John S. Mbiti asserts that in African traditional thought "while surviving relatives remember the

[23] Defined simply by Yvonne P. Chireau as "the beliefs and actions by which human beings interact with an invisible reality" (2).

departed, the spirits more or less lead a personal continuation of life. It has become what we have called the living dead. People regard it as being much like a human being although it is dead" (*Introduction to African Religion* 119).[24] So, being a "living dead" relies primarily on the communicative memory of the living. As both Richie and Given-not-Given are remembered by the living, they are portrayed as "living dead," two embodied spirits with human-like features and actions. Seeing Richie for the first time, Jojo describes him as "a dark skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck" (174), who sits with them in the car with "his arms over his knees, his mouth on his wrists. One hand balled into a fist" (219). In this description, Richie is portrayed as very human and alive. While his posture (clenched hand) mirrors his emotional distress, it may symbolize as well his baby-like character—an important characteristic of ancestral spirits that I explain in more detail below. Similarly, Given-not-Given is introduced by Leonie as a human presence, who sits with her, leans forward, puts his elbow on the table, and watches her like always (52). Richie's and Given-not-Given's human-like features, ability to communicate easily and comfortably with the living, and visibility to those who have the gift of "seeing the dead" (305) render them not entirely dead yet not fully alive, hence their possible classification as the "living dead" in an Africanist sense. In fact, their appearance seems not only "normative and normalizing" (Zamora and Faris 3), but even desirable for the living. Notably, just like what Justine Tally points out about the ghost in Morrison's *Beloved*, "no black characters . . . ever question the actual existence of ghosts" (59) in *Sing*. On the contrary, they even seek and desire their presence. This is clear in Mam's confession of how she "[w]anted it so bad" to see the spirit of her dead son (305),

[24] Mbiti defines the "living dead" as "a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of spirits" (*African Religions* 32). He also distinguishes between the long-dead whom he calls "spirits" and the "living dead" who refers to "the departed of up to five generations" whose "process of dying is not yet complete" and is thus in a state of "personal immortality," which render him/her "partly human and partly spirit" (*African Religions* 107, 110).

in Leonie's deliberate consumption of drugs to summon the phantom of her dead brother, and finally in Jojo's intimate conversations with Richie.

As in the African belief system, the boundaries between the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible, and the natural and the supernatural worlds in *Sing* are blurred. Mbiti confirms that in African cosmological thought "the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them" (*African Religions* 97). The fusion of the spiritual and the material worlds reflects an African worldview of life and death as "one integrated bond and interrelated web" and of time as a non-linear process (Ikeke 4). Contrary to Western "default sense of time" as sequential with a clear-cut distinction between past, present, and future (Fu-Kiau 59), time in African cosmological thought is a non-finite entity where past and present and life and death co-exist and intersect. The African circular view of time is implied in Mam's statement when she tells Jojo that "we don't walk no straight lines. It's all happening at once. My mama and daddy and they mamas and daddies" (304). It is also palpable in the possible co-existence of the visible and invisible worlds as clear in Richie's and Given-not-Given's ability to occupy spaces and move freely around places inhabited by the living, including the most familiar and intimate ones, like the car, the backyard, the kitchen, and the bed.

The presence of the "living dead" side by side with the living creates a shared communal space. Remarkably, the communal essence characteristic of African societies extends not only to the world of the living, but to the world of the dead as well. Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau points out that in African thought "the dead are not dead, they are being living just beyond the wall, waiting for their probable return to the community [Ku nseke], to the physical world" (17). Death from the African perspective does not mean a break from the community, but rather signals

a return in a different form. The emphasis on the communal potential of the afterlife is highlighted by Mam as she informs her grandchild, Jojo, that her death "don't mean I won't be here, Jojo. I'll be on the other side of the door. With everybody else that's gone before. Your uncle Given, my mama and daddy, Pop's mama and daddy" (303). The "porous border" (Olupona 4) between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead, according to both Fu-Kiau and Mam, enables the "living dead" to connect with both the departed (the ancestors) and the still alive. The third space that the liminal figure of the "living dead" inhabits—with an easy shift between the visible and the invisible worlds—mirrors an embedded African cosmological view of "the universe as fluid, active, impressionable" (Olupona 4), where the living and the dead can and do exist in tandem rather than in separate worlds.

Mbiti indicates that "[t]he majority of [African] peoples hold that spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains, or just around the villages" (*African Religions* 104). A similar view of trees, and by extension nature, as a dwelling place for spirits is articulated by Mam when she tells Jojo a lesson she learned from her great granddaddy: "Said there is spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals" (100). Like Beloved's ghost which emerges from a water stream (50), Richie's ghost is always found crouching in and or climbing trees, sitting on branches, and wrapped around trunks. The first time he comes back to life, Richie wakes up in a "stand of young pine trees" (176). Although for African Americans the tree represents a symbol of racial violence (especially lynching), it also communicates an African-based view of trees as sacred elements. They are particularly seen as the home of the dead. For instance, a year after Given died, Mam planted a tree for him, "*One every anniversary*" (73). The "*whispering forest*" (73) that she aspires to grow is in a way embodied in the tree of ghosts that appears at the end of

the novel as a communal space where a collective body of ghosts—the spirits of the dead— dwells and comes together whispering, "*Home*, they say, *Home*" (360).

While death in traditional African thought signifies "a transition from one life stage to the next" (Olupona 31), the manner of death is also important in determining the long-term fate of the deceased. Jacob K. Olupona explains that in African belief a "common requirement for a person to become an ancestor is that he or she must have died a 'good death,' one not caused by incurable sickness (such as leprosy, smallpox, or AIDS), an accident, or violence" (31). A similar view is found in Afro-Caribbean thought as Caribbean-American author Barbara Christian confirms:

> If ancestors are consistently not fed, or have not resolved some major conflict, especially the manner of their death, they are tormented and may come back to the realm we characterize as that of the living, sometimes in the form of an apparently newborn baby. So often I have heard someone in the Caribbean say, "This one is an old one and has come back because she needs to clear up something big." ("Fixing Methodologies" 9-10)

Both Richie and Given died a violent death. While Richie was stabbed by River (Pop)[25] in a mercy killing act, Given was deliberately shot by a white man during a hunting trip. Due to the brutal manner of their deaths, Given's and Richie's ghosts remain trapped between the human and spiritual worlds, wandering around, and seeking final rest. Mam provides a similar conception when she tells Jojo that "the old folks always told me that when someone dies in a bad way, sometimes it's so awful even God can't bear to watch, and then half your spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water" (303).[26] This is especially clear for

[25] Pop's real name is River Red. He is called River by Richie and Pop by the other characters in the novel. Throughout the dissertation, I use River only for passages dealing with him and Richie.

[26] Rabi IIemona Ekore and Bolatito Lanre-Abass similarly indicate, "With the belief that the goal of life is to become an ancestor after death, a person is given a proper burial after death as failure to do this may result in the

Richie, who remains haunted by the memory of his murder, hence he comes back "wanting peace" that is possible only if he unravels the mystery of his death.

Furthermore, just as indicated in Barbara Christian's quote above in connection with the Afro-Caribbean thought, Richie is represented as an "apparently new-born baby." Like Beloved's ghost, Richie comes back "with an empty stomach" (314), "milk hungry" (283), not for food but for love and care. Hence, he behaves and is often described or referred to as a baby. For instance, hearing him in the backyard, Jojo compares Richie's voice to the sound of "a baby crying" (301). Describing Richie, River indicates as well that "[h]e had baby hair on the edge of his scalp . . . little fine hair he'd had since he sucked at his mam's tit" (325). The connection between babies and the "living dead" is also found in some African traditional societies, where, as indicated by both Mbiti and Olupona, some newborn babies are considered as "reincarnated ancestors" (Olupona 30), by representing some "features, characteristics and personality of such a spirit [the living dead]" (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 119). The idea of imagining ancestral spirits as newborn babies emphasizes the conception of death as "partial rebirth" (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 119), the beginning of another stage of life and not the end. Thus, while Richie's characterization as a baby primarily accentuates his premature death and evinces his insatiable hunger for truth and love, it also further substantiates his identification as a "living dead" rather than a mere ghost, from an Africanist standpoint.

The close connection between the living and the "living dead" goes beyond their spatial proximity. The "living dead" in the African belief are conceived as active agents with power and authority in influencing the world of the living, which further emphasizes their embodied human-

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individual becoming a wandering ghost, unable to live properly after death, and constituting a danger to those who are still alive" (3).

like characterization. Mbiti asserts that the "living dead" "can act in malicious way, as well as in a benevolent manner" (*African Religions* 105). Similarly, Joanne Chassot indicates that "the dead call on the living with an insistence that ranges from benevolence, through mild nuisance, to overpowering and dangerous invasion, depending on the way the living respond to their presence" (9). In *Sing*, both Richie and Given-bot-Given intrude and act in a non-threatening way. Their presence is like that of the ancestors "benevolent, instructive, and protective" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 343). When they appear, they act like Mbiti confirms about the ancestors as "they inquire about family affairs, and may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who failed to follow their special instructions" (*Introduction to African Religion* 107). While this is true for Richie, who comes back to meet and reprimand River (Pop), it is even more relevant for Given-not-Given. Indeed, the main purpose for Given-not-Given's return is to guide and protect his close sister Leonie, especially from her self-destructive character. In addition, as ghosts, both Richie and Given-not-Given carry a healing potential. Their presence contributes by the end of the novel to "repairing mental damage and separation" by acting as "spectral bridges" for the living characters to "work through their traumatic memories and connect with each other, their loved ones, and their pasts" (M. Anderson 319). Their healing effect is evidenced in the sense of familial reconciliation and spiritual relief with which the novel concludes.

The involvement of the "living dead" in the world of the living concerns mainly, as Fia Kiau points out, "rites of passage for the living, such as naming, puberty, marriage, and death. This transition cannot be successfully accomplished without the assistance and support of the ancestors" (99). As the novel's most important rite of passage, Mam's death perfectly illustrates the power of the "living dead" in affecting the life of the living. Suffering from terminal cancer, Mam is unable to cure herself and is waiting to die. While both Leonie and Given-not-Given play a crucial role in

their mother's transition into the next world, it is especially the phantom of her son who ushers his mother into the spiritual realm of the ancestors:

> Given's next to the bed, climbing into it, curling around her, saying 'Mama,' saying, 'I come for you, Mama,' . . . 'I come with the boat, Mama,' and then he moves his hand over her face, from her air-starved chin to her flared nostrils to her eyes, open and open . . . Given's hand flatters above her face like he is a groom and Mama is a bride and he has pulled the veil from her head and let it fall back so they can look upon each other with love, clear and sweet as the air between them. Mama bucks and goes still. (342-343)

Death is portrayed here as a cathartic moment. The image of the bride and groom pictures it like a rather ceremonial, communal event, further supported by the family's congregation around Mam's bed. At this critical moment of passage, Mam is finally able to see the dead for the first time (she can see both the phantom of her dead son and that of Richie), which confirms the beginning of her transition into the spiritual ("living dead") world. Just like what Joseph Murphy explains in connection with death in the African traditional belief, Mam's "liminal transition between spirit and human worlds" signals as well her rebirth "with a new identity and vision," where "[t]he mark of this reborn self is the ability to 'see' simultaneously the spiritual and human worlds" (383). Mam's rebirth includes as well her symbolic return to her ancestral homeland as suggested by the "boat" with which Given-not-Given comes, in a clear allusion to an original African view of "dying as returning home" (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 112) and to an ensuing African American belief in the liberatory potential of death as homegoing.

Besides the Africanist figuration of the ghost as the "living dead," Ward's use of Black magic includes other African-based myths and symbols. Richie's story, itself, of coming back as a ghost is laden with supernatural or magical elements emanating from African and African

American mythology. As soon as he wakes up for the first time, Richie sees "a white snake . . . slither out of the shadows beneath the trees" (176). The snake has supernatural features for it is not only able to speak, but to fly as well. While the snake represents a common symbol across many cultures—including the Christian myth of creation—the snake in Vodou religion embodies especially Damballah or Danbala, "an important vodou deity envisioned as a serpent" (J. Anderson 127). Danbala is described as "the great white snake spirit of the city of Wedo (sometimes spelled Whydah in modern-day Benin)" and "is said to be the world itself . . . He is slow-moving but generous, kind and loving, and is often sought out by Vodouisants for help in their lives" (Tann 124). The snake that Richie encounters bears several similarities to Danbala. Besides its white color, it is both divine and obliging like Danbala. Its god-like characterization finds ground in Richie's kneeling gesture to it (176). With the help of a magic scale that the snake gives to Richie, the latter is able to rise high and fly "*up and away . . . [a]nd around*" (177), back to Parchman prison. The healing capacity of the snake comes in its ability to restore Richie's memories of Parchman prison by taking him on a journey back to the past and future, allowing him eventually to meet River (Pop) and face the gruesome reality of his death.

In association with the Vodou white snake/Danbala metaphor, Ward uses the myth of "flying Africans." The legend of Black people flying back to Africa after being brought into the Americas to be enslaved "permeates the mythology of Black America" and "[e]xamples of the metaphor are found in major musical genres, myths, and poetry in Black cultures that span the Caribbean and Southern North America" (McDaniel 29). As an allegory for liberation and homegoing, the myth of flying Africans communicates a desire to reclaim ancestral power and embrace a distinct cultural heritage. In *Tell My Horse*—her account of her own experience being initiated into Vodou in Haiti, Jamaica—writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston writes about the

"flying Africans" legend: "Once Africans could fly because they never ate salt. Many of them were brought to Jamaica to be slaves, but they were never slaves. They flew back to Africa" (38). While for Hurston flying represents a means of resistance, for Morrison it stands literally for the magic capacity of Black people and the beauty of Black folklore:

> I also wanted to use black folklore, the magical and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. . . . That's why flying is a central metaphor in *Song*—the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody's dream. It was about people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. (qtd. in Watkins 46)

In the footsteps of both Hurston and Morrison, Ward deploys Black folklore and mythology in her literary work as a way of reviving an ancestral heritage and reaffirming its restorative power. In a magical motion, the white snake turns into "a bird, but not a bird. No feathers. All black scales. A scaly bird. A horned vulture" (177). The supernatural power of the white snake to change shape and color and metamorphose into a black bird recalls the figure of the trickster—a "staple" of African American oral culture that symbolizes, among many other things, "freedom from all restraint" (Morgan 4, 24). Like the snake/scaly bird, Richie is able to fly by clenching into one of the bird's scales and rising "[u]p and up and out. Into the white water torrent of the sky" (178). The scene of Richie magically flying is reminiscent of Milkman in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* when he discovers by the end of his identity-quest journey that his great grandfather, Solomon, was able to literally fly back to Africa (407). Just like Solomon, who "cut across the sky" and "gone home" (378), Richie is able to cross "the white water torrent of the sky" (178) in a healing journey back home.

In addition to Richie's ability to fly, summoning both the trickster figure and the myth of the "flying Africans," Kayla's recurrent reference to Richie's ghost as a "black bird" (174, 333) further associates him with an African heritage. It evokes the Sankofa bird motif, a "West African symbol, widely used in contemporary American Black culture" (Bale and Bondevik 81). Represented as "a bird whose head is looking back while holding an egg in her beak, which is her future" (Kwarteng 1), Sankofa, as Christel N. Temple indicates, conventionally means "'go back and fetch it,' 'return to your past,' and 'it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost'" (127). Like the Sankofa, a bird who is associated primarily with remembrance and retrieval of the past, Richie embodies memory. Also, like the healing effect of Richie's haunting ghost, Sankofa, as a "constant reminder that the past is not at all shameful and that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past" (qtd. in Temple 127), emphasizes the importance of looking backward, of remembering, even the most traumatic events, in order to understand the present and move forward to the future.

While the novel itself does not explicitly define Africa as a homeland, there are several in/direct references to it in the narrative. These include River's stories about his great-great-grandmother in Africa and their "death march to the coast" (95) and Richie's vision of "the land across the face of the water" (309). The "flying Africans" myth along with the Sankofa symbol invoke as well the cultural memory of Africa and suggest "ideologies of 'return'" (Temple 128), not necessarily in the literal sense but in the more figurative one, that is, a spiritual and cultural return. For instance, Richie's act of flying is compared to "crossing waters" (247) and "floating on that tumbling river" (178). The idea of crossing water as homegoing is a trope that figures prominently in Black mythology and folktales. One of the most known stories of water-crossing is the "Igbo tale," also known as "Igbo Landing," which involves "a group of Igbos who walked

singing into the water [‘The sea brought me and the sea will take me home’] at Dunbar Creek, Georgia” (McDaniel 32) in an attempt to go back to Africa after being brought to America as slaves. Like the Igbo tale, Richie’s story connects water-crossing, singing, and homegoing. Richie “sings songs without words” (309) and defines home as “a song, a song and I am going to be a part of it” (237). Describing his own notion of home, Richie affirms: “Home ain’t always about a place. . . . Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats like your heart. Same time” (237). Thus, much like Africa for African Americans, home for Richie is not a geographical or physical place, but rather “an affective construct” (Ratman 1) defined by an emotional and spiritual tie. While Richie’s vision of home reasserts the elusiveness of the view of Africa as a concrete homeland, it nonetheless establishes in its essence a cultural and spiritual connection with an African heritage.

A close reading of the ghost figure and its characterization in Ward’s *Sing* reveals much in terms of its cultural origin and symbolism. It specifically embodies and communicates African-based cosmological worldviews and traditions, especially the belief in the spiritual (ancestral) world, that is, in the “living dead,” and its interconnectedness with the material one. The ghosts’ human-like features, their natural and desirable presence, their agency in affecting the world of the living, and their healing power point as well to their Africanness. Both Richie’s and Given’s ghosts embody, carry, and—at the same time—produce cultural meanings of origin that are constitutive of African American cultural identity. Through these two ghosts, Ward brings to the foreground issues of “cultural preservation, ancestry, and rootedness” (Smith 115) and asserts a cultural continuity with an African heritage. Yet, the haunting trope and the ghosts’ vocation in the novel

transcend the poetics of cultural reclamation to embrace a larger—and even more political—objective, that is, historical "re-visioning."

2. Historical "Re-visioning" and the Healing Power of Haunting

The study of haunting and ghosts, both in the literal and figurative sense, has received growing critical attention across disciplines. A "spectral turn" (Weinstock 61) defines a large part of contemporary literary production, especially in the wake of postmodernism and the "ethico-political engagement" (Craps 468) that different communities in the world have started to display by the late twentieth century. While the familiar understanding of the ghost figure in literary studies is traditionally connected to a "hallucinatory projection of the self" (Brogan 151), more recent theories of haunting relate it rather to history and memory, taking it thus from the individual level to the collective and cultural one. With this shift, haunting has come to symbolize the return of violent histories and to represent the discourse of the social outcast or the marginalized (Dziuban 115) for, as Avery Gordon maintains, "To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories" (17).

As haunting connects to memory, it is perceived as a means of remembering and reimagining a usually unresolved past that "we may not yet be able to absorb in more rational language" (Hinrichsen, *Possessing the Past* 219). In her concept of "cultural haunting," Kathleen Brogan argues that the presence of ghosts in African American literature "signal[s] an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially-erased cultural history" (150). The ghost becomes, thus, an embodied carrier of memory/trauma and an instrument for historical investigation and "cultural transmission" (Brogan 151). As such, it bears witness to violent histories, passes on cultural memories/traumas, and introduces counternarratives/memories through the conjuring of what Gordon calls, "ghostly knowledge" (23).

By giving voice to the dead to articulate unknown or forgotten stories from the past, haunting endows ghosts with an assertive subjectivity to challenge "the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History" (Glissant 66) and enable "the potential emergence of a different story and a competing history" (Weinstock 64). As a liminal, in-between figure defying the constraining spatiotemporal boundaries suggested by Western rational binaries, such as present and past, life and death, reality and imagination (Zamora 498), the ghost figure evokes an "ambivalent multiplicity" (Blanco and Peeren 33) and calls for a new historiographic mandate where historical knowledge is questioned and pluralized. The ghost presents, in this regard, a "politically effective cultural mechanism" (Chase 148) that contemporary African American writers deploy in line with an aspiring "re-visionary project" which, as Joanna Chassot describes after Adrienne Rich and Toni Morrison, seeks at the same time to "reconceive" and "rewrite" dominant narratives of history, producing alternative modes of both representation and knowledge of the past (11).

The growing theoretical interest in haunting as a literary metaphor has evolved in line with the recent advent of trauma theory (1990s). A "ghostly" terminology has thus come to represent and mediate trauma experiences. Whereas Cathy Caruth in her lay trauma theory defines trauma as the belated return or "haunting" of previously experienced yet unassimilated catastrophic events (*Unclaimed Experience* 4), Anne Whitehead indicates in her interpretation of the Freudian notions of the "uncanny" and "traumatic neurosis" that "trauma is inextricable for Freud from the ghostly or spectral, and it testifies to the profoundly unresolved nature of the past" (13). Haunting, both from a psychological and cultural perspective, is triggered primarily by traumatic events or processes experienced by individuals and/or collectivities. While as it concerns cultural traumas haunting is mainly experienced by individuals as group or community members, the spectral presence itself refers to a rather transgenerational trauma, or what Nicholas Abraham and Maria

Torok call “transgenerational haunting” (170), that is, unprocessed collective experiences of pain inflicted by violent histories that are passed on from one generation to another.

According to Lois Parkinson Zamora, “Ghosts carry the burden of tradition and collective memory: ancestral apparitions often act as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion” (497). Besides acting as bearers of violent histories, ghosts feature a reparative potential by strengthening communality through the reconstruction of collective memories. Thus, as much as the emergence of ghosts is to be understood as the outcome of violent experiences, the ghost, as a literary trope, serves not only to illuminate a little-known or discredited past, but also to create a space for “cultural mourning” (Brogan 158), hence healing. The diverse functions of the ghost figure make it, therefore, a relevant conceptual tool in exploring questions of memory/trauma, history, and cultural identity.

The “spectral turn” in American literature is inextricably related to the late twentieth century’s discourses around national, ethnic, and racial identities, incorporating “a broader questioning of traditional historical narratives by those who were long absent from or silenced in them” (Chassot 14). In the African American context, the ghosts of chattel slavery and its afterlife haunt contemporary African American literary works, both in the literal and figurative sense. The proliferation of ghosts in African American literature translates a desire among Black writers to rewrite their cultural history, even though “the turn to the supernatural in the process of recovering history emphasizes the difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past, as well as the degree to which that any such historical reconstruction is essentially an imaginative act” (Brogan 5). Haunting, by way of its reconstructive capacity, becomes nevertheless “an important aesthetic

mode among African American writers" (Black Grotesquerie 13) to "rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" ("Site of Memory" 91)—to use Morrison's expression—while highlighting their unwieldy ongoing effects on Black individual and collective psyches.

When asked in one of the interviews about her use of ghosts in her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Ward replies:

> I think that ghosts are embodiments of the past. Especially here in the South because we're so close to the past. So much of the past lives in the present. We live with the ramifications of the past that might not be as clear or feel as present in the rest of the country. . . . The history of this region bears very heavily on the present and informs our actions. I think the ghost story form is a great way to explore and express that. ("Haunted by Ghosts")

Ward asserts here the idea of Southern ghosts emerging from the region's violent history as she perceives the South as a forever haunted place. Although set in modern-day Mississippi, Ward's *Sing* bears the traces of an older Southern cultural and geographical context due to "the historical continuum of violence, racism, and exclusion" (Cucarella-Ramon 71). As Ward herself affirms: "Modern Mississippi means addiction, ground-in generational poverty, living very closely with the legacy of slavery, of Jim Crow, of lynching and of intractable racism" ("Black girls are silenced"). The spatiotemporal proximity in the novel is embodied in the rendering of the boundary "between (black) living and (black) dying porous and negotiable" (Abdur-Rahman 2) through the ghost figure, deconstructing the binaries of past and present, life and death, and more particularly the notion of history as a linear "march of progress" (Chassot 20).

Ward's use of the ghost trope links her to the Southern Gothic tradition, which has often been perceived as the exclusive realm of the white male writer. Yet, Ward's Gothic world has its own cultural particularities as it relates mainly to the Black Southern context. In particular, Ward's

deployment of the Gothic is grounded in the violent history of the American South—the traumatic legacy of slavery especially—as the writer herself explains in her interviews with Karen Long, "Jesmyn Ward on the Politics of Being a Southern Writer," and Regina Bradley, "Something Beautiful Out of the Darkness: Jesmyn Ward and Regina N. Bradley in Conversation." As a Black writer, Ward has "adopted the Gothic tradition of American literature and given its more supernatural and surrealistic characteristics a realistic basis, founded on actual lives often lived in the Gothic manner, that is indeed terrifying" (Gross 184). Through the incorporation of Richie's and Given's brutal death stories and their subsequent reemergence as haunting ghosts, as well as the inclusion of supernatural creatures (the Black vulture/scaly bird), uncanny settings (Parchman prison), repellent elements (blood, vomit, sweat, rotting flesh, foul-smelling intestines), and grotesque imageries and scenes (the goat's skinning and dissecting scene, Given's lifeless body, the female inmate rape scene, Blue's gruesome lynching, Pop's killing of Richie), Ward reworks the Southern Gothic tradition, rooting it in Black history and exploring its horror. By using the Gothic and connecting it primarily to the eerie historical and present experience of Black people, Ward is able not only to "speak back to the tradition's originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America" (Wester 2), but also to reclaim a Southern heritage and place both as a writer and a (Southern) Black subject.

Commenting on Ward's *Sing*, *The Dallas Magazine* states, "If William Faulkner mined the South for gothic, stream-of-consciousness tragedy, and Toni Morrison conjured magical realism from the corroding power of the region's race hatred, then Ward is a worthy heir to both" (Vognar). Ward's fictional works, especially *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, are evidently "deeply and self-consciously indebted to the works of Ward's fellow Mississippian writer, William Faulkner" (S. Moynihan 550), his novel *As I lay Dying* in particular. Just like *As I Lay Dying*, *Sing*,

Unburied, Sing is built on a haunted road trip, where instead of "travelling to bury a dead family member as is the case in Faulkner's novel, Ward has her characters pick up Richie's ghost" (A. Green). In addition, "as in Faulkner's classic work, Ward's novel expands individual narratives into a haunting tale of the American South by foregrounding that which Americans prefer not to see: poverty, historical and individual trauma, family violence, and death" (Antoszek 8). However, much as it reworks Faulknerian narrative themes and techniques, Ward's *Sing* remains more grounded in the Black literary tradition. In particular, as a ghost story invested in tightly linked personal and communal acts of traumatic remembering, *Sing* draws mainly from Morrison's *Beloved*. Just like Beloved's ghost, which stands simultaneously for the intimate psychological trauma of a mother who kills her daughter to save her from being enslaved as well as for the more collective trauma of American slavery, Richie's ghost in *Sing* speaks for his own painful premature death, but also for the historical suffering of Black people under the horrific laws of Jim Crow and lynching.

Ward's *Sing* is structured around a haunted road trip that Leonie, together with her two children, thirteen-year-old Jojo and three-year-old Kayla, and her white friend Misty, undertake to the Mississippi State Penitentiary—also known as Parchman Farm Prison—to pick up her white lover and the father of her two children, Michael, who is being released after serving a three-year sentence for a drug-related crime. Nicole Dib describes the trip as a "haunted roadscape," which "demonstrates the immobilizing and haunting effects of racism on contemporary black lives" (134). These haunting effects are manifested figuratively in the lingering history of Parchman prison and, more literally, in the actual ghosts of Richie and Given-not-Given, who appear and reappear during the course of the story.

Depicted as a haunting place, Parchman prison emphasizes the persisting presence of racial violence as it works as a "linchpin . . . linking the oppressive conditions of the past (when prison sentences more closely resembled legalized slavery) and modern-day incarceration" (A. Green). Using Parchman as a site of memory/trauma and a metaphor for plantation slavery, Ward emphasizes the enduring legacy of the slave past.[27] While Ward's *Sing* oscillates between the past and the present in its representation of Parchman, the latter is univocally portrayed as a "prison-cum-plantation" (Chase 202). Describing the wretched conditions of his imprisonment in Parchman in 1948, River (Pop) indicates: "*From sunup to sundown we was out there in them fields, hoeing and picking and planting and pulling. A man get to a point like that, he can't think. Just feel*" (94). The ruthless reality of Parchman is further stressed by Richie's ghost, who speaks from a more contemporary moment. Richie, a Black child only twelve years old, was imprisoned with River back in the 1940s for a petty crime (stealing food to feed his starving family).[28] As soon as he comes back as a ghost years after his death and lands in "the newborn Parchman," Richie states: "I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks for gunmen and trusty shooters. I thought I was in a bad dream" (241). The picture of chained men working the land and trusty shooters guarding them reveals the unchanging nature of the place as it brings forth memories of the Southern plantation. The static essence of Parchman is further highlighted by Richie as he observes that "Parchman was past, present, and future all at once" (240). While the

[27] In one of her interviews, Ward indicates that back in the 1930s and 1940s Parchman was inhabited "by mostly black men. They were basically enslaved again, and they worked the fields . . . they worked the plantation. They worked Parchman prison" ("Writing Means Telling the Truth"). Also, in his book *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*, David M. Oshinsky describes Parchman as "a sprawling 20,000-acre plantation in the rich cotton land of the Yazoo Delta" (1) and describes it as "the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War . . . [in] the darkest corner of the South" (2).

[28] In one of her interviews, Ward indicates how back in the 1930s and 1940s children as young as twelve and thirteen were also sent to Parchman prison, where "they were enslaved and suffered and were tortured and sometimes died in Parchman prison, and their suffering had been erased from history in some ways" (Ward, "Writing Means Telling the Truth"; see also Oshinsky 138).

temporal collapse primarily reflects Richie's traumatized psyche as he remains mentally trapped in his painful past, it equally shows how the history of the plantation South persists not only symbolically, but also physically as "it impacts and actively lingers in a topographical, landed way" (Lloyd, *Rooting Memory* 157).

Haunted by the systemic violence he experienced and witnessed as a Black man at Parchman, Pop remains a prisoner of a deep psychological and cultural trauma that he feels unable to articulate. Pop was sent to Jim Crow Parchman at the age of fifteen on the account of "*harboring a fugitive*" (38) after his brother, Stag, got into a bar fight and stabbed a white man, defending himself (32). Although Pop had nothing to do with the incident, his skin color and presence at home with his brother were enough to convict him. Pop was basically enslaved at Parchman as he had to work in the cotton fields, "*planting and weeding and harvesting crops*" and was treated like "*a plowing horse, like a hunting dog*" (37). Because the boundaries between the personal and the political in the African American experience are often blurred (Parham 6), Pop's personal traumatic memories of Parchman cannot be detached from the larger socio-political and racial contexts that produced them. Through its replication of the terrible conditions of chattel slavery, Parchman prison—as a carceral space—is a projection of not only Pop's individual psyche but of the Black Southern collective psyche as well.

The far-reaching cultural dimension of the trauma inflicted by Parchman comes to the foreground in Pop's connection of the story of his incarceration to a story he heard from his great-grandmother about the "death march to the coast" and the boats "sailed by white ghosts" (95), in reference to the slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean. Pop's linkage of the two stories shows, as Nicole Dib indicates, how "the story of [Pop]'s family's Middle Passage, the grip that the afterlife of slavery has on their lives, is unburied in the process of recounting his own encounters with the

unfreedom that built today's carceral state" (140). The persisting state of unfreedom transpires in Pop's statement as he tells Jojo at the end of his story, "*Like a fishing net, Us caught and struggling*" (95). In its plural voice, water imagery, and implied reference to captivity, Pop's phrase speaks for a Black collective condition of being trapped, emotionally and psychically, in the fishing net of the historical traumas of the Middle Passage, slavery, and their afterlife.

Yet, Pop's feeling of being "*caught and struggling*" (95) relates as well to the "heinous" act he committed at Parchman by killing Richie to save him from being mutilated and lynched: "I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out" (327), he tells his grandson. Pop's psychological trauma comes to the foreground in his inability to articulate Richie's story in a straightforward way as noticed by Jojo:

> Pop has never told me the story of what happened to Richie when he ran. Everytime I ask about it, he changes the subject or asks me to help him with something in the yard. And I understand the sentiment when he looks away or walks off, expecting me to follow. I know what Pop's saying: *I don't want to talk about this. It wounds me*. (235)

Pop's repetitive yet unsuccessful attempts to narrate the entirety of Richie's story reveal his traumatic consciousness as well as a strong desire to ban the past through storytelling as a coping mechanism. As argued by Sunwolf, "Stories offer a way of knowing and remembering experiences, and provide a powerful structure for binding together seemingly isolated or confusing events in a meaningful way" (239). However, Pop's fragmented memories and the fractured, disintegrated way in which he recounts segments of Richie's story prove his initial failure to confront the past and incorporate it into his "framework of understanding" (Whitehead 140). As Jojo further observes, "Whenever Pop done told me his and Richie's story, he talked in circles. Telling me the beginning over and over again. Telling me the middle over and over again. Circling

the end like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals" (316). Pop's "unwitting reenactment" (Caruth, *Trauma Explorations* 2) of his traumatic experience transpires in the visceral, spiral movement of his storyline. Like Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* who initially fails to voice out her deep secret of killing her daughter and is described as "spinning. Round and round the room" and "turning like a slow but steady wheel" (159) around Paul D, Pop—as Mam indicates—kept "making circles and loops and swirls in the ceiling" of their bedroom when he was painting it (338). Due to their psychic traumas, both Sethe and Pop remain mentally trapped in "the prison house of repetition compulsion" (Schwab 2) for what they both did exists "outside of the logic of words and justifications, of cause and effect" (Krumholz 406), hence cannot be articulated within the ordinary means of narrative.

At once a haunted and a haunting ghost, Richie both embodies and emerges from trauma. Due to the multilayered texture of trauma in the Black context, "ghosts of the African Diaspora" are haunting the present as much as they themselves are haunted by the very traumatic events that led to their emergence in the first place. A haunting ghost, Richie is himself, like Pop, haunted by the memories of the brutal treatment he endured as a child at Parchman prison (94, 102-103, 178), and especially by the story of his violent death. Describing his feeling when he landed back in Parchman as a ghost years after his death, Richie says: "I remembered my name: Richie. I remembered the place: Parchman prison. And I remembered the man's name: River Red. And then I fell, dove into the dirt, and it parted like a wave. I *burrowed* in tight. Needing to be held by the dark hand of the earth. To be blind to men above. To memory. It came anyway" (179, emphasis added). Like Pop's deliberate evasion of Richie's story, Richie's wish to be blind to memory reflects his inability to face the painful "rememory" triggered by his presence in Parchman—the site of his trauma—and his deep desire to bury it. Although he is a ghost—hence supposedly

invisible—Richie's act of "burrowing" highlights both his ontological displacement as well as his longing for a dwelling place, a home (237), or more so a proper burial ground. However, for him to find peace, Richie needs to unravel the story of his violent death first as he tells Jojo, "I need the story to go" (295). He particularly needs to know why the person he loved the most in Parchman prison—"the only daddy I ever knew" (285)—killed him. To use Avery Gordon's theorization of "cultural haunting," unless Richie comes to "understand the conditions under which [his] memory was produced in the first place" (22), he is doomed to remain both a haunted and a haunting ghost.

Just like Richie, Given-not-Given—the phantom of Leonie's brother—is a victim of racial terror and his haunting ghost stands for the ongoing condition of systemic injustice. Given died after being deliberately shot by a white "friend" on a hunting trip because he won a bet that "he could kill a buck with a bow before the boy could take one down with a rifle" (70). As Big Joseph, the killer's uncle, was the sheriff, the crime was covered as a hunting accident and the killer was acquitted (71-73). The verdict, together with the killer's phrase that Given "*was supposed to lose"* (72)—a racist phrase implying that "*he was supposed to lose because he was Black*"—reveal the persistence of racial violence both at the systemic (criminal justice system) and individual levels.[29] Despite the different circumstances, and even temporal distance, of Richie's and Given's deaths, the two are connected by the racial dynamics that led to their premature departure as well as to their spectral return.

[29] In her edited collection of essays, *The Fire This Time* (2016), Jesmyn Ward dedicates the introduction to talking about what she calls "the myriad injustices of living while black in this country" (4), where she identifies Black past, present, and future as a lifelong "wrestle with the specters of race and history in America, and how those specters are haunting us now" (5). One form in which these specters are haunting is the random killing of black men and women as part of the country's racial legacy. Also, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander examines the racial dynamics of the American criminal justice system and defines mass incarceration as the New Jim Crow.

Unlike Given-not-Given who is not offered a narrative voice in the novel, Richie is one of the novel's three narrators. He thus takes more space and agency as a haunting ghost. Particularly, a bearer of memory, Richie's ghost comes back both to find answers to his own haunting questions and to tell stories from the past. As soon as he meets Jojo at Parchman, Richie reflects: "There's so much Jojo doesn't know. There are so many stories I could tell him. The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased. I could *patch those holes*. Make that shirt hang new, except for the tails, the end" (180, emphasis added). Richie's insistence on patching holes, that is, on telling stories, as a means of bearing witness to a traumatic past corresponds, in this sense, to Ward's "re-visionary project" of reconceiving and narrating the void in the Black historical experience. The stories recounted by Richie relate not only to his personal traumatic experience at Parchman prison, but also to a more communal history of Black suffering. He tells Jojo, "There's so many . . . So many of us" (356), in reference to the "community of ghosts" who would appear at the end of the novel on the tree of ghosts standing for the countless victims of historical racial violence, further proving the fact that in the African American context "collective memory always coexists with individual losses" (Antoszek 15).

One of the most crucial Black cultural memories/traumas that Ward's *Sing* reworks through the ghost figure—and the Gothic trope—is lynching. Although the lynching of African Americans in the South remained a taboo subject for decades after the Jim Crow era—not only due to the horrific realities associated with "spectacle lynching" (Cone 9) but mainly to mainstream discourses that aimed to silence any narrative disclosure of white historical crimes—the history of lynching has recently been brought back into the public debate, especially within the academic community (Wood and Donaldson 5-6). While the act of remembrance or reenactment of racial

violence always raises both ethical and representational concerns—as to how to represent the unrepresentable and how to do so without objectifying the victims of violent histories and "exacerbating the indifference to their suffering" (S. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 4)—Ward recognizes the need to face racial terror through narrativization and opts to "speak back to the tragedy of lynching" (Cone 14) to reveal past injustices and give some moral justice to its victims by "transforming traumatic memories of lynching into stories of Black vindication and empowerment" (Hill 118).

Richie's death story itself involves lynching. The story as told in segments partly by Richie partly by River goes back to the 1940s when Richie was incarcerated in Parchman with River, and Richie decided to run out together with another mentally-unstable inmate called Blue, who raped a Black woman in the prison and attacked another white girl when he fled, but Richie stopped him and saved her. Knowing about the incident, a white mob started chasing Richie and Blue, and as they found Blue first, they mercilessly lynched him. Meanwhile, River, who was by the time one of the dogs' trustees at Parchman, tracked Richie using the dogs and eventually found him before the white mob. Aware that "when it came to Blue and Richie, they wasn't going to tell no difference. They was going to see two niggers, two beasts, who had touched a White woman" (322), River decided to mercy kill Richie, saving him thus from being tortured and lynched to death. Richie's death story highlights the injustices of the Jim Crow system for although Richie put his life in danger to save the white girl, "Blue's and Richie's shared racial identity" made them "equally culpable" (Chase 212). Through Richie's story, Ward debunks the white concept of the Black man and through that the myth of the "black beast rapist" (Hill 11), which fed deeply into the Southern white imagination and mainstream narratives during the Jim Crow era.

The traumatic memory of lynching comes as well to the foreground in another story that Richie heard at Parchman from "a prostitute who serviced Black men in the prison,"[30] who told him about "the latest hanged man" (242). The story is about a Black man and his lady who refused to step off the sidewalk when a white woman was passing by and the man accidentally touched her. Accused of molesting and disrespecting the white woman, the Black man and his wife were both lynched in public by a white mob. Richie provides an elaborate and exhaustive image of the lynching scene:

> She said their people went out in the woods and found them the next day. Said the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the trees was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire too. (243)

The story of the man and his wife brutally murdered for a "minor transgression" proves how lynching worked as "a tool for racial control designed to enforce social norms and racial hierarchy" ("Equal Justice Initiative" 31). Ward's insistence on including a detailed description of the horrific rituals of "spectacle lynching" does not intend to perpetuate the "victimization narrative of the lynched black body" (Hill 4), but rather to stress the extreme brutality of white supremacy through the provision of a "graphic account of the pleasures exacted from the destruction and degradation of [Black] life" (S. Hartman, "Venus" 6). Furthermore, just like in Richie's story, by exposing the false allegations of the white woman, Ward subverts "the narrative of the white female

[30] Oshinsky indicates that Parchman prison included a number of Black female inmates, ranging between "twenty-five to sixty-five . . . every year" and a small number of White female inmates ranging between "zero to five" (174).

victimization" to replace it with "a narrative of black male innocence" (Hill 112), emphasizing again the historical futility of the Jim Crow lynching system.

The trauma of lynching eventually crystallizes in the tree of ghosts which appears at the end of the novel as a metaphor for the violent history of Black existence:

> He [Richie] ascends the tree like the white snake. He undulates along the trunk, to the branches . . . And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white. . . . They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found that I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me till I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe.* (357)

Like the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back in *Beloved* (16, 79)—symbolizing the harrowing scars of slavery—the "tree of ghosts" in *Sing* stands for the victims of racial terror. The collectivity of ghosts it harbors tells stories of various atrocious crimes endured by people of African descent since their early displacement and enslavement. The "tree of ghosts" emerges, therefore, as a "potent symbol" of Black pain (Cone 3) and a site of memory articulating "new master narratives of social suffering," to use Jeffrey Alexander's words (15). The fact that the ghosts can only speak with their eyes stresses not only the deep psychological extent of their traumas, but also the "unspeakable" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 126) nature of the past and the difficulty of

"narrating stories that are impossible to tell" (S. Hartman, "Venus" 10). As Patrycja Antoszek argues, "While the novel gives voice to the oppressed who had long been erased from official cultural memory, it also shows the impossibility of articulating their traumas by ordinary systems of representation" (16). Thus, though ironically "*gouged*" to emphasize the horror of lynching, the ghosts' eyes become the only medium of narrative and their gaze a locus of representation and an act of narration itself, offering nonetheless a more powerful visual effect and immediate access to their horrific stories of death. The stream of consciousness adds to the impossible "speakability" yet inevitable narrativity of the ghosts' stories. It highlights the dissociative nature of the ghosts' narratives and points to their troubled state of mind, further evidenced by their bodily posture as they "*crouch*." In addition, the uninterrupted flow of narration mimics the continuous flow of the past and the "litany of brutal torture and death" (Harrison) spanning and subsuming the horrors in Black life, "from slavery all the way to people in 'hoodies' who may be the victims of contemporary racial violence" (Stannard 104).

Besides and beyond the violent stories and traumatic histories that the ghost figure brings forth, haunting carries a healing effect. Both the ghosts of Richie and Given contribute to the final sense of relief and peace with which the novel concludes. As the act of "[e]ndowing the traumatic events with a narrative form changes their scale, making them smaller and more manageable, and implies moving toward a resolution [and] . . . psychological closure" (Ingermark 9), Pop's final ability to tell the entirety of Richie's story to Jojo for the first time and Richie's fulfillment of his quest in knowing his end prove to be spiritually and emotionally redemptive for both of them. In fact, despite the emotional pain and corporeal distress that Pop displays while narrating the story of how he killed Richie (321-328), his success by the end of the novel at both "the verbalization" and "the emplotment"— that is "the arrangement of events into an internally coherent sequence"

(Ingemark 8)—of Richie's death story signals the beginning of his healing process. It specifically marks a therapeutic transition from traumatic memory, which according to Brogan "fails to adapt the past to the present," to narrative memory, "which reshapes and gives meaning to past experience" (154; see also Whitehead 140-141), as both Pop and Richie finally come to acknowledge Richie's death as an ultimate act of mercy and love. The sense of closure is evident in the serene picture of Pop and Jojo "embracing in the grass" with the animals "quieting in grunts and snorts and yips. *Thank you*, they say. *Thank you thank you thank you*, they sing" (328) and a "soft air and yellow sunlight and drifting pollen" filling the place as soon as Pop finishes narrating the details of Richie's death.

Just like Richie's, Given-not-Given's haunting is redemptive as revealed in Mam's death scene. As mentioned before, Given's ghost is the one who helps fulfill his mother's rite of passage, ushering her to the next life. Despite the intensity of the scene, Mam's departure not only puts an end to her physical suffering and induces her spiritual rebirth (by allowing her to meet for the first time the spirit of her dead son and join her ancestors), but also brings the rest of the family members closer to each other as they become a family again. This is reflected in their brief reunion after Mam's death as they all "cry in chorus" (343), "bonded by their shared loss, but also by their love" (Mellis 12). Whereas the bond between Pop, Jojo, and Kayla remains strong and is even reinforced after Mam's death, Leonie alienates herself again—though her initial troubled relationship with her children, Jojo in particular, is remedied to a certain extent.

The novel's final scene brings to the fore the ultimate healing potential of haunting. It features Kayla singing to the multitude of ghosts as they "lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (359-60). The ghosts' smile and feeling of relief prove how the knowledge of the past through "the telling and retelling

of . . . stories" (Gilroy 19) is redemptive both for the living and the dead. It also asserts that the reintegration of past traumatic memories allows "to restore collective psychological health" by enabling "identity revision" and offering new ways for "re-membering" (Alexander 7, 22), both in the meaning of making sense of the past and of joining a collective entity. The ghosts' existence in the same "memory place" speaks for their collective history/identity and confirms their sense of communality. While the novel's end offers no cues as to where Richie and the other ghosts would go, it clearly suggests that Richie's initial desire "to be part of the song" (37) is now possible. His unburied ghost is finally able not only not tell his story, to sing, but also to belong, to join the collective song/story of the community of ghosts. Kirsten Dillender argues that "Ward's ghosts linger in this landscape because the cruelty that extinguished their lives is inscribed on the land, seemingly indelible and unavoidable as natural weather cycles" (136). While this is true—especially as it further validates the very definition of trauma as a process that "does not allow for neat resolution or closure" and that "its reparative gestures can only be partial" (Levy-Hussen 51)—the novel's ending seems to validate Joanne Chassot's argument that "African Diaspora literature invites us to live with ghosts rather than to exorcise or to lay them to rest" (32-33), which in turn resonates with Caroline Garland's understanding of traumatic healing as *getting on* with trauma rather than *getting over* it (6).

Chapter 3: Remembering in/through Nature: An Eco-Critical Reading

> *Here, then, is beauty and ugliness, a wide vision of world-sacrifice, a fierce gleam of world-hate. Which is life and what is death and how shall we face so tantalizing a contradiction? Any explanation must necessarily be subtle and involved. No pert and easy word of encouragement, no merely dark despair, can lay hold of the roots of these things. And first and before all, we cannot forget that this world is beautiful. Grant all its ugliness and sin—the petty, horrible snarl of its putrid threads, which few have seen more near or more often than I—notwithstanding all this, the beauty of this world is not to be denied.*—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*.

African American environmental thought has often been excluded from mainstream American environmental discourse for, as argued by Dianne Glave, "stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment" (3). Nature or the environment has, however, been an integral element of African American cultural history since the early days of Black people's displacement from Africa and their enslavement in America. Black historical relationship with nature in general and with the Southern landscape in particular—hence their ecomemory—carries the double meaning defined by Kimberly Ruffin as the "ecological burden-to-beauty paradox" (2). Accordingly, "the environment is as much a constituent of African American cultural memory as it is a locale of cultural trauma" (Gaál-Szabó, "African American Eco-memory" 17). It has represented for African Americans both a space where they can project their own sense of identity through the values and meanings they bestow on and derive from nature, but also an oppressive milieu where their very sense of subjecthood is

always endangered and more than often negated—that is an "environment steeped in a legacy of violence, forced labor, torture, and death" (Dungy xxi).

Contrary to most traditional ecopoetics which "has historically privileged and romanticized the natural world and set it apart from social landscapes" (Wardi, *Toni Morrison and the Natural World* 5), Black literary representation of the environment reflects diverse, and even contradictory, epistemologies ranging from earth connection, communal bonding, and cultural recovery, to racial violence, environmental othering, and ecological trauma. A non-essentialized reading of Black ecowriting is, thus, needed to recognize the "multidirectionality" and "multilayeredeness" (Gaál-Szabó, "African American Eco-memory" 18) of African American ecomemory and engage an "ecological discussion that includes but is not limited to domination" (Ruffin 16).

In line with this complex Black literary figuration of nature, the present chapter focuses on the dichotomous relationship between Ward's characters and their Southern physical landscape in both *Sing* and *Salvage*. While in *Sing*, nature appears as mostly benevolent and redemptive, in *Salvage* it is primarily traumatic and oppressive. The chapter is divided accordingly to highlight this "ecological beauty-to-burden paradox" (Ruffin 2), with the first part dealing with the spiritual and healing connection between the characters and their natural environment in *Sing*, and the second part focusing on environmental racism and ecological trauma through a reading of Hurricane Katrina as an individual as well as a collective/cultural trauma in *Salvage*.

1. Ecospirituality in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Although Ward's *Sing* depicts the South as a place that is "filled with specters of racialized violence who haunt an indelible, ancient terrain" (Dillender 134), the natural world in the novel emerges more redeeming than violent. It especially embodies a restorative and life-giving space that the characters appropriate and reclaim for their physical, cultural, emotional, and spiritual

sustenance and survival. In particular, the characters' connection to their southern landscape delineates an ecological-spiritual paradigm embedding an ancestral eco-humanist view of the world with all its components. This eco-humanist view is primarily, yet not exclusively, African-based. In his article "'*Humanitatis-Eco*' (Eco-Humanism): An African Environmental Theory," Michael Onyebuchi Eze defines "*humanitatis-eco*" or "eco-humanism" as an Africanist ethical view of the environment endorsing a "holistic" and "dialogic" relationship between humans and nature where "neither the human person nor the environment is prior or superior in moral status and recognition" (629). Drawing upon this ancestral integral view of the environment, Jesmyn Ward employs ecospirituality as a constituent of memory to reclaim an African American—and more specifically a Black rural Southern—cultural identity and assert an often-denied environmental history.

Spirituality among people of African descent constitutes a defining characteristic of their cultural identity and religious life. As demonstrated by several Black cultural scholars, the African American religious or spiritual system—or what Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya call the "black sacred cosmos" (2)—is characterized by the fusion of mainly West African, Euro-American, and, to some extent, Native American beliefs and practices.[31]It comprises "cosmological, theological, linguistic, and ritualistic elements of a paradigmatic West African worldview" (W. Coleman 533) mixed with Euro-American Christian beliefs. Together, they created a syncretic system made of "unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they [enslaved people] were involuntary guests" (Lincoln and Mamiya 2). This hybrid system is embodied in "cross-cultural expressions" (W. Coleman 533), including Vodou, conjure, and rootwork, or what Yvonne P. Chireau calls

[31] See, for instance, Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (4); Sharla Fett's *Working Cures* (39); Yvonne P. Chireau's *Black Magic* (41); James W. Coleman's *Faithful Visions* (7); and Emilie Townes's *In a Blaze of A Glory* (19).

"Black magic" (2). Thus, besides being highly influenced by Christianity, African American spiritual traditions maintain several features of African religions and philosophies. While Africans brought along their cultural knowledge, it was utilized as a means for "spiritual empowerment" (Chireau 2) and represented a "locus for power, protection, and protest in a racially oppressive society" during slavery and its afterlife (Mellis 17).

In *Sing* spirituality defines to a large extent the everyday life and relational worldviews of the main characters. Besides its practical function as a way of dealing with the hardships of their southern environment and healing deeply embedded traumas, spirituality—as it connects to nature in the novel—has a more powerful potential as a tool for cultural recovery and self-authentication. Accordingly, the characters' relation to their southern landscape is filtered through a spiritual lens which enables them to create a culturally liberating space that is both reflective and receptive of their ancestral/familial heritage and cultural roots in the South. While all the members of the Stone family—Pop, Mam, Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla—display different aspects of spirituality, it is mainly Mam (Philomène) and Pop (River) who embody the spiritual backbone of the novel, especially in connection to nature.

One of the most remarkable tropes used by Ward in her literary figuration of African American spirituality, and ecospirituality, is the concept of the female healer. As a Vodou practitioner, midwife, herbalist, and root doctor, Mam embodies, par excellence, the spiritual vein of the family and of the narrative itself. Specifically, Mam's spirituality connects to a Black female genealogy that has embraced and used spirituality as a way of knowing, living, surviving, and serving the Black individual and community. Telling her daughter Leonie about the first time she discovered her magical spiritual power, Mam recounts:

> When I was twelve, the midwife Marie-Therese came to the house to deliver my youngest sister. She was sitting a moment in the kitchen, directing me to boil water and unpacking her herbs, when she start pointing and asking me what I thought each of the bundles of dried plants did. And I looked at them, and knew, so I told her . . . It was like someone was humming in my ear, telling me they purpose. Right there, she told me I had the seed of a gift. With my mama panting in the other room, Marie-Therese took her time, put her hand on my heart, and prayed to the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, that I would live long enough to see whatever I was meant to see. (59)

Mam's reference to Marie-Therese, the midwife, praying at the same time to Mami Wata—a female water deity of African origin—and to the Virgin Mary reveals the syncretic nature of her religious roots. It specifically manifests "a strange admixture of Christianity and supernaturalism" (Chireau 14), reinforcing the notion of "magic and religion as convergent phenomena" in African American spiritual thought (J. Coleman 7). Mam's spirituality is presumably of Haitian Vodou origin given her practice of a creolized form of religion of both West African and Catholic backgrounds (see also Mellis 9).

By foregrounding her spirituality, Mam identifies with and positions herself within a deep-seated African American (female) spiritual heritage. Like enslaved healers who "often described their skills as 'gifts' and attributed their knowledge to divine intervention" (Fett 36), Mam is born with "the seed" of a healing capacity and a spiritual knowledge of the universe. She describes it later in the novel—in environmental terms—as a generational gift that "runs in the blood, like silt in river water. Builds up in bends and turns over sunk trees. . . . Rises up over the water in generations" (60). The metaphor of "blood" and "river"—symbolizing respectively lineage and

fluidity or movement—substantiates the notions of communality and continuity at the heart of African American spirituality as memory work. Silt as a natural element has a specific quality of enhancing soil and increasing the fertility of land; the image hence alludes to the enriching potential of spirituality in cultivating the Black cultural space. In addition, as a fine grain, silt can be carried by air for long distances, as is the case for the "silt of wisdom" which travels across time and "settles through generations [to] eventually accumulate and manifest itself in characters like Jojo and Kayla" (Dillender 140).

Black herbalism, as a healing practice combining African, Native American, and European techniques (Chireau 93), represents one of the core elements of African American spiritual legacy. It translates a vision of nature as a sacred therapeutic source for both physical affliction and social ills (Fett 62). As a root doctor who is herself suffering from terminal cancer, Mam tries self-medication first by turning to the natural world to seek healing: "She'd be in the woods, picking and slowly dragging bushels of young pokeweed shoots behind her. Everytime, she said: *I'm telling you, it's going to cure it* (139-140). Mam's assertion to her daughter Leonie, "*I'm telling you, it's going to cure it*," attests to her strong belief both in the curative power of nature and in traditional medicinal knowledge. Her insistence on treating herself can, therefore, be read as a gesture of cultural affirmation and identification with an ancestral heritage. Besides, Mam's attempt at curing herself reveals as well a deep desire to heal her own and her family's emotional traumas after the tragic loss of her son by restoring some spiritual balance through ecowisdom and connection with nature.

As one of the most crucial natural and spiritual elements, water, as Kelly McKisson indicates, "figures reparatively" in the novel (485). All characters are in one way or another connected to water. For instance, while Pop tells stories about rivers that "[*r*]*ush out to the ocean,*

and that stretch to the ends of the earth" (246) and the "wind coming off the water . . . that eases" (159), Richie dreams of "streams leading to rivers leading to the sea" (246) and hopes to "[c]ross the waters. Be home" (355), and Mam wishes to walk "straight to the bayou, to the water" (216) as she steps into the next life. Mam even defines herself as "*la fille de l'océan, la fille des ondes, la fille de l'écume*" (the daughter of the ocean, the daughter of the waves, the daughter of the seafoam) as she calls upon "Our Lady of Regla" and invokes Yemayá, the goddess of the ocean and salt water" (208). The reference to Yemayá—one of the most important Yoruba Orishas, "Mother of All Life," also called "Goddess of the Sea, Queen of the Sea, Mother of Compassion, Ocean Mother, primordial Mother, Queen of Magic, and many more" (Morgaine 4)—together with "Our Lady of Regla"—the Christian "Black Madonna with whom Yemayá is often identified" (Morgaine xiii)[32]—reemphasizes the syncretic nature of Mam's spiritual and cultural background. More so, it intertwines Mam's and Yamayá's identities as great mothers, creators, protectors, and spiritual healers. The cross-cultural component is further echoed in Mam's self-identification as the daughter of the ocean and in Richie's reference to her as the "saltwater woman" (244). While both associations directly connect Mam to the traumatic history of the Middle Passage, they nonetheless assert her "submarine roots" (Glissant 67), hence the fluidity of her identity not only as a female spiritual healer but as an American subject of African descent too.

Like Mam, Pop—as his actual name, River Red, suggests—is closely connected to nature, especially water. Their shared connection to water, "an ever-moving element that mirrors the constant flow of African Americans" (Loveland 64), reveals their similarly fluid identity and

[32] In his book *Yamaya: Orisha, Goddess, and Queen of the Sea*, Raven Morgaine identifies the African origins of Yamaya and provides an account of her historical transportation to the U.S. during the Middle Passage: "After emerging as a West African river goddess, Yemaya left Africa to travel with her children in overcrowded slave ships during the Middle Passage—the transportation of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas that began in 1518 and continued into the mid-19th century—to try to protect them from the horrors to come" (x).

caring nature. Reflecting on Pop's real name, Richie says: "I knew him when he was called River Red. The gunmen called him River because that was the name his mama and daddy give him, and the men say he rolled with everything like a river, over the fell trees and stumps, through storms and sun. But the men added the Red because that was his color: him the color of red clay on the riverbank" (180). Like rivers that supply trees, animals, and humans with water, Pop embodies a strong nurturing male model, both physically and spiritually. His devotion to his wife Philomène, his daughter, Leonie, and especially his two grandchildren, Jojo and Kayla, makes him—together with Mam—the epicenter of the family.

Pop's ability to "roll with everything like a river through storms and sun" stresses his adaptive capacity to adjust to both hostile and favorable environments, in the literal and the more figurative sense. Interestingly, the use of the word "roll," together with the river imagery, evokes one of the best-known spiritual songs created by enslaved African Americans, "Roll, Jordan, Roll," and its biblical reverberations as a story of physical and spiritual freedom and redemption (Ray). With its Christian symbolism and spiritual significance, the allusion to "Roll, Jordan, Roll" in describing Pop's character further identifies him with his African American religious and spiritual roots. It also points to the metaphor of singing as storytelling—suggested by the novel's title itself—where Pop is one of the storytellers.

Pop's spiritually fluid identity is reemphasized through his association with clay, a flexible natural substance, besides its biblical significance in Jeremiah 18 in denoting God's power of creation and recreation as the "Potter" or in the story of Adam's creation in the book of Genesis.[33]

[33] Pop can be read as an Adam-like character, both prophetic and earthly. Besides the direct "clay" motif connecting Pop to Adam, their similarities include two other major aspects. First, like Adam (Adam in Hebrew means "son of the red earth") who was put into the "garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it" (*New American Standard Bible*, Genesis. 2), River Red (Pop) works the land and sustains it. Second, as Adam who was, in the myth of creation, expelled from Eden due to his sin of eating from the forbidden tree, Pop carries within himself his own tormenting sin of killing Richie, even though it was a merciful act.

Furthermore, Pop's nickname, Red, points to his Native American roots. Early in the novel, Jojo mentions that his Pop has "brown skin tinged with red" (63) and that he "looked like an Indian in the books we read in school on the Choctaw and Creek" (12). Pop's mixed African American and Native American background is even more palpable in his syncretic worldviews and cultural beliefs, to which I will get with more details later in the subchapter.

As the intergenerational transmission of ecospirituality or ecowisdom constitutes a central feature in the African American experience of the land (Fett 62), both Mam and Pop insist on passing down their spiritual knowledge to their children and grandchildren through teaching and storytelling. Mam, who has herself been trained in different spiritual practices, mainly herbalism, root doctoring, and midwifery by Marie-Therese (61), tries to pass on the tradition to her daughter, Leonie, by instructing her at an early age:

> Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world. Starting when I was seven, Mama would lead me out in the woods around the house for walks, and she'd point out plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt. . . . Every day, Mama would point out a plant that had parts that could help women, specifically, seeing as how it was mostly women that searched her out, needing her skills and knowledge. (138-139)

The phrase "I can find what I need in the world" backs up Mam's vision of the universe as a place where everyone can survive and defines a "spiritual subsistence" economy (Bryant 139), where natural provisions and ecowisdom become the most favorable tools for physical existence as well as emotional healing. By teaching Leonie the ethics of self-reliance and autonomy, Mam aims not only to protect her daughter and arm her with the necessary means to navigate the world, but also

to give her a sense of belonging to "a gender, a family, and a feminine history" (Edelman 201). By reciting Mam's lessons, Leonie carries on her mother's tradition—though to a limited extent for unlike her mother, Leonie is unable to embrace her cultural identity or make use of her spiritual power due to her traumas.

More importantly, Mam's embeddedness in nature relates to an ecowomanist tradition structured around the environmental experience of women of African descent. Alice Walker lays the ground for her womanist praxis by providing a personal account of her mother's magic creativity as "a grower of flowers" (216), as a metaphor for the empowering potential of Black women. Walker describes her mother's capacity to transform a space of dearth and hopelessness into a space of hope and beauty, "a garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity" (216), as a female legacy of pride attesting to the ability of African American women. Similarly, Mam's appropriation of the space to induce healing embodies an ecowomanist practice where African American women become "moral agents" (Harris, *Gifts* 50) and the land as a source of identity and empowerment for them. Within this framework, the spiritual epistemology and self-sustaining know-how of Black women are valorized as an effective means to achieve both individual and collective well-being. Hence, Mam's insistence on passing down her ancestral heritage can be read as a way of "honoring" the eco-experience of women of African descent and ensuring its cultural survival (Harris, *Ecowomanism* 27).

The fact that Mam's ecowisdom is put at the disposal of her own community, especially the female community, reveals the communal essence of her practice and its potential in creating "an alternate way of constructing power and authority in women's spaces . . . [by] understanding the special needs of women" (Zauditu-Selassie 52). Mam's connection to her surrounding

environment enables her to maintain and exercise her spiritual identity not only as a female healer, but also as a "community mother (Omunwa/Iyaloda)" (Phillips xix). As an Africanist "womanist method of social transformation," communal motherhood, Layli Phillips explicates, extends beyond the biological meaning of motherhood to include a more collective and cultural one. It refers to "a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual mediation, and dispute resolution" (xxix). Through her poetics of healing, care, and devotion to her family and community, Mam cultivates a holistic, especially women-centered, interpersonal space. By doing so, she draws a sense of authority and power that she derives from nature itself and "distributes throughout the community" (Dillender 140).

Like Mam, who tries to transmit her ecowisdom and spiritual knowledge to her daughter Leonie as a way to protect and empower her, Pop insists on teaching his grandson, Jojo, "survival-oriented knowledge and wisdom" (Warfield-Coppock 471) by telling him ancestral stories embedding a spiritually and ethically based view of the natural world. Most of these stories involve his (Pop's) forefathers' and foremothers' spiritual and physical attachment to the land. Early in the novel, Jojo narrates how he sits up alone with Pop "late at night in the living room or out in the yard or woods" and Pop tells him "[s]tories about eating cattails after his daddy been out gathering them from the marsh. Stories about how his mama and her people used to collect Spanish moss to stuff their mattresses" and how his father taught them "some hunting and tracking, some animal work, some things about balance, things about life (30-31). Pop's memories of his father and mother center on activities carried out in nature. In particular, the activities bear a socioeconomic relevance as they reflect a way of life depending on natural resources. Pop's two visual pictures of his father collecting cattails and his mother stuffing mattresses with Spanish moss indicate how nature has supplied Black Southern rural communities—throughout generations—with essential

needs and how these communities have created and sustained a basic lifestyle through their interaction with the physical environment and its available means. Hunting constitutes, for example, one of the main agricultural activities that flourished in the slave communities in the South as a recreational—limited as it must have been—subversive, and sustaining practice that "strengthened slaves' nutritional and material condition" (Giltner 21). While enslaved people "were not permitted firearms" and used only traditional hunting methods like traps and homemade devices (Giltner 25-26), the bow and arrow were "the chief weapon" for hunting among the different Native American tribes (Driver and Massey 189). Pop is a good bowhunter and he, like his father, taught his son, Given, how to hunt until he became a skilled hunter like Pop—which sadly turned out to be the very reason for his violent death (70-72).

As "[t]he sharing of stories between tellers and listeners provides a symbolic framework offering myriad connections between story, self, other, and experience" (Sunwolf 240), Pop's stories to Jojo have a significant cultural and spiritual outcome. In particular, they not only help strengthen the emotional bond between the grandfather and his grandson, but also foster cultural continuity by connecting Jojo to the cultural meanings and lessons embedded in the stories themselves. More specifically, Pop's stories help link Jojo to nature itself. (24). Turning out much like his grandfather, Jojo's communality with nature is embodied in his own smell as he carries "the scent of leaves disintegrating to mud at the bottom of a river, the aroma of the bowl of the bayou" (133). In Pop's footsteps, Jojo becomes part of nature as "their auras reflect their shared connection" (Dillender 142), to nature and culture alike.

The "shared connection" between Pop and Jojo comes to the foreground in their narrative contextualization and spatial association with animals. Pop, as Richie describes, "had a way with animals" (181). The "animal work" (30) that Pop learned from his father has a spiritual dimension

beyond the material knowledge of raising livestock. While in Parchman prison, Richie observes the close relationship between Pop and the prison's vicious dogs:

> The dogs loved Riv. They turned floppy and silly when he came around. . . . When they saw Riv in the dark morning, they bounced and yapped, but when they saw me, they ossified to stone. Riv held out his hands to the dogs like he was a reverend and they were his church. They were quiet with listening, but he didn't say anything. Something about the way they froze together in the blue dawn was worshipful. (182)

Although as "a central organizing symbol of historical trauma" (Boisseron 514) Parchman dogs in Ward's *Sing* serve as a tool for racial oppression—by being trained mainly to track and attack inmates, including Richie whose dead body ends up being heinously consumed by the prison's hounds—with Pop the dogs turn magically amicable. In particular, the dogs are able to recognize Pop's wisdom and sense his power, as especially revealed in their solemn worshipful reaction to his presence. In turn, Pop's gentle "way" with the dogs reflects a human-animal reciprocal sense of reverence and mutual respect.

Jojo's affinity with animals and his supernatural capacity to hear and understand them (26-27) further identify him as a disciple of Pop. Describing the great relief he feels around animals, Jojo admits: "There was comfort in that, in hearing the pigs snuffle and the goats tear and eat, in seeing the chickens peck and scratch. I didn't feel so small or alone" (14). Unlike the human world where Jojo is endangered and subjected to humiliation both by his parents and institutional structures (the police), the animal world provides an alternative safe space or a cross-species community to which Jojo is able to belong.

To come back to Pop, his spiritually-imbued understanding of the universe materializes in his view of the natural world as a "scared cosmos" (Lincoln and Mamiya 2). As he transmits his ancestral knowledge to his grandson, Pop tells Jojo:

> Everything got power. . . . My great-granddaddy taught me that. . . . Said there's spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. Said the sun is most important, gave it a name: Aba. But you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance. So the crops will grow, the animals breed and get fat for food. . . . You need a balance of spirit. A body, he told me, is the same way. (101)

Pop's relational view of the material world evokes both the African concept of "*bondedness of life*" (Sindima 538) and the much similar Native Choctaw belief in the interdependence of "everything in the world—all people, plants, animals and even inanimate objects" (Akers xiii). Besides the Christian allusion, Pop's syncretic religious and cultural background is especially revealed in his reference to "Aba" (the sun), the name of the "Creator" in the Choctaw mythology (Akers 4), which resonates as well with an African cosmological understanding of the sun as a "manifestation of god Himself" (Mbiti, *African Religions* 68). Pop's respective belief in the concepts of bondedness and embeddedness in the natural world generates an eco-humanist, non-anthropocentric view of nature not as an objectified entity, but rather as a living body endowed with agency and subjecthood. His insistence on keeping the balance between human and non-human entities as a prerequisite for growth and prosperity presupposes "an ethical, moral, and spiritual imperative" (Werbanowska 48) directed at respecting nature and appreciating all forms of life.

The "ethical" ecological mandate manifests in Pop's teaching of his grandson the ethics of sharing and preserving natural resources. As he cuts wood, Pop educates Jojo: "Like this. I'm strong. I can split this wood . . . But never more than I could handle. The boar share so much, and I take so much. No waste. Waste rots. Too much either way breaks the balance" (101). Pop's advocacy of an ecologically-balanced way of life reveals his intuitive environmental awareness. His insistence on the importance of equitable sharing of natural resources between humans and animals, even the smallest ones, and the harmful effects of overexploitation—mainly the loss of balance and hence well-being—introduces a counter-materialistic framework predicated on the stewardship rather than the control of nature. This view, as argued above, has mainly roots in both African (Eze 626)[34] and Native American cultures (Akers 66),[35] but may relate as well to the Christian mandate of caring for nature as reflected in the story of creation in the Book of Genesis (Glave and Stoll 162). Besides its ethical implication, Pop's "no waste" precept defines a "subsistence economy" that aligns with Mam's earlier admonition to her daughter that she can find all that she needs in nature if she looks carefully enough (138). Both Mam and Pop endorse an ancestral rural lifestyle and believe that the sustainable use of "natural provisions to survive outside the capitalist markets" (Bryant 131) is sufficient to maintain life, both physically and spiritually.

Just as it presents a source of physical survival for the characters, nature or the land provides emotional sustenance too. As a healing practice, Mam furthers her spiritual connection to nature by planting a tree every year in memory of her dead son, Given: "*One every anniversary*,

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[34] In the African understanding, "The sacredness of nature entails that it should not be violated. What this means is that everything on Earth— rivers, mountains, trees, plants, seas, the sun, moon, stars, et cetera—has embedded force and spirit" (Eze 626).

[35] Similarly, in most Indigenous worldviews "harmony between the creatures of the world and balancing the interests of each are of paramount importance. Maintaining the harmony and balance of the natural world is the most important concern of mankind. Therefore, native peoples who adhere to this traditional worldview do not exploit other creatures or want only to consume natural resources for personal profit and desire" (Akers 66).

she said, pain cracking her voice. *If I live long enough, going to be a forest here*, she said, *a whispering forest*" (73). Contrary to the negative connotation associated with the tree of ghosts at the end of the novel as a site of historical trauma, trees for African Americans also symbolize reconnection and healing. Mam's reminiscence ritual is an act of working on her trauma and "a counterpractice of memory" (Fidecaro 253). As a "place memory" with a powerful capacity to "contain" and "retain" (Casey 186) memories, trees represent "potent signifiers of family continuity and regeneration" (Auslander 194). By spatializing the memory of her dead son, storing it up in nature, the land itself, Mam enables it to survive and thrive because, as Gaston Bachelard emphasizes, the "localization" of memories allows for their survival and "the more securely they [memories] are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (*The Poetics of Space* 8, 9).

Mam's "*whispering forest*" represents a memoryscape evoking an ancestral West African view of forests as "a cemetery and the abode of ancestral spirits" (Sindima 545; see also Mbiti, *African Religions* 104). Her mnemonic practice of planting trees can be read in this respect as a spiritual act of providing "shelter" or a "natural habitatis" (Casey 188, 189), a dwelling place for the spirit of her dead son to inhabit. The spiritual aspect of Mam's memory work is further emphasized in the magic "*whispering*" power of the forest which—as a soundscape similar to the "humming" in Mam's ear—shows interaction and establishes connection not only between the human and the natural worlds but between the human and the spiritual realms as well, that is, between the living and the "living-dead."

As Mam's attempt to cure herself fails, she asks her daughter Leonie to gather cotton, cornmeal, rum, and rocks from the cemetery so that she can walk into the next life. The different sacrificial natural elements that Mam insists on taking with her as she departs have both cultural and emotional significance. They particularly carry meanings and evoke traditions related to

Mam's spiritual and cultural origins.[36] Indeed, the placement of "grave goods" as a means "to provide the departed with items either of sentimental value to them or that will serve them in good stead in the land of the dead" (Jamieson 49) is a common African practice which has survived to some extent in a syncretized way among people of African descent in the Americas. By carrying with her to the grave "something of [her]self," Mam hopes to maintain connection with the living world and her loved ones, in the same fashion she built the "*whispering forest*" as a means to keep the spirit of her departed son nearby and his memory alive.

Mapping the spiritual geographies in Ward's *Sing* by focusing mainly on two main characters, Pop and Mam, reveals an inherent bondedness between the African American subject and the natural world. The connection is both physical and spiritual. As much as Mam's and Pop's rootedness in nature reflects a necessity for material survival and sustenance in their impoverished southern environment, it, more importantly, defines a mutual relationship with the natural world as a liberating space. By embracing and merging with her surrounding landscape, Mam connects to an African American female spiritual heritage and cultivates a communal space from which she derives and on which she projects her own identity as a female healer and a community mother. Similarly, Pop's connectivity to nature communicates an ancestral, especially African and Native American, spiritual view of the universe as a sacred entity and imposes an ethical mandate to care for and preserve its resources. Through the transmission of their syncretic worldviews and practices to their children and grandchildren, both characters contribute to the intergenerational revival and survival of their ancestral heritage, while maintaining a space that they can inhabit and reclaim as part of their cultural identity.

[36] In his book *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook*, Jeffrey A. Anderson confirms that "[c]onjurers use extremely varied materials. Traditionally, most of them came from the natural world of plants, animals, and minerals" (3).

2. Hurricane Katrina as Ecological and Cultural Trauma in *Salvage the Bones*

Under the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" that Kimberly Ruffin introduces in her study of African American ecoliterature (2), the environment emerges both as an identity-constructive and an identity-disruptive entity for the African American subject. As much as Black ecomemory reflects interconnectedness with the natural world, it also reveals an antagonistic relationship where the physical environment becomes a space of ontological negation. Historically speaking, atrocities committed against people of African descent during the Middle Passage, enslavement, and Jim Crow, for instance, took place in different natural and/or built environments where Black bodies were exploited, violated, and dehumanized. Relevant as well from the point of view of Ward's post-Katrina novel, *Salvage the Bones*, the environment embodies a site of cultural trauma and symbolizes racial violence.

More recent studies conceptualize environmental issues in their intersection with other interlocking axes, mainly race, class, and gender. In their introduction to *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina* (2009), Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright identify race as a major factor in contemporary environmental discourse stating that "[r]ace tracks closely with social vulnerability and the geography of environmental risks" (1). A similar argument is made by Martin Melosi, who argues for "the core view that race is at the heart of environmental injustice" (128) and shows, based on official environmental reports and studies, how poor communities, especially communities of color, have consistently been the most exposed to environmental wastes and pollution in the U.S. (126-128). Natural disasters are, as well, being studied not only from a climate change-related perspective in line with discourses on the Anthropocene, but also from a race and class standpoint by focusing on the socio-economic,

political, and cultural implications of environmental hazards, particularly in the way they reveal "racially coded socio-economic disparities" (Ishiwata 33).

Hurricane Katrina, which hit the American Gulf Coast in August 2005, is one of the most destructive natural disasters that has marked the American collective memory. Unlike mainstream media representations of the hurricane which portrayed it, at least at first, as an extreme weather event,[37] most literary and non-literary narratives of Katrina,[38] have focused on the hurricane's socio-cultural and socio-economic dimensions and repercussions, or on what Henry A. Giroux calls the "biopolitics of disposability" that was made visible in the aftermath of the hurricane. Giroux argues that "[t]he bodies of the Katrina victims laid bare the racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy and revealed the emergence of a new kind of politics, one in which entire populations are now considered disposable" (174). Linking in his article the bodies of Hurricane Katrina to the horrific images of Emmet Till's disfigured body, Giroux highlights the racial dynamics of American neoliberal politics revealed in the state's failure to protect a large segment of its population, namely poor (Black) people, not only in the wake of the hurricane but way before that by marginalizing and treating them as "*personae non grata*" (Ishiwata 33) or citizens of second-degree.

Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* is one of the most notable Katrina narratives. While New Orleans has received the major focus as the city the most affected by the hurricane, Ward's choice to set her novel in her hometown in Mississippi "provides an alternative perspective

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[37] As argued by Henry Giroux, "Labeled as a natural disaster, Katrina initially seemed removed from the political realm and social criticism until it had become clear in the aftermath of the tragedy that matters of race and class had to be addressed" (192).

[38] These include novels, memoirs, songs, documentaries, paintings, and movies, like Spike Lee's documentary film *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Kara Walker's exhibition *Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge* (2006), Dave Eggers' nonfictional book *Zeitoun* (2009), Benh Zeitlen's fantasy film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), Natasha Trethewey's poetry collection *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2012), and Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016), her video clip "Formation," specifically.

on Katrina, indicating that the effects of the storm are more wide-ranging than usually considered" (Clark 342). Ward herself lived through Katrina and was, together with her family, displaced and traumatized by it ("Jesmyn Ward- Salvage the Bones"). However, the novel is not a personal account of the writer's own experience of Katrina—though the latter has undoubtedly fed into the narrative. Despite its centrality on Katrina, *Salvage* moves beyond the mere depiction of the hurricane and its devastating impacts to offer a deeper and more complex understanding of what it means to be Black and poor in the twenty-first-century South, "at the confluence of history, of racism, and economic power" (*Men We Reaped* 237).

The novel tells the story of a poor African American family, the Batistes, who live on the Mississippi Bayou in a fictional town called Bois Sauvage. The family is composed of Esch, the novel's narrator, a fifteen-year-old pregnant girl struggling with her unwanted pregnancy, her alcoholic father, Mr. Claude, her three brothers, Skeetah, Randall, and Junior, and Skeetah's female pit bull, China. In terms of structure, the book is divided into twelve chapters that parallel the twelve days leading up to Katrina, featuring the family's struggle before, during, and after the hurricane hit the Gulf Coast.

Written in response to "the people who blamed survivors for staying and for choosing to return to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm" (Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*"), *Salvage* revisits the history of Hurricane Katrina and provides a counter fictional representation of its cultural and political entanglements.[39] In particular, the novel places Katrina in a wider African

[39] Katrina, as widely argued, is both natural and man-made. While the disaster itself represents an extreme weather event, much of the material and human damage caused by it can be attributed to institutional failure and inefficiency in protecting endangered communities before the hurricane and abandoning them in its aftermath. Particularly, the poor construction and inadequate maintenance of flood control structures along the Southern coastal region caused the levees to break and the pumps to fail to handle storm surges (Bullard and Wright xix; Dickel and Kindinger 5), resulting in a huge material loss and a high toll of human deaths, especially among elders and poor communities of color, most of them drowned in the hurricane's floodwaters. Ward's fictional narrative of Katrina emphasizes these facts as it shows how little to no effort was made to evacuate or relocate the poor and the vulnerable before the hurricane and how the affected individuals and communities were left to fend for themselves after the disaster (250).

Diasporic context by portraying it as another tragic event adding to the historical traumas experienced by people of African descent. Rick Crownshaw indicates that "Hurricane Katrina has affected all social groups, (yet) African Americans borne the brunt of the storm's effects for historical reasons" (163). In this light, Katrina has to be read not only as an ecological disaster but also as, literally and figuratively, an "anti-black" weather event (Sharpe 75), a "raced" tragedy (Wardi, *Water and African American Memory* 3) due to both its immediate and long-term deleterious effects on the Black community of the Gulf Coast in particular.[40] Thus, the subchapter provides a reading of Hurricane Katrina in the novel as an individual as well as a collective or cultural trauma revealed through the example of a poor Black family. It focuses, in its first part, on the everyday struggles of the Batiste family with their disposable environment and explores, in the second part, the cultural and racial dimensions of Katrina, ending by highlighting the ethics of familial and communal solidarity that emerged in the aftermath of the hurricane.

The southern landscape depicted in *Salvage* signifies, to use Patricia Yeager's terms, "the discomforting emblems of neglect, disregard, elision, the throwaway" (8). The Batiste family lives in a Mississippi forest clearing called "the Pit" "where everything else is starving, fighting, and struggling" (94).[41] Describing how the Pit came to be, Esch recounts:

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[40] It is important to note that different communities or social groups were affected by the Hurricane. Although the exact number of fatalities remains unknown and differs from one report to another, a study conducted by the Louisiana Department of Health shows a total of 1170 deaths directly caused by Hurricane Katrina, distributed by race as follows: 53% Black, 38% white, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Other (Native American, French Islander, and Asian) (Markwell and Ratard 3). Another study carried out by Brunkard et al (2008) found 986 Katrina-related deaths, with the following racial breakdown: 51% Black, 42% white, 2% Hispanic/Latino, and 1 % Other (Native American, French Islander, and Asian). Besides race or ethnic group, the two studies identify two other major factors of death in relation to Katrina, namely age and gender.

[41] Despite its "trash-strewn, hardscrabble" environment (94), the Pit, as Jim Coby argues, represents for the Batistes "a place that is equal parts detrimental and life-giving" (88). It is the place where Mama gave birth to all of her children (2), the place where the children go together swimming, hunting, and running (15, 53, 46, 64), and the place that provides them with food to partially fulfill their hunger: eggs, squirrels, and chicken (22, 47, 210). Thus, "[i]t is not surprising that it acts as a suitable shelter for them to wait for the storm to pass" (T. Green 138) and rebuild the house that it has destroyed.

> My mama's mother, Mother Lizbeth, and her daddy, Papa Joseph, originally owned all this land: around fifteen acres in all. It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money. (14)

Likened early in the novel to a "gap in the woods" (1), the Pit—as its name literally suggests—is a place of "social and spatial exclusion" (T. Davis 27), reflecting the family's dire condition and marginalized place in society. As indicated in the passage above, the Pit is also an ecologically vulnerable place. What used to be once a cultivated area is turned due to land excavation into a "body of water" (T. Green 131), a "sinking land" (McKisson 473), unfit for cultivation, "perfect for flooding, ripe for the destruction Hurricane Katrina has in store for it" (Railsback 26). Through their excessive exploitation of the landscape, the white developers not only put the Batiste family at environmental risk, but also led to the degradation of their land, contributing to their further geographical and socio-economic isolation, that is, "alienation from social order" (Wilson xv).

While it is Papa Joseph, Esch's grandfather, who allowed the white people to excavate the ground for clay and "take all the dirt they wanted" to construct their houses (probably due to the family's poverty), the ability of the white entrepreneurs to easily grab land and extract resources to accumulate wealth reveals a "history of colonial engineering, extraction and displacement"

(McKisson 473). It particularly denotes a form of environmental racism by disclosing the greedy nature of white profit-driven structures invested in both land and human life exploitation. The polluting effect of this capitalist ideology is reflected in Esch's use of the word "dirt," a recurrent motif in the novel,[42] as a metaphor for "matter out of place" (Douglas 50), such as the case for the Batistes who are confined, physically and culturally, to the social periphery, the Pit. However, by linking whiteness rather than Blackness with dirt (as it is the white developers who are taking the dirt to build their houses), Esch hints at as she subverts the "racist constructions that posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people" (Zimring 3).

"Consigned to the category of waste" (S. Moynihan 563; Giroux 187),[43] the Batistes live in a "house the color of rust, nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided" amid a "trash-strewn, hardscrabble" (94) environment. Early in the novel, Esch indicates:

> We dump our garbage in a shallow ditch next to the pit, and we burn it. When the pine needles from the surrounding trees fall in and catch fire, it smells okay. Otherwise it smells like burnt plastic . . . When there's good rain in the summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it. The water, which was normally pink, had turned a thick, brownish red. The color of scab. (15)

The invisibility of the Batistes' house "behind the rubbish" reflects their social invisibility as it throws into relief their hypervisibility after the hurricane. The overwhelming presence of "waste"

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[42] The trope of dirt is used especially to emphasize the wasteful, throwaway environment in which the Batistes live. One example of this is when Skeetah finds out about their parvo-contaminated ground and tells Esch, "The parvo. It's in the dirt in the shed" (59). A second instance is when Esch describes Bois Sauvage by referring to the "small catholic church, the haphazard cemetery Skeetah mowed, the country park with the dirt parking lot, which strives to impose some order, some civility to Bois Sauvage. It fails" (116-117). Dirt takes here, as implied by Esch, a figurative meaning as a spatially categorizing matter, that is, as defining of social order and hierarchy.

[43] The connection between waste and race was initially introduced in Reverend Benjamin Chavis's national report "Toxic Waste and Race in The United States," published in 1987. The report examines "the relationship between the treatment of storage and disposal of hazardous wastes and the issue of race" (ix). It defines environmental injustice as "an insidious form of racism" and indicates that African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native American communities are the most exposed to hazardous wastes in the U.S. (ix-x).

points to the "conjoined ecological and human disposability" (Nixon 4) in the Pit, that is, to the "wastification" of both the Batistes and their surrounding environment. Although by dumping garbage in nature and burning it, the family takes part in the contamination of their environment, their act of swimming in the Pit's polluted waters—the color of which (scab) pointing to the shared woundedness of nature and the characters—proves nonetheless that their contribution to the pollution of their milieu is due to a lack of ecological knowledge and means rather than to a conscious will to destroy nature. Being born into a toxic environment with no chance to get out, the Batistes are naturalized into the impoverished environment of the Pit and have no means to change it. Indeed, through their corporeal and cultural proximity to their wasteful environment, the Batiste family and their surrounding landscape merge into a single category, becoming both symbols of "the waste machine of modernity" (Giroux 189).

The everyday traumatic life in the Pit exemplifies what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" (2).[44] In her reading of narrative ruthlessness in Ward's *Salvage*, Annie Bares aligns the novel's depiction of slow violence with Saidiya Hartman's theorization of scenes of Black subjection during slavery (22) by "illuminat[ing] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit[ing] the shocking spectacle" (*Scenes of Subjection* 4). While towards its end *Salvage* does exploit the "shocking spectacle" of Black suffering through the poignant picture of the Batistes stranded in the attic cold "like a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris" (237), the novel in its entirety focuses more on "ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence" (Rothberg,

[44] In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon defines "slow violence" as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Environmental racism is for Nixon the ultimate form of "slow violence." Much like Chavis's "Toxic Wastes and Race" report, Nixon's book deals with environmental racism yet at a larger scale by focusing on the Global South and showing the wasteful effects of globalized economies and neoliberal/neocolonial policies on the global poor.

"Decolonizing Trauma" 226), manifested especially in the family's precarious condition and their daily struggles to survive amid a physically and socially hostile environment.

Much like Hartman's approach of indiscernible scenes of Black subjection during slavery, *Salvage* explores, in a similar fashion, the "quotidian praxis" (Yeager 6) of anti-Black and anti-poor slow violence, that is, "the terror of the mundane," yet in the afterlife of slavery. The traces of slavery further transpire in Esch's early statement in the book:

> It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over to the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north. (4)

For Rick Crownshaw, while Esch's mention of slavery does not aim to "equate the conditions of the antebellum South with twenty-first-century racialized poverty," it does nonetheless point to its enduring legacy as embodied especially in the continued "unhoming of the racialized poor—an unhoming that is ghosted by the national non-belonging of slaves" (164). Esch's simultaneous reference to the "twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach" (which exists in reality functioning as a barrier against hurricanes) and the "slave galleys" reinforces a contrast between a presumptive narrative of (racial) progress and a violent history that is still inscribed in the landscape itself. Moreover, Esch's commentary on "slave galleys" turned into guesthouses points to the "tourist-scape of the post-plantation South" (Crownshaw 164), which commodifies, and even erases, Black memory by stripping the slave galleys from their historical and cultural value. It represents another form of Black uprooting and "unhoming"—to use Crownshaw's term—similar to the Batistes' dispossession of their land by the white entrepreneurs.

The debilitating condition of life in the Pit is foregrounded in the novel's entangled representation of humans and animals. Their connection evinces especially in what Christopher Lloyd calls—following Eric Santner—"creaturely" or "creatureliness" (248) in referring to the spatial and ontological juxtaposition of humans and animals, and more particularly to the intersection of animality and race (*Corporal Legacies* 141). In particular, human and non-human bodies in the novel are linked through imageries and similes of violence.[45] The novel's opening bloody whelping scene establishes this human-animal dynamic for the rest of the novel. Esch pays close attention to China, a white pitbull, as she "snarls, her mouth a black line. Her eyes are red . . . she seems to be turning herself inside out" (4). While Esch and China are already linked through their pregnancy, the picture of China struggling to give birth reminds Esch of her mother "straining to push Junior out and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try to stay inside, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born" (4). The parallel between China giving birth and Esch's mother dying right after delivering her last baby points to the "proximity of life and death" in the African American context (Marrote 207). In addition, the "grotesque" imageries of "physical disfigurement" (Psilopoulou 71, 72) and "evisceration" (Edward 157) describing the two birthing scenes identify the mother's and China's bodies as shared loci of violent figurations. While these imageries are interpreted by Esch and relate probably to her own fears as an expectant mother, they, however, establish an inherent connection between violence and (Black) motherhood.

The entanglement of the human and the animal, in Esch's perspective, comes to the foreground in the way they both deal with the approaching hurricane:

[45] In addition to pictures and metaphors of violence and debility connecting humans and animals, the novel abounds in images of interspecies love and kinship, as discussed in the last chapter of the dissertation especially in terms of Skeetah's and China's relation.

> When my mother first explained to me what a hurricane was, I thought that all animals ran away, that they fled the storms before they came, that they put their noses to the winds days before and knew. . . . And maybe bigger animals do. But now I think that other animals, like the squirrels and the rabbits, don't do that at all. Maybe the small don't run. Maybe the small pause on their branches, the pine-lined earth, nose up, catch that coming storm air that would smell like salt to them, like salt and clean burning fire, and they prepare like us. (215)

For Esch, the lack of means to escape the hurricane restrains the mobility of "small animals" and poor Black people alike. The picture of small animals pausing on branches waiting for the storm foreshadows the novel's final scene of the Batistes stranded in the open attic "like a pile of wet, cold *branches*" (237, emphasis added). The analogy drawn by Esch between humans and animals further emphasizes their shared precarity and identity in the wake of the hurricane as the disposable "animal other" (Holland 168). It also works figuratively as a powerful commentary on social injustice by pointing to "a hierarchical structure based on social power. Those with more resources can choose to leave when threatened; whereas those without are dependent on social structure without which they are left completely alone" (Doble 59). Esch's allusion here to uneven access to mobility between the rich and the poor resonates with Janie's statement in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a book that has inspired Ward's writing of *Salvage*.[46] Before the arrival of the Okeechobee Hurricane (1928), Janie comments: "If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your

[46] In one of her interviews, Ward affirms, "Zora Neale Hurston has also been important. One of the biggest reasons I think she was a big influence, of course, was because of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which includes a hurricane at the end. I remember thinking about that when I was writing *Salvage the Bones*, and wondering how I could possibly follow Zora Neale Hurston. I just did the best that I could. So I was thinking about the ways that she first wrote about natural disasters" (Hartnell 217).

cracks, shiver in your wet bed and wait on the mercy of the Lord" (150). Janie's fierce criticism of how people with more socio-economic advantages are safer in the face of natural disasters echoes another observation that Esch makes when she compares their decaying house to the white people's house: "The Boards of the house are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids" (208). With their stronger foundations and thick walls, both the castles and the white people's house have a higher chance to withstand the storm compared to slave cabins or the Batistes' thin and insulated walls (7).

While the similarity between small animals and the Batistes as identified by Esch manifests figuratively in their comparable immobility, it may reflect as well their shared rootedness in place and use of their own means to survive. Indeed, far from being powerless, neither the small animals nor the Batistes are completely stripped of agency as it might seem. In the previous quote, Esch mentions, for instance, how rabbits and squirrels resort to their olfactory senses to detect the coming storm. Earlier in the novel, she also describes how squirrels seek refuge in the "hard branches" of oak trees as a method to survive the storm (46). Due to the place's history of recurrent hurricanes, the Batistes—like the small animals—have developed their own adaptive tactics and instead of leaving, they turn to their knowledge to prepare for the hurricane. As argued by Abigail Manzella, the Batistes "do not discuss leaving, but they are not passive, with much time dedicated to gathering water and food and preparing the house for the storm, while the father, injured during preparations, gives cogent directions from his bed" (193). Esch herself enumerates the measures they take to prepare for the hurricane in an almost mechanical way (187-191)[47] and the father

[47] These include mainly: covering the windows, filling jugs with water, filling the gas tank, cooking whatever is in the refrigerator, parking the truck in the clearing by the Pit, and getting the cheapest groceries they can get (187-191).

reassures his children in a confident tone, “We make do with what we got . . . Always have. And will” (195), which reflects both a sense of pride and faith in their capability to survive.

Ironically enough, much like the squirrels who resort to the “hard branches” of oak trees to survive the storm (46), “a spreading oak tree” that the Batistes needed to climb to reach “the hollow carcass” of Mother Lizbeth’s house (231) proved to be their “solid house” and savior at the end. Thus, through the figurative simile between humans and animals, Ward stresses the resilience of the Batistes, and by extension of the hurricane survivors. She also reveals the diverse reasons behind their refusal or inability to evacuate, mainly poverty and lack of means, but also attachment to home and land. In so doing, Ward subverts discourses that tended to “pathologize the hurricane’s victims” (Crownshaw 163) by labeling them as “passive (e.g., lazy, dependent), irresponsible (e.g., careless, negligent), and inflexible (e.g., stubborn, uncompromising)” (Stephens et al. 880), acknowledging them, instead, as fighters and survivors.

In line with the human-animal dyad in the novel, Crownshaw contends that “Ward’s characters, her protagonist included, are described and perceive themselves in bestial terms: the distinction between their humanity and the surrounding animal life is blurred; their bodies are experienced as caught in an interminable process of evisceration revealing the animal within” (160). Much as the distinction between humans and animals in the novel is blurred to highlight their shared precarity and vulnerability, Crownshaw’s proposition that the Batistes identify themselves and behave in a bestial, animalistic way is far-fetched. Actually, despite their spatial and ontological proximity to their wasteful environment, the Batistes insist on demarcating the lines between the human and the animal. While the characters show different degrees, or gradual

development, of "transcorporeal consciousness"[48] (Raices 1), there is an overall tendency among them to differentiate themselves as humans. This is clear, for example, in Randall's strong objection to Skeetah's proposition to bring China and her puppies into the house because of the storm: "This is a house Skeetah. For Humans. Not for dogs" (211), he firmly indicates. Randall's observation is clearly anthropocentric revealing, yet, a resistance to be identified with animals as a way of asserting humanness. Before that, when Skeetah jokingly suggests that they could eat China's food "if worse comes to worst" (193) after the hurricane, Big Henry reassures him that "you ain't got to eat dog food" (193), while Randall objects again, reminding Skeetah: "we ain't dogs . . . And you ain't either" (193). Skeetah himself, who seems to show more cross-species affinity through his intimate relation with China, proves to be at times human-centered. It is evident in his desire to sell China's puppies to send his brother Randall to a basketball camp as well as in the final difficult decision he had to make when he sacrificed his dog, China, to save his sister from drowning, favoring thus human life over animal life.

For Skeetah being animalistic or "bestial" has an utterly distinct meaning. It signifies fighting to survive. His affirmative statement to Manny, "We savages up here on the Pit. Even the gnats. Mosquitoes so big they look like bats" (95) implies a strong sense of "pride in being savage" (Doble 56), as it also critically points to racial stereotypes linking Black people to animals. It especially communicates "a sense of survival in adversity and oppression and repurposes the ways in which Black bodies are defined through animalistic discourse" (Doble 56) by subverting "a rhetoric that has in other contexts been used to racist ends" (Hartnell 212) and radically redefining what being savage or animalistic even entails.

[48] In her article "*Salvage the Bones*: A Transcorporal Bildungsroman," Cynthia Raices outlines the characters' anthropocentric dynamics, focusing especially on the development of Esch's trancorporal consciousness throughout the novel.

Skeetah's understanding of "savage" mirrors Ward's own concept of survival. In one of her interviews, Ward indicates that she has chosen the word "salvage" as a title for her novel because it is phonetically close to "savage" ("Q&A with Jesmyn Ward" 263). For her, life in the unforgiving environment of the Pit "demands a certain savagery" ("Jesmyn Ward-Salvage the Bones"). Explaining her use of the term "savage," Ward further clarifies that for her being a "savage" means to be a fighter and a survivor (Hartnell 212). Like Skeetah, by deconstructing the traditional animalistic connotation associated with the word "savage" and turning it into a determined will to fight and survive through salvaging, Ward humanizes her characters and endows them with agency, moving thus away from their characterization as "*zoe"* (animal-like) to "*bios*," that is, full political subjects (Agamben 1).[49]

In preparing for the hurricane, the Batiste children had to salvage any food supplies they could find in the house of wealthy white people who had already evacuated or in the food store. Meanwhile, the automated call for evacuation sent by the state government sounded—ironically enough—more like a threat than a warning:

> *Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned.* And *these could be the consequences of your actions*. There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, this is what it feels like: *You can die*. (217)

The evacuation call reveals the total indifference of state and local authorities toward the lives of its citizens. The phrase "*You can die*" summarizes their "necropolitics" embodying "the capacity

[49] Both Rick Crownshaw and John T. Matthews's "Heirs at Large" (38), besides other critics, borrow Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," or *zoe* in Greek, to describe the Batistes' precarity and their wasteful landscape. "Bare life," as defined by Agamben, designates "the simple fact of living common to all living beings [animals, men, gods]" (1), i.e., the "merely reproductive life" (2). In contrast to *bios*, "which indicate[s] the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (Agamben 1), "bare life" refers to a sort of biological life that is devoid of any socio-political belonging (Crownshaw 164).

to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe 66). Knowing that most of the people residing in these environmentally vulnerable areas are poor and lack the means to evacuate, the authorities—instead of providing "a safety net for the poor, sick, elderly, and homeless" (Giroux 175)—waved the responsibility to the endangered people, leaving them helpless to face the storm, and hence their death. The novel's last powerful picture, with the Batistes stranded in the attic as "a pile of wet, cold branches, *human debris* in the middle of all of the rest of it" (237, emphasis added), points again to the "calculus of life" (Mbembe 72) revealed by Katrina. The decomposition and disintegration of human bodies by the hurricane and its floodwaters into "human debris," an indefinable mass of flesh, "that zero degree of social conceptualization" (67)—as defined by Hortense Spillers—shows the extreme failure of a supposedly colorblind system that disenfranchised its poor (Black) citizens not only during or after the hurricane, but well before that.

Hurricane Katrina triggered Esch's memory of other previous hurricanes, namely, Elaine and Camille. While she herself had witnessed Hurricane Elaine, Esch's memories of Hurricane Camille are communicated through the memories of her dead mother who told her "about the big storm when she was little, the legend: Camille":

> She said Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's roof was ripped off the house. She said the smell afterwards was what she remembered most clearly, a smell like garbage set to rot, seething with maggots in the hot sun. She said the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, the woods. . . . She said she got sick, and most everybody did, because even then the water wasn't clean, and she had dreamed that she could never get away from water because she couldn't stop shitting it or pissing it or throwing it up. She said there would never be another like Camille, and if there was, she didn't want to see it. (218)

The sickening post-hurricane setting described by Esch's mother is very similar to the present-day filthy environment of the Pit, asserting the chronic nature of poverty and the cyclical disposability of the Batiste family. Even the mother's act of excreting the contaminated water—thus the Pit's repulsive environment—is manifested in her own daughter, Esch, who is featured at the end of the novel "cough[ing] up the water and the hurricane and the pit" (236). Furthermore, while the mother's wish not to witness another tragedy like Camille was fulfilled—sadly though—by her postpartum death, Katrina shows how history's reproductive processes of violence have caught up with her family. The mother's reference to the old and newly-dead bodies washing ashore reveals a collective memory of suffering and an intergenerational trauma that not only haunts Esch in the present, but invariably repeats itself for the Batiste family and their entire community.

In describing the drowning bodies of Hurricane Katrina, Anissa Wardi writes in her book *Water and African American Memory*:

> Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the surrounding areas. As I watched image after image of bodies floating in the Gulf Coast waters, it was not lost on me that this tragedy was decidedly raced. Indeed, the materiality of the drowned, displaced, and disregarded recalls an African diasporic history that continues to wash on the shores of America. (3)

By situating the floating bodies of the Gulf Coast in the larger African Diasporic history, Wardi evokes the cultural memory of the Middle Passage and the tragedy of the millions of African enslaved people who died in the Atlantic Ocean on the way to the Americas. In doing so, she establishes a historical continuum between Katrina's floodwaters and transatlantic waters. This figurative return to the "primal scene" of the Middle Passage is echoed in the novel's title itself,

Salvage the Bones, where "salvage" means to rescue often a wrecked ship, and "bones" evokes the "bones of the Middle Passage" (Wardi, *Water and African American Memory* 23).

The linkage made between Hurricane Katrina and the "founding trauma" (LaCapra xii) of the Middle Passage through the image of "floating bodies" suggests that beyond being a mere natural disaster or even a racialized tragedy, Katrina represents a cultural trauma which, like slavery and the Middle Passage, has ruptured and marked Black cultural history and identity. As argued by Ron Eyerman:

> Hurricane Katrina was not only a devastating hurricane that demolished homes and livelihoods in the Gulf region, but also a social disaster that destroyed communities and tore the threads of collective identity. The Hurricane evoked cultural trauma, a profound public reflection on the meaning of this devastation that reached into the very foundational narratives and myths which grounded the nation itself. (*Is This America?* 6)

As for Eyerman "cultural trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all" (*Cultural Trauma* 2), Katrina can be interpreted as a cultural trauma that affected not only the Black community of the Gulf Coast, but the larger African American community as well. By turning the story of Katrina into a fictional narrative, moving it thus from the realm of the real to the realm of the symbolic or cultural, while placing it in a wider historical context, Ward's novel contributes to the very construction of Katrina as a cultural trauma that is "environmentally mediated" (Crownshaw 161).

Despite the immense physical and emotional damage left by Katrina, the novel's ending shows that what came to the surface in the wake of the hurricane was not only the American "biopolitics of disposability" (Giroux 175), but also the ethics of familial and communal care, solidarity, and survival. Entitled "Alive," the novel's last chapter offers a glimpse of hope

embodied in tighter familial and communal bonds and a stronger sense of groundedness and attachment to land. As argued by Jim Coby, despite their utter devastation, the Batistes have "no desire to relocate, to abandon their homestead. There is only the desire to rebuild" (7). Their determination to reconstruct is evident in Randall's assertive statement to his father: "We can fix it" (241), in reference to their ruined house. Furthermore, contrary to mainstream narrative which tended to "depict people of color who depend upon government assistance for survival and participate in criminal behavior such as looting" (Doble 51), the novel presents communal solidarity and empathy as counternarratives of collective salvaging and healing. Kai Erikson indicates that collective catastrophic experiences can serve as a source of communality in that they help create a "spiritual kinship" (459) between the affected individuals. This reinforced sense of kinship is palpable in Ward's novel as well. For instance, the Batiste displaced family is able to find shelter in the half-demolished house of their friend Big Henry, who also offers them food despite his family's dire need for it after the hurricane (242-244). In another affective gesture of solidarity, Esch and Big Henry hand a Top Ramen packet to an old hungry woman who, despite all her distress, is still able to laugh and remains hopeful that things will be "all right" (250).

Unlike *Sing,* which figures a primarily symbiotic relationship between the characters and their natural world, *Salvage* reveals an ecological burden through its focus on Hurricane Katrina. Environmental racism and othering, as illustrated through the Batiste family's everyday struggles with their unforgiving environment together with their exposure to natural hazards in the absence of state protection, highlight a profound systemic failure that was made even more visible in the wake of the hurricane. In this context, the novel's placement of Katrina within a larger historical, socio-economic, and political framework of Black existence gives it a more cultural and symbolic meaning as a cultural trauma reaching to the very core of the African American cultural identity.

However, besides revealing the traumatic effects that preceded and followed the hurricane through the example of the Batiste family, Ward's novel goes beyond the mere discourse of racial victimization to embrace a more authentic and agentic narrative of communal resistance and survival.

Chapter 4: (Dis)continuing Black Motherhood

> *Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my* own.—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*.

Women occupy a central space in Jesmyn Ward's fiction. Whether in *Salvage the Bones o*r *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the Black female is not only portrayed in a complex, multilayered way, but is also given a voice in the narrative to articulate her individuality and define her identity. Particularly, in the footsteps of her literary foremothers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, whose literary texts display "the significance of maternity as an integral part of a woman's state of being" (Ghasemi 243), Ward grounds her texts in "a matrilineal history and myth" (Steele 8), thematizing the question of the Black female subjectivity through the classical trope of motherhood. Both Esch in *Salvage* and Leonie in *Sing*, two respective female protagonists, the first a mother-to-be, the second a mother of two, perceive and question their identities through the lens of their maternal positions. It is not to claim that their identities are uniquely or primarily shaped by their status as mothers (to-be), but rather to show how the experience of motherhood allows them to explore and, when possible, assert their self-identity and position as women in their immediate environments, that is, families and communities.

In its multiplex nature, the memory of motherhood in the African American context is always already overshadowed by the trauma of slavery. Andrea O'Reilly confirms that "slavery, more than any other cultural institution, severed the African American motherline by separating families through sale and by commodifying African Americans as property, robbing them of their subjectivity and history" (85). Since under chattel slavery, Black women are reduced to mere

"breeders" and their bodies considered "units of capital" (Collins 135, 51), "the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis" (76), as Hortense Spillers contends. Linking contemporary conceptions of Black motherhood to the traumatic experience of slavery, Christina Sharpe makes a similar claim asserting that "[l]iving in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother" (19). O'Reilly, Collins, Spillers, and Sharpe all insist on the enduring disruptive effects that the dispossession and negation of motherhood during slavery have on the contemporary formation of Black maternal subjectivity.

Although Ward does not deal with the enslaved woman's maternal experience in a direct way in the two novels discussed herein, her representation of contemporary Black motherhood as inherently painful situates her thematization of motherhood within the far-reaching discourse of slavery and its afterlife. Both in *Salvage* and *Sing* motherhood is conceptualized in part as a complex, violent experience that is often linked to the trauma of loss, be it physical or figurative. In the two novels, Ward provides multiple examples of severed experiences of motherhood: whether in Esch's mother's tragic death during childbirth in *Salvage* or in Leonie's physical and psychological abuse of her two children in *Sing*, motherhood takes on burdened meanings, where the mother is, for one reason or another, either absent or abusive of her offspring.

Limiting, however, Ward's depiction of Black motherhood strictly to the epistemologies of violence and trauma would be reductive, not only of the writer's conceptualization of the issue but of the Black female's maternal identity as well. Instead, Ward portrays motherhood essentially as "[a] site of resistance and affirmation with its tensions and contradictions rather than a homogeneous experience" (Lawson 26). Thus, while acknowledging the continuing pressures that

Black women experience as mothers due to historical factors related mainly to race, class, and gender, Ward's fiction promotes a womanist understanding of Black motherhood where both motherhood and mothering acquire a redemptive power for the Black female subject and the African American family and community as a whole. It is evident not only in Ward's inclusion of examples of nurturing maternal figures, Mama (Rose) in *Salvage* and Mam (Philomène) in *Sing*, but even through her nuanced and complex characterization of Esch and Leonie as mothers (to-be).

In line with the redeeming dimension of motherhood, Ward stresses the central role of the mother-daughter relationship in the formation of the Black female identity. In the Wardian perspective, mothers—especially among the elder generation—wield authority and function as a source of empowerment for their daughters. Both Mam in *Sing* and Mama in *Salvage* act as "carriers of (cultural) memory and traditional spirituality" (Hochberg 1) and as "key socializers" (Barlow and Chapin 327) of their daughters. They do so by teaching them "survival skills" based on the cultural knowledge of their community (O'Reilly 13) and by providing an archetype of womanhood/motherhood that the daughters can identify with and possibly reproduce. Besides embodying a form of protection in a racial and gender antagonistic society, the mothers' attempt to pass down their knowledge and wisdom to their daughters reflects a strong will to preserve a female cultural heritage that has always empowered women and authorized them both in the family and the community. While, as Ward's texts show, the transfer of skills and knowledge from mother to daughter is more "often than not interrupted due to traumatic instances" (Baxter and Satz 6), the cultural and emotional bond between the mother and the daughter (as well as with the family, community, and culture at large) makes it possible for the female characters to ensure a cultural matrilineal continuity.

Ward's most recent fictional work, her short story *Mother Swamp* (2022), provides a perfect illustration of the enabling potential of motherhood in general and of the mother-daughter bond in particular. Set during slavery in the Great Dismal Swamp (stretching on the border between Virginia and North Carolina), *Mother Swamp* revisits the history of the maroon communities, the secret societies of enslaved people who fled to the wilderness of the swamps in the South seeking freedom from bondage. In her mythical creation story,[50] Ward emphasizes female genealogy by imagining an all-female maroon community descending from one single pregnant woman, "First Mother," who, after giving birth to her "First Daughter," succeeds in building a family and a self-sufficient community. Throughout nine generations, the mother takes her daughter as soon as she reaches the age of seventeen to another borderline island of men (Manilamen) to get pregnant and bring other children into the community. Female children are kept with their mothers and male children are sent back to their fathers. Ward's allegorical story underscores the primacy of the female bond and represents motherhood as a "symbol of power" (Collins 194) and a method of survival, resistance, and freedom, "freedom from gender roles, freedom from patriarchy, freedom from slavery and racism" (*Mother Swamp* 22), as Ward writes in her short story.

Besides biological reproduction, the survival of the all-female maroon community relies on the transmission of knowledge and know-how from mother to daughter:

> First Mother taught First Daughter how to find mushrooms in the undergrowth, how to pry them the hearts of the felled logs, how to chart the flow of the stars across the sky, the phases of the moon, the depth and feather of the water in the river, the color of the clouds, so she knew when to seek shelter when great storms were coming, so she knew

[50] In her short story, Ward stresses a strong Native American cultural connection. By using the capitalized words "First Mother" and "First Daughter" Ward draws an analogy with the history of the "First Nations" as she identifies her maroon community as the indigenous inhabitants of the Great Dismal Swamp, reclaiming, thus, an original identity and a Southern space both physically and culturally.

> to expect the rising river, the seep of it into the bottom of the burrow. First Mother taught First Daughter to mark the moon over hundreds of nights, through the seasons, so First Daughter would know when she carried her own ripe egg inside of her. (5)

The above picture of a mother initiating her daughter into the world by teaching her (eco)wisdom to survive is a recurrent motif in Ward's literary texts. Similar to "First Mother" in *Mother Swamp*, the "first" mothers in both *Salvage* and *Sing* (Philomène and Rose, respectively) insist on passing on their ancestral knowledge to their daughters as a way to empower them and preserve the motherline.[51] This thematic intertextuality among Ward's literary works helps identify a Wardian standpoint on motherhood, which posits that "a positive daughter-mother identification is the foundation of a strong female-defined identity" (O'Reilly 79). "Black maternal epistemologies" and "processes," Ward seems to suggest, are "authentically revolutionary" (Grant 122), both for the Black female formation of her feminine identity and for the cultural continuity of the African American community as a whole.

Based on a reading of the two different maternal experiences of the two female protagonists in Ward's *Salvage* and *Sing*, Esch and Leonie, I argue that despite being represented as inherently traumatic in the two novels, motherhood emerges as a source of strength and power for the Black female. To do so, I show, in two respective subchapters, the redeeming potential of reconnection with the motherline (such as the case for Esch) and the cultural dissociation that comes with the disconnection from it (as the case for Leonie).

[51] The concept of the "motherline" was first coined and introduced by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky. On the front page of her book *Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter Bond, Finding Our Feminine Souls*, Lowinsky defines Motherline as: 1-"The life source that lives in every woman"; 2- "The story of the generations from a woman's point of view"; 3- "A woman's female lineage reaching backward from her mother and mother's mother, and forward to her daughters and granddaughters."

1. "I am a mother": Reconnecting with Motherhood in *Salvage the Bones*

Living in the Pit's impoverished environment, Esch's life in Bois Sauvage is defined and constrained by the intersectionality of mainly—but not only—race, class, gender, sexuality, and age (adolescence).[52] She is a fifteen-year-old poor Black girl surrounded primarily by men. With three brothers, an alcoholic father, and no girlfriends, Esch is left alone to grapple with the loss of her mother, who died when Esch was only eight, and "there was no one left for [her] to hold on to" (59). As such, Esch is initially portrayed as an educated and perceptive, yet powerless and self-belittling character. Seeing white "ladies with feathery-light hair and freckled forearms pulling tall men wearing wraparound sunglasses" (28) in the grocery store in St. Catherine, Esch thinks of herself as "small, dark: invisible" (28). As a teenage girl at the crucial stage of self-discovery, Esch probes and questions her racial, ethnic, and feminine identity. Early in the novel, Esch hints at the "Indians" who gave her her hair (12) and recounts:

> I pulled my hair back in a ponytail. It was my one good thing, my odd thing, like a Doberman come out white: corkscrew curls, black, limp when wet but full as fistfuls of frayed rope when dry. Mama used to let me run around with it down, said it was some throwback trait, and since I got it, I might as well enjoy it. But I looked in the mirror and knew the rest of me wasn't so remarkable: wide nose, dark skin, Mam's slim, short frame with all the curves folded in so that I looked square. (7)

Much like Pecola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Esch associates blackness with ugliness and whiteness with beauty, as clear in her criticism of her wide nose and dark skin and her comparison of her hair—"her one good thing"—to a "Doberman coming out white." A black dog, the

[52] Place and geography also play a crucial role in the characters' lives and identity construction. In *Salvage*, place is tightly connected to race and especially class, that is, to the Batiste family's lower socio-economic status. For a detailed description of the Pit's disadvantaged environment, read subchapter 3.2 on environmental racism and ecological trauma, especially pages 101-106.

Doberman throws into sharp relief Esch's fascination with China's whiteness (94)[53]—although as discussed later in the subchapter her admiration is primarily prompted by China's feminine and maternal power, something that Esch initially lacks and longs for. Esch's view of her hair as an "odd thing" reveals her confusion with regard to her biracial/ethnic identity. Yet, as a "throwback trait" pointing to her partial Native American origins and symbolizing cultural identity and resistance,[54] Esch's distinctive hair gives her pride by adding a sense of peculiarity to her character and making her stand out in her African American community.

Furthermore, Esch's comment about her body shape (her lack of curves and short frame) reveals her dissatisfaction with her feminine identity. Her dissatisfaction is further exacerbated by the predominantly masculine environment in which she lives. As the only woman in a world full of men, Esch's life revolves around her relationship with the male characters of the novel, especially her father, three brothers, and the young men who visit them. An adolescent girl, Esch does not have the privilege like other girls her age to show or enjoy her femininity in the most conventional terms. While she describes how Shaliya, another Black girl from the neighborhood, wears "feminine" items, sandals, mini skirt, gold earrings, bracelet, and necklace (144), Esch indicates that she and her brothers have to share clothes, "so it's mostly men's T-shirts for me, loose jeans and cotton shorts" (88). Although poverty may be the main reason why Esch uses her brother's "masculine" clothes, it also points to the family's unawareness of Esch's wants as a young girl on the verge of womanhood. Esch herself confirms her father's ignorance of her physical and emotional needs as she wonders who, in the absence of a mother or a girlfriend, would

[53] This could be read, together with her identification with Medea, a Western mythical figure, so a white one, as a form of internalized racism, pointing even to an unarticulated desire to pass.

[54] As it is for African Americans, hair is an important cultural marker in the Native American context. It is especially a symbol of their tribal identity and cultural resistance against forced American assimilation: "The wearing of long braided hair has been claimed to be a definite expression of pride in being an Indian" (Doty 107).

help her get birth control pills: "Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets that I am a girl?" (102), she asks. The father's indifference is further emphasized by Esch as she asserts that Daddy would not care even if he was told that his daughter was sick (38).[55]

Living in an entirely masculine environment, Esch is, as Sondra Bickham Washington observes, "interchangeably unsexed by her family and oversexualized by the young men who visit them" (87). While the family seems to be insensitive to Esch's femininity, most of the young men in Bois Sauvage tend to over-objectify her, especially Manny, leading in turn to Esch's objectification of herself, as especially reflected in her passive surrender to all and any sexual advances she gets. Early in the novel, Esch mentions, "The only thing that's ever been easy for me to do, like swimming through water, was sex when I first started having it. I was twelve" (22). She further confirms later, "I'd fucked because it was easier to let them [the boys] get what they wanted instead of denying them, instead of making them see me" (238). While as argued by Keith Mitchell "the trauma of her mother's death propels [Esch] to seek comfort and validation through sex with the young men in the community" (67), Esch's "unhealthy" sexual comportment can also be understood in light of her age and lack of maturity. As a teenage girl in the process of exploring her body and developing a sense of her sexuality, Esch has a limited understanding of the emotional and physical risks that may come with impulsive, uncontrolled engagement in (unprotected) sexual relationships.

Esch's submissive behavior comes to the foreground in her unrequited love with Manny, a nineteen-year-old boy and a friend of her brother Randall, who humiliates and uses her for his sexual ends. Although Esch's love for Manny helps her acquire a more mature understanding of

[55] As I discuss in chapter 5, although the father starts as a passive, violent person at the beginning of the novel due mainly to the loss of his wife, his character evolves positively, especially after the family's struggle with the floodwaters.

sex, her feelings of self-loathing and inferiority are deepened due to Manny's manipulative and cunning character. As she goes with her two brothers, Randall and Skeetah, together with their male friends, including Manny, to swim in the "black water of the pit" (52), Esch becomes subject to Manny's objectifying gaze and body-shaming comments. Yearning for Manny to recognize her—"I want Manny to touch me, to swim over and grab me by my arms, to pull me against him" (53)—Esch sustains humiliation instead. Mocking her body, Manny asks Esch, "You was scared to take off your clothes in front of us?. . . Scared to let everybody see what you look like?" (54-55); a question to which she has no genuine answer except for repeating Manny's words and feeling ashamed for doing so. Manny's humiliation of Esch continues as she reaches out to him under the water to touch his chest, yet he pulls away violently, though a while before he grabs her hand wrapping it around his penis, a gesture that reveals both his disrespect of Esch and his pure selfish sexual interest in her.

Esch's low self-esteem is further compounded by her unwanted pregnancy. By building her narrative around a fifteen-year-old pregnant girl, Ward raises some of the most crucial issues facing (poor) Black girls in America today, mainly teen pregnancy and single motherhood. In her interview with *The Guardian* Ward emphasizes that Black girls "are silenced, they are misunderstood and underestimated. Black girls period: pregnant young black girls, poor girls—girls like that are diminished in American culture" (Allardice). Through the character of Esch, Ward's text addresses as it problematizes the topic of teen pregnancy by dismantling "the assumption of morality and repugnance" around it and exploring "the ethnic and class stereotypes associated with it" (Ward, "Q&A with Jesmyn Ward" 265). In *Salvage*, Esch becomes pregnant because she has no chance to get a sexual education, a role attributed conventionally to the mother,

simply because her mother died birthing at home in the absence of any medical assistance.[56] Besides, Esch has no access to birth control means or any health facilities due to her family's extreme poverty. In line with this, bell hooks argues that:

> Lower class women and consequently many black women have the least control over their bodies. In most states, women with enough money, (particularly upper and middle class white women), have always been able to rid themselves of unwanted pregnancies. It has been poor women, black and white, who have had the fewest opportunities to exercise control over their reproductive activities. (*Ain't I a Woman* 106)

Asserting her lack of "control over her body," Esch confirms: "Only thing I wouldn't be able to find is the birth control pills; I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have money to get them, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to a Health Department" (102). In addition, abortion is not even a possibility for her because she cannot afford it, and any attempt for self-induced miscarriage would be risky, so all of her options "narrow to none" (103).

Deploying motherhood as the central topic, the novel opens with a whelping scene. China, Skeetah's pit bull, is giving birth to a litter of puppies while pregnant Esch observes curiously in an attempt to understand what it means to give birth and be a mother. Ward explains in one of her interviews that "[b]ecause she [Esch] doesn't have [motherhood] models in her life, she begins looking to Greek mythology (Esch is intrigued by her school reading of "Jason and the Argonauts" and "Medea"), and to China (Skeetah's dog) and to the natural world for her cues" (Eveld). Accordingly, "the *search* for a surrogate mother" becomes the driving force of the text, leading to Esch's identification with a cast of comparably surrealistic mother figures, China,

[56] Although Esch does not specify why her mother chose to give birth at home, one of the most obvious reasons could be the family's poverty and lack of access to free healthcare as pointed out later by Esch who also wanted to get an abortion, but had no financial means or access to health facilities to do so.

Medea, and Katrina, who serve as "ancestors" or "othermothers" guiding Esch and offering her a "certain kind of wisdom" (Henry 72), which she achieves at the end by both relating to and disconnecting from them.

Before proceeding with the analysis of Esch's connection to China, Medea, and Katrina, it is important to look first at the mother-daughter dyad in the novel because it is especially Esch's mother, Rose, who acts before and even after her death as the primary maternal role model for her daughter. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Ward centers the mother-daughter relationship and insists on the key role that mothers as "cultural bearers and tradition keepers" (O'Reilly 11) play in the construction of the daughter's identity. In *Salvage*, while the mother Rose is dead, to Esch and her siblings "*Mama, Mama* [is] *always here"* (222), "present in the absence" (247). The mother, as portrayed in Esch's and her brothers' recollections, "clearly served as a cohesive force of the family" always "fortifying and guiding them" (Marotte 207, 209). Thus, flashbacks and memories of Rose occupy a significant portion of the novel, "saturating the narrative and its plot" (Henry 72) and functioning as a source of succor and empowerment for Esch and her brothers.

In one of her recollections, Esch recounts how Mama taught her "how to find eggs" as they went together to the woods, and the mother "moved and it looked like the woods moved, like the wind was running past the trees" while Esch followed behind "by touch, not by sight" (22).[57] The phrase "by touch, not by sight" reveals Esch's strong sense of faith and trust in her mother. The word "touch" itself creates a kind of embodied memory that allows the daughter to feel her

[57] The phrase "by touch not by sight" rhymes both phonetically and semantically with the biblical verse in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (*New American Standard Bible*). Both phrases convey meanings of trust and faith.

mother's presence even when she is absent or dead.[58] The mother's embeddedness in nature as she dissolves into the woods looking for eggs—"a practice that is both a pleasure and a necessary skill for survival" (Fisko 119-120)—associates together Mama Rose and nature as two similarly mothering and nurturing entities. Furthermore, Esch's comparison of her mother's movement among the trees to the movement of the wind establishes a figurative connection between the mother and the storm, Katrina, as two comparably powerful maternal figures. Indeed, like Esch's mother, who plays the role of a cultural and spiritual guide leading the way for her daughter and "teach[ing] her how to see with her body, not with her eyes" (Fisko 119-120), Katrina is depicted, despite its destructive potential, as spiritually orientating both for Esch and her family/community.

In another recollection, Esch remembers how her mother caught a baby shark when they went together as a family to the bay. In her memory text, Esch describes her mother as a strong, independent, and persistent woman:

> She was the one that caught a baby shark; it was the same color as the water, as long as her arm, and strong. Daddy tried to take the pole from her and she wouldn't let him. . . . she held it in both hands and walked the shark up and down the oyster-shelled sand, in the biting marsh grass, under and out from the bridge. She walked it tired, her arms big and round, strong under the woman fat. She coaxed it to death. And when it gave up, she hauled it in and let out a laugh that swooped up into the sky with the pelicans and flew away, wind-ready and wide as their wings. (85)

Esch emphasizes her mother's strength by linking her to the three powerful maternal figures with whom she (Esch) connects, that is, China, Medea, and Katrina. The trickster-like gesture of the mother "coaxing" the baby shark until death recalls not only the picture of Katrina "hauling" Esch

[58] In the next chapter I examine the trope of maternal touch as a crucial caring practice that the siblings use in remembering their mother and connecting with each other.

until she almost drowns (235), but also China's merciless act of "whipping" her baby puppy "through the air like a tire" with "no gentleness" (129). The mother's uncompassionate laughter as she hauls the powerless animal, a laughter that "swooped up into the sky" and "flew away, wind-ready" (85), echoes Medea "shrieking" triumphantly as she "flew away into the wind on dragons" after killing her children and taking revenge on her husband (205). The parallel drawn between Esch's mother on the one hand, and China, Medea, and Katrina, on the other, stresses not only the similarities in their multiplex maternal experiences, but more so their shared feminine power as female figures and mothers.

Even though Esch's initial relation to her mother offers her a rather positive view of womanhood and motherhood, the mother's death in childbirth marks a shifting point in the daughter's perception of what it means to be a woman and/or a mother. Watching China as she "snarls, her mouth a black line" while "turning herself inside out" (4, 7), Esch remembers her mother "straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try to stay inside of her, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born" (4). The mother dies a few minutes after giving birth on the way to the hospital as she was dragged by her husband to his truck, "trailing her blood" (2). Due to the grotesque "corporal processes" (Lloyd, "Creaturely" 252) of both human and animal "bodies in the act of turning on in themselves and transforming" (Psiloupoulou 72), connecting together the mother's bloody death during birth and China's painful labor, Esch's idealized conception of motherhood collapses, giving place to a more apprehensive understanding of it as an inextricably violent, and even traumatic, experience.[59]

Esch's maternal apprehension is exacerbated by China's act of mutilating one of her puppies, the "dirt-red puppy . . . the one that is a model of the father" (129). Much like the mother's

[59] Hence the parallel later with the Hurricane and the metaphor of its strenuous laboring of Esch.

death scene, China's murder of her own puppy is a grotesque one: "China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy's neck as she does when she carries him. . . . She is chewing" (129). The death of the puppy and his consequent loss of his mother may be read as a metaphor for Esch's unfortunate loss of her mother. China's deliberate act of eliminating the puppy who looks like the father is symbolically emasculating, much like Medea's act of killing her own offspring as a way of depriving their father of his pride in having an heir. For pregnant Esch, China's violent behavior is so perplexing that she wonders, "*Is this what motherhood is?*" (130), a question which shows both Esch's emotional shock at seeing a mother murdering her baby as well as her confusion as to what being a mother even entails.

China's power as a female figure shows especially in the surrealistic scene of the dog fight. The fight serves through its figurative gendered male-female dynamics of violence and power as a demonstrative performance orchestrated by Skeetah, who is able to see the parallels between Esch and China as two female and maternal subjects, to implore his sister, Esch, to "*make them* [the young men of Bois Sauvage] *know*" her strength and worth. As perceived by Esch, the fight between China, a female pit bull, and Kilo, a male dog and the father of China's puppies, embodies a social commentary that uses animals to put into display the often fraught relationships in the human world, especially between women and men. For instance, the "quasi-sexual" terms (Psilopoulou 72) used by Esch to describe China's and Kilo's violent encounter throws into relief her (Esch's) own initial (sexual) submissiveness. Reading herself into the scene and projecting her own desire to be loved and kissed by Manny—who "had never kissed [her] except . . . with his body, never his mouth" (16)—onto China and Kilo, Esch pictures the dogs fight as an intense love-making scene: "China kisses the side of Kilo's face, face-tonguing lover's kiss, mother to father, deeply. . . . They meet. They rise. They embrace. They bite, neck to neck" (172-175). Kilo's

subsequent attack on China's spectacular "white and full and heavy and warm" breasts (173) is similarly gendered and sexualized by Esch. It figures in her understanding as an act of revenge by Kilo, aimed at stripping China of the symbol of her "feminine potency" (Gripsrud et al. 217) as a nursing mother for previously killing the puppy that looks like him (129), depriving him thus of his masculine pride. Although China retaliates afterwards by biting Kilo's neck and taking away a part of his throat, the mutilation of her nipples marks nonetheless the beginning of her retreat as a mother and Esch's gradual introduction as an alternative, strong maternal figure. Esch's palpable consequential change of character—as she expresses a desire "to open [her] mouth on [Manny's] neck just once" (200) in a clear embodiment of China—attests to the success of the demonstrative dog fight in achieving its intended effect "*to make them know*," as further evidenced by Esch's and Manny's subsequent altercation.

Like China, Medea, another similarly powerful mother figure,[60] plays a key role in Esch's conceptualization of motherhood and her final spiritual awakening by "prompt[ing] her to dive into questions of desire, love, loss, and mothering" (Henry 80). For her summer reading, Esch is assigned Edith Hamilton's mythology and is fascinated by the chapter on Medea.[61] In his reading of Medea in *Salvage*, Benjamin Eldon Stevens argues that "Esch's identification with Medea is a way of understanding her own experience as a young woman coming of age, entering motherhood

[60] A feminist tale par excellence, Medea in Edith Hamilton's Mythology is a Greek princess with a "magic power" (Hamilton 170), who betrays her father and kills (or helps to kill) her brother to save the man she loves, Jason, by helping him steal the Golden Fleece from her father and then sail back to Greece to regain the kingdom. Medea marries Jason and together they get two sons. However, despite all the sacrifices, all the "evil and good" she did for Jason (Hamilton 175), and all the love she has for him, "She would have given her soul for him if he had asked so" (Hamilton 171), Jason abandons her to marry the daughter of King Corinth. Medea retaliates by "killing the bride, the bride's father and last her own children, and flies away into the wind on dragons" (Ward, *Salvage* 205).

[61] While Ward herself confirms that the use of Greek mythology is a way for her to "claim that tradition as part of [her] Western literary heritage" (Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*" 265), a connection can also be made here with another major Wardian literary influence, Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* is inspired by the story of the modern Medea, Margaret Garner, the enslaved mother who after escaping slavery kills her own children to save them from bondage, reaffirming thus the connection between trauma and Black motherhood.

and confronting the responsibilities it entails, and more generally responding to forces—in her body, in her community, and in nature—that are beyond her control but nonetheless let her show an impressive power" (158). In an attempt to understand her disposition as a woman and a lover, Esch projects her own story on Medea's by imagining herself as Medea and Manny as Jason. In particular, due to her emotional weakness, Esch seeks refuge in the powerful figure of Medea as a way of coping with her trauma of both losing her mother and being betrayed and used by Manny. Apart from her act of infanticide, Medea represents through her raging power "a potentially positive model of strength" (Stevens 165) that Esch aspires to emulate. Eventually, despite her initial vulnerability and submissiveness, Esch succeeds through her identification with and internalization of Medea's potent character to gradually regain control over her own life, aided as well by the simultaneous liaison she forges with China, a Medea-like archetype of female strength.

By connecting to both China and Medea, Esch is at last able to find her voice and the courage to face Manny. In a climactic scene that happens just one day before the landfall of Katrina, Esch appears changed and more assertive as she yells Manny's name with a "voice higher than [she has] ever heard it" (202). She finally acknowledges her pregnancy and says it aloud for the first time, to herself and to Manny, "I'm pregnant" (202). Provoked by Manny's insults, who calls her a "slut" and "stupid bitch," Esch becomes a fighter and she is "on him like China" (203). In a reenactment of the violent dog fight, she slaps Manny "over and over," her "hands a flurry" (203), until she eventually becomes another Medea: "This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (204). After her assertive confrontation with Manny, Esch stands watching Manny leaving and "getting smaller and smaller" while reflecting: "*Tomorrow . . . everything will be washed*

clean" (205). Esch's prophecy, indeed, came true with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina which washed everything away, including Esch's traumas.

While through her partial identification with China and Medea Esch comes to accept her pregnancy even before Katrina, it is "only when she battles through the storm does [she] truly become a mother" (Marotte 216). Contrary even to both Medea and China, "Esch does not—and will not—commit infanticide" (Stevens 162), and her maternal identity is endorsed rather than rejected after the storm. In particular, the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, another potent maternal figure, marks Esch's full personal transformation as she acquires a new "ontological understanding of body and community" (Neimanis 92) following her near-drowning experience. The scene featuring Esch's struggle with the hurricane's floodwaters is itself figuratively represented as a birthing act:

> The water swallows and I scream. My head goes under and I am tasting it, fresh and cold and salt somehow, the way tears taste in the rain. The babies. I think. I kick extra hard, like I am running a race, and my head bobs above the water and the hand of the hurricane pushes it down, down again. *Who will deliver me?* And the hurricane says ssssssshhhhhhh. It shushes me through the water, with a voice muffled and deep, but then I feel a real hand, a human hand, cold and hard as barbed wire on my leg, pulling me back, and then I am being pushed up and out of the water, held by Skeet, who is barely treading, barely keeping me and him afloat. (235)

Despite its Medean cruelty, Hurricane Katrina is portrayed in the passage above as "a force that facilitates birth" (Lénárt-Muszka 131), a mother giving birth to a new Esch. The symbolic connection between water and motherhood has already been highlighted by Gaston Bachelard in his book *Water and Dreams* (1942), where he shows "how profoundly maternal waters are" (14)

by arguing that "[w]ater is the spring of being, motherhood" (ix). The "fresh and cold and salt" amniotic taste of Katrina's floodwaters, Esch's direct question "*Who will deliver me?*" (which can be read as both who will "save" her or will "birth" her), together with the hurricane's motherly shushing voice, all point to Katrina's maternal essence. Finally, Esch is saved both physically by being pulled out of the water by the human hand of her brother Skeetah and emotionally by being reborn as a new subject, a "womanly ripe" (163) fifteen-year-old Black girl and mother-to-be.

Tara T. Green states that "what is commonly seen in the body of work produced by authors of African descent who engage water thematically is the changed self, or as Daniel M. Scott puts it, 're-configuration of the self'" (9). In *Salvage*, the "reconfiguration" induced by Katrina and its floodwaters is most clear in Esch's character development and her final coming of age as a "girl-woman" (Washington 85). As indicated by Benjamin Eldon Stevens, "Ward's Esch starts as a 'love-torn girl' and ends up as a powerful mother" (152). Although both China and her puppies are sadly taken away by the waters, Esch's final message to China in the book carries an assertive declaration of their shared identities not only as two female warriors, but as confident mothers too: "China. She will return, standing tall and straight . . . the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. . . . She will know that I am a mother" (258). Much like a totem animal, China's mission as the spiritual guide or "ancestor" (Henry 72) to Esch comes to an end with "Esch's burgeoning motherhood" (Doble 54). In particular, now that China's milk, the symbol of her motherhood, is "burned out" of her, Esch is able to inhabit the "feminine space" and "inherit the legacy of womanhood" left behind by China (Clark 357).

By becoming a mother, Esch becomes a cultural subject as well. Following the storm, Esch emerges as the "focal point" (Doble 59) of both her family and community. In particular, much

like her mother, Esch becomes the cultural bearer of her family's and community's story with Hurricane Katrina. As she collects pieces of glass from the rubble—one marbled blue and white, one red, and one pink brick stone—Esch reflects:

> *This was a liquor bottle,* I will say. *And this, this was a window. This, a building* . . . I will tie the glass and the stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. (255)

Esch's resolution to tie Katrina's debris, the fragments of glass and stone, and piece them together creatively into a whole collage of memory aids represents a counter-practice of resistance and memory work. By insisting on preserving and passing on the memory of the hurricane, Esch forges a space for recovering the stories and voices, hence salvaging the lost lives, of the people of her community and region, while reclaiming a familial legacy by carrying on her mother's cultural tradition of storytelling.

In addition, Esch's choice to anchor the story of Katrina in a colorful string of shards or beads stands for hope and represents a form of embodied or objectified memory with specific cultural resonance and ties. As cultural artifacts, stones or beads for people of African descent carry "ontological, spiritual, metaphysical, and historical meaning" (LaRoche 14). In his study on African American spirituality and material culture, Aaron E. Russel argues that the archeological presence of bead assemblages throughout the Southern United States shows "some degree of cultural continuity with West Africa" (69). Beads or stones represent as well a principal item that Vodou practitioners utilize in their religious rituals and practices with particular spiritual meanings, generally positive, tied to each color. Interestingly, blue and white stones, such as the

pieces of glass used by Esch, are often associated with Yemaya, a Yoruban and an African diasporic orisha, "Mother of all life, Goddess of the Sea," who symbolizes fertility, life, compassion, and renewal (Raven 4,10), pointing thus to Esch's nascent motherhood as well as to the sense of communal rebirth in the aftermath of the hurricane. Red stones symbolize, in Vodou, "love, sexuality, good health, strength, and physical vigor" and pink represents "honor, love, morality, friendship, and general success" (Malbrough 13, 4). All of these meanings can be sensed throughout the novel, and especially at its end. Much like Walker's mother's garden, Esch's string of beads, with its brilliant and radiant colors, turns destruction into beauty. It signals connection and acts as a symbol for the creative potential of Black women and the African American female "heritage of a love of beauty and respect of strength" (Walker 216). Esch's decision to hang the string of shards above her bed aims to keep the memory of her mother alive and carry on in her footsteps. Esch's bed, like her mother's, becomes thus a site or place of memory symbolizing both death and rebirth. As the mother's bed, which witnessed the Batiste children's birth (2) as well as the mother's death, Esch's bed will harbor the story of Katrina, the "murderous mother" that "swept into the gulf and slaughtered" (255), yet left behind "new-born babies," including Esch's.

Esch's journey from girlhood to womanhood/motherhood can be interpreted as a womanist bildungsroman where the female protagonist—like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—goes through a vision quest to find her inner strength and feminine power. Esch comes of age at the end by connecting, emotionally and spiritually, to her mother and "availing herself of her memories" (Henry 71-72), but also by identifying with and projecting her initially powerless self into a cast of alternatively strong maternal figures, China, Medea, and Katrina. By building her narrative around Esch's painstaking journey, Ward shows the traumatic nature of Black motherhood and emphasizes the inherent struggles that Black girls and women experience as mothers. Yet, by

triumphing to Esch's maternal identity at the end and making her find her own garden in the process of searching for her mother's, Ward seems to suggest that salvaging the motherline is essential for the formation and continuity, spiritual and cultural, of the African American feminine self and community at large.

2. "*I can't be a mother*": Disrupting the Motherline in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Like *Salvage the Bones*, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* emphasizes the powerful role of mothers and motherhood. While still featured as mainly traumatic, motherhood in *Sing,* similarly to *Salvage*, carries a redemptive potential. The novel includes two generations of mothers, Philomène and her daughter Leonie, who display two completely different, and even oppositional, experiences of motherhood. Whereas Philomène is a caring and loving mother, her daughter Leonie, a mother of two, is struggling with her maternal identity due to several traumatic instances, especially racism, the imminent death of her mother, and the tragic death of her brother. These affect her perception of her role both as a mother and a daughter and leave her trapped in a dire psychological condition, leading ultimately to her emotional dissociation and cultural disconnection from her family and community. Although Leonie achieves little development as a character and remains quasi-dysfunctional as a mother and daughter, she nonetheless becomes—even momentarily—at the end of the novel, in the footsteps of her mother, a healing subject by partly contributing to the sense of emotional ease and relief with which the novel concludes. While providing a nuanced reading of Leonie's ambivalent identity both as a mother and a daughter, the subchapter aims also to argue for the individual failure and cultural dislocation that come with the female disconnection from the motherline.

When asked in one of the interviews about her writing of Leonie, Ward confirms the complexity of her character. She admits that she initially could not understand Leonie due to her

abusive nature, yet after figuring out the "multiple pains that she's lived with in her young life," it was easier for her to understand and even feel sympathy for Leonie ("Powell's Interview"). Connecting Leonie's vulnerability to the legacy of slavery, Sheri-Mari Harrison argues that "Leonie's inability to function healthily in any of her relationships, as daughter, partner, or mother, is demonstrative of the complex familial dysfunction that characterizes some of the afterlives of slavery" (1). More particularly, Leonie's anger and pain emanate from the racist environment in which she lives, which not only led to the tragic death of her brother (who was as mentioned before deliberately killed by Michael's cousin), but also made her relationship with both her white partner, Michael, and two children, Jojo and Kayla, more complicated and guilt-ridden.

The novel's opening chapter introduces the readers to Leonie's flawed character as a mother as well as to her fraught relationship with her son, Jojo. For her thirteen-year-old son's birthday, Leonie gets, as Jojo disappointingly indicates, "a baby shower cake," the only cake she could find in the store (44). Later in the novel, Jojo remembers how Leonie used to slap and hit him "so hard" in public for talking too much when he was younger (154). Feeling constantly emasculated and debased by his mother, Jojo "has largely written Leonie off as anything except a mother-in-name only" (Broida). He calls her by her name, Leonie, never Mama (17). His confession, "Sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I'll ever understand Leonie" (41), stresses the extent of their detachment and lack of bond as mother and son.

Leonie's aggressive behavior extends even to her toddler daughter, Kayla. As she bathes Kayla and the baby starts kicking and screaming, Leonie feels the urge to hit her: "I just want to give her one slap, or maybe two, enough to sting her good, but I don't know if I'll be able to stop" (192). Leonie even derives an uncanny kind of content from mistreating her children. She admits: "It feels good to be mean, to speak past the baby I can't hit and let that anger touch another. The

one I'm never good enough for. Never Mama for. Just Leonie. A name wrapped around the same disappointed syllables I've heard from Mama, from Pop, even from Given, my whole fucking life" (192). Leonie's maternal outrage is especially triggered by her feeling of being unappreciated and labeled as unfit or "bad" mother[62] by both her children and her parents, who, for her, seem unable to see through the roots of her anger and understand the extent of her inner turmoil.

Despite her abusive character, at heart, Leonie longs to be a "good" mother. This is especially evident in the contradiction she displays between what she does and what she wishes she could do as a mother. Though she wants "to answer her [daughter's] question . . . to be her mother" (261), Leonie remains yet silent and passive. Leonie even envies her children for always seeking each other. In particular, the siblings' attachment reminds her of her own failure as a mother. Seeing her son Jojo soothing his sick toddler sister Kayla, Leonie reflects: "I stand there, watching my children comfort each other. My hands itch, wanting to do something. I could reach out and touch them both, but I don't" (136). While the itching in Leonie's hands reveals a maternal tingling desire to tend to and touch her children, it can be understood too as a somatic manifestation of Leonie's traumatic feelings of loss, the loss of not only her maternal sentiment, but more so of her brother.

Leonie's "inconstant" (132) maternal identity is palpable to her immediate family, especially her mother. Leonie, as Mam tells Jojo, "ain't got the mothering instinct. I knew when you was little and we was out shopping, and she ate right in front of you, and you was sitting crying hungry. I knew then" (299). Despite acknowledging her daughter's lack of maternal drive, Mam

[62]Although the definition of a "good" and a "bad" mother remains elusive, relative, and vague, a "good mother" is generally understood in critical literature as the one who "promotes the well-being and development of her children and is almost always patient, protective, nurturing, and generous" (Barlow and Chapin 4). A "bad" mother, on the other hand, can be viewed as a deliberately absent or abusive mother, physically and/or emotionally (Baxter and Satz 5).

is able to see through and tolerate Leonie's failure to love her children "wholly and self-lessly" (Rich 15). When Jojo tells his grandmother that Leonie hates him, Mam explains: "No, she love you. She don't know how to show it. And her love for herself and her love for Michael—well, it gets in the way. It confuses her" (300). A mother herself, Mam understands that "the lack of mothering does not necessarily imply lack of mother love" (Reventós 286) and that motherhood itself is a "naturally" complex experience, where mothers may for whatever reasons find themselves "caught in waves of love and hate" (Rich 25) at the same time.

Due to her failures, Leonie resorts to drugs to "burn up all the sorrow and despair [she] felt (51). More specifically, Leonie uses drugs to see the phantom of her brother, Given-not-Given: "Three years ago, I did a line and saw Given for the first time" (74), she indicates. While the "hollow figment" that Leonie is able to summon may first seem as a drug-induced hallucination, Given-not-Given reveals to be an actual ghost, who, although voiceless, can communicate with his sister through bodily gestures and facial expressions. Since the novel itself is conspicuously grounded in Vodou and other African American spiritual beliefs, Leonie's ability to conjure up the ghost of her brother can be read in light of her spiritual gift to see the dead. It specifically comes alive through her use of drugs as she enters into a Vodou-like trance and ecstatic state in which she connects with the spiritual world.[63] Leonie, as her mother told her, "might have it" (60), referring to Leonie's magical extrasensory perception. While Mam "could read people, read the future or the past in they bodies. Know what was wrong or needed by their songs: in the plants, in the animals, too" (305), Leonie shares the supernatural power to see the dead with her two children,

[63] Some Vodou literature asserts a connection between drugs or hallucinogenic substances/plants and Vodou. In his foreword to Ross Heaven's book *Vodou Shaman: The Haitian Way of Healing and Power*, Tim Booth states that "Trance is the state many of us have gotten in touch with by using drugs. We know there is something out there that is more real than the dream we live in, and our spirits are magnetically drawn to it. Until this natural drive is addressed and given other healthier pathways, such as those shown in *Vodou Shaman,* drugs will remain the most popular shortcut" (x).

Jojo and Kayla, who both prove able to see not only the ghost of their uncle Given, but Richie's ghost too. The intergenerational spiritual gift that Leonie, together with her two children, has clearly inherited from the motherline, inscribes her therefore—despite her seemingly individualistic and uprooted character—in a spiritually-imbued cultural universe and family of which she is an integral part, as further revealed at the end of the novel and discussed below.

Leonie's dysfunction as a mother is also grounded in what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia" in referring to "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" (235). When she was young, Leonie resented her mother's healing lessons (142) and later when she got pregnant by Michael she found herself struggling with the idea of motherhood mainly due to an internal fear of becoming like her mother:

> It still twists something in me to think of that: the fact that I hesitated, that I looked at my mam's face in that light and felt myself wrestle with wanting to be a mother, with wanting to bear a baby into the world, to carry it throughout life . . . The way we were sitting on that sofa, knees tight, backs curved, heads low, made me think of mirrors and of how I'd wanted to be a different kind of woman, how I'd wanted to move somewhere far away, go to California, probably, with Michael . . . A baby would make that harder. Mama looked at me and she wasn't stone no more: her eyes were crumpled and her mouth crooked, and that told me she knew exactly what I was thinking, and I worried she could read minds, too, that she would see me shying away from who she was. But then I thought of Michael, of how happy he would be, of how I would have a piece of him with me always, and that unease melted like lard in a cast-iron pot. (207)

While Leonie's ambivalent feeling towards motherhood reflects her sense of insecurity and apprehension to bear a baby into a world that she cannot trust as well as the very inherent

"contradictory nature" of the experience of motherhood (Collins 133), her struggle with the want to be a mother is especially triggered by a "war of identity against [her] mother" (Reventós 287). This is palpable in her "desire to become purged once and for all of [her] mother bondage, to become individuated and free" (Rich 236) by escaping the South—the site of her traumas and the constant reminder of both her racial identity and cultural failure.

More particularly, Leonie's desire to split off from her mother and break out from her community and culture is driven by an underlying internalized sense of racial inferiority. At the core of internalized racism, Suzanne Lipsky argues, is the "turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people . . . that result from the . . . oppression of the (dominant) society" (6). Leonie's internalized oppression is the by-product of the racial discrimination she experiences in her immediate Southern environment, especially from her white supremacist in-laws. Constantly humiliated and mistreated by Michael's father, Big Joseph, who calls her the "n" word and refuses to let her or his own grandchildren into his house (267), Leonie becomes severely traumatized and develops a sense of fear and self-doubt. When she hears the "deep and gravelly voice" of Michael's mother, Leonie "flinch[es]" (262). As she drives once to Big Joseph's house to leave a note about Michael's release from prison, Leonie gets chased by Big Joseph, and she flees scared:

> Fear rises to my shoulders, up my neck, a bubbling choke. I don't know what I'm afraid of. What can he do but curse me? . . . But something about how fast he's gunning that lawn mower, the way he points to that tree, the way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence. (80)

Leonie's comparison of the lawn mower to a gun, together with her reference to the oak tree—a symbol of racialized terror (lynching)—reveals a deep-seated consciousness of whiteness as an

inherent source of threat. Although she has no reason to panic, Leonie's reflexive response can be attributed to the "hidden wounds of racial oppression" (Hardy 26) she carries, further evidenced in her extreme fear, voicelessness, and inability to defend herself or her children against her racist in-laws.

Thus, while it is apparently her profound love for Michael "across the color lines" (53) that prompts Leonie's emotional and cultural alienation, it is actually her internalized racism and "deification of whiteness" (Hardy 25) that estrange her. Leonie's love for Michael, as her mother asserts, "ain't healthy" (201); "it gets in the way. It confuses her" (300). In an attempt to please Michael, Leonie tries to "get white" (Tunc 676) by assimilating to white standards of beauty. She relaxes her hair and dyes its tips blond so it becomes "straight and wispy as Misty's" (her white friend), yet it looks "like it didn't belong on her" (87), as Jojo affirms. She puts "soft pastel pink nail polish" in the hope that "the color would make Michael take her fingers" (201). Indeed, even Leonie's decision not to abort the baby does not emanate from a real desire to become a mother, but rather from an aspiration to "have a piece of [Michael]" with her, that is, to have a child who is partly white.

Leonie's unconditional identification with Michael and his whiteness shows especially in her question as she wonders after Michael's release from prison: "If we had another baby, if it would look more like him than Michaela. If we had another baby, we could get it right" (196). Leonie's desire to bear a third baby who looks entirely like Michael, a white child who is even whiter than her mixed-race, light-skinned daughter Michaela (Kayla), is but another desperate attempt on her part to pass through motherhood and "disappear into the white race" (Tunc 676). Her statement that they could "get it right" implies that by trying a third time, she and Michael

might succeed in getting a visibly white child, hence in reducing their racial differences and gaining acceptance by Michael's parents and the larger white community.

Adrienne Rich argues that "where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard will identify with her completely" (235). Similarly, on the flip side of Leonie's resentment of her mother and all what she represents is a profound idealization of her: "I thought about the Medusa I'd seen in an old movie when I was younger . . . *She was beautiful as Mama. That's how she froze those men. With the shock of seeing something so perfect and fierce in the world*" (207). While Esch's mother is likened to Medea, Leonie compares her mother to Medusa, and both Medea and Medusa, hence Rose and Philomène—Philomene means strength and powerful love in Greek)—represent female power, magic, and beauty.

Leonie's apparent "dread of becoming like her [mother]" can, therefore, be understood as but "the otherside of her deep identification with her" (Reventós 287). Her identification is especially evident in the reference to mirrors in the previous quote, which defines the daughter and her mother as reflections of each other as they remain tied together culturally, emotionally, and by the bloodline. Even the position in which Leonie and her mother sit on the sofa "knees tight, backs curved, and heads low" is suggestive of a birthing scene, pointing not only to Leonie's upcoming motherhood, but also to the tight mother-daughter connection they have. Leonie herself acknowledges it as she asserts how she would eventually "[g]row into her [mother's] body. Grow into her" (68). The final image in the quote above of Leonie's unease melting like "lard in a cast-iron pot" further confirms the inherent dissolution of Leonie's and her mother's identities, an identity that is clearly rooted in a Black Southern culture and place as suggested by the rural imagery of the lard and the cast-iron pot.

Leonie's deep admiration of her mother is especially revealed in the scene featuring Mam educating her daughter and preparing her for womanhood. When Leonie got her period for the first time, her mother told her "stories of female experience" relating not only to the physiological changes that happen to women's body when they "bleed for the first time" (60), but also "stories of the life cycles that link generations of women" (Lowinsky 1). She also told about her memories of being initiated into the spiritual world of the ancestors at the age of twelve, as well as about her spiritual power to see through and read people's minds (58-60). However, it is Mam's capacity to deliver babies which impresses Leonie the most. Learning about it for the first time, Leonie declares:

> In that moment, Mama became more than my mother, more than the woman who made me say my rosary before I went to sleep with the words *Make sure you Pray to the Mothers*. She's been doing more than mothering when she put homemade ointments on me when I broke out in rashes or gave me special teas when I was sick. That smile hinted at the secrets of her life, all those things she'd learned and said and seen and lived, the saints and spirits she spoke to when I was too young to understand her prayers. (62)

Leonie's particular fascination with her mother's ability to assist other women in childbirth points to the sacredness of midwifery as a "motherwork of creating mothers" (Wilkie 120). As an African American female cultural and spiritual practice, midwifery, as Laurie A. Wilkie contends, extends beyond the mere tasks of facilitating labor and delivery to include "teaching pregnant women how to care for themselves during pregnancy, what to expect during the ordeal of childbirth, and, afterward, how to care for their newborns" (119, 141). Midwives have functioned within African American Southern rural communities as "bearers of cultural and communal standards" (Wilkie120) that are mostly, but not exclusively, female and mother-centered. This moment of

quasi-religious revelation between a mother and her daughter marks a rite of passage for Leonie as she is at this particular moment, like her mother before her, initiated into the spiritual world of the foremothers. Leonie's ability to discern "the secrets" of her mother's life just by looking at her and reading her smile accentuates the strong mother-daughter bond. It also hints at Leonie's nascent spiritual consciousness, which, as her mother confirms, "usually come[s] around full blown when [women] bleed for the first time" (61).

For all her differences, Leonie comes to represent—though to a limited extent—a cultural extension of her mother. As James Mellis argues, "Despite her struggles, [Leonie's] early education in African-based religious and healing traditions never leaves her, and when she practices them, she 'becomes' a part of the family" (9). It is evidenced in her ability to recite, albeit imperfectly, her mother's healing recipes and lessons as she remembers her trips to the woods with her (138-39). As an adult and a mother herself, Leonie resorts to her mother's instructions and prayers to deal with the hardships of everyday life. For example, as they drive to Parchman prison and Kayla gets severely ill, Leonie starts looking in nature for something to give to her sick daughter: "Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world" (138), she indicates. Yet, Leonie's "doughy memory" (141) fails her and she ends up making a drink that makes Kayla even more sick. So, she pleads: "I wish I'd listened more carefully I wish I could remember . . . I forgot so much of what she [Mama] taught me" (140), proving the individual failure and "dislocation of self" (O'Reilly154) that come with the female disconnection from the motherline. In another instance of despair, in order to control her anger and abstain from hitting her toddler daughter, Leonie starts to "*pray to the Mothers*" (62), to Oya, Yoruba Goddess of winds, hurricanes, and lightening, and to Saint Teresa, her Catholic syncretized equivalent in Santeria (Alvarado 21), just like her mother taught her: "*Ain't no good in using anger*

just to lash. You pray for it to blow up a storm that's going to flush out the truth" (190-91). Although Leonie's attempt to contain her anger and derive some truth from the "mothers" fails (like her tea for Kayla), her prayers reassert her continued faith in the power of her mother's teachings.

Eventually, Leonie's inconsistent agency throughout the novel is partly nullified by her final redemptive act of putting an end to the suffering of her mother using her spiritual power. Due to her pain, Mam asks Leonie to help her "prepare" for her death and "usher her away" (334) by calling upon Maman Brigitte, mother of the dead. Mam's insistence that only her daughter, Leonie, could help her move to the next world—"You my baby . . . Like I drew the veil back so you could walk in this life, you'll help me draw it back so I can walk in the next" (277-78)—indicates the intrinsic mother-daughter spiritual and emotional bond formed at birth. In the same way Mam understands life and death as one "complementary" process (Mazama 221), she also considers her daughter a continuum of her, her successor in life after her death. Even though Leonie accepts her mother's request reluctantly, by so doing she rejoins—if but for a moment—the stream of the motherline from which she previously detached herself: "I nod, and then her scalp is under my hands, hot to the touch, and I'm kneading and scratching like she did me, and her mouth is opening and closing in half pleasure, half pain" (278). The magic effect of reconnecting with the motherline unfolds in Leonie's momentary transformation of identity as she becomes a caring person, laying her hand over her mother's head while "kneading and scratching" her scalp. This cathartic moment marks a shift of roles between mother and daughter and points to Leonie's resurfacing as a spiritual subject, much like a (Vodou) priestess giving her blessings and prayers to her dying Mam.

By entrusting Leonie with the task of carrying out the rituals for her death, Mam succeeds in dragging back her daughter into the current of the motherline, offering her thus the opportunity

to reconnect with a "gender, a family, and a feminine history" (Edelman 201). As Leonie feels emotionally incapable of performing the litany, her suffering mother slaps her urging her to end her pain and "let her go" (344): "Baby, Please," she begs (339). Although the slap itself represents a wake-up call for Leonie, "it is not the slap that prompts [her] to begin the litany" (Li, "Learning to Listen" 97) but, as Leonie herself confirms, "It's the word *baby* that makes me jump off the bed. Because I hear her say it now and I'm her baby again, soft-gummed and wet-eyed and fat, and she is whole and sweet-milked" (339). Leonie's nostalgia for her younger guilt-free self here resonates with an earlier observation she makes about how Pop changed from calling her "girl" when she was young to calling her only by her name now, "and every time he says it, it sounds like a slap" (63). Similarly to Mam's, Pop's word-slap is a way for him to bring back his daughter into the family and the cult. So, in a moment of both extreme emotional weakness and strength, Leonie embraces her authentic spiritual self and performs her mother's litany, dumping the collected items (rocks, cotton balls, cornmeal, and rum) in her mother's altar and praying to "Maman Brigitte, Mother of all the Gede. Mistress of the cemetery and mother of all the dead" (340-341), until her mother bucks and dies peacefully and with little pain.

Thus, "in performing this ritual, Leonie re-enters into an old tradition" (Mellis 12) and "an ancestral female realm" (Lowinsky 37). Leonie's success at fulfilling her mother's wish enables her to reconnect with her forgotten cultural and spiritual roots while finding her lost self as "the daughter she once was" (O'Reilly 157). Leonie herself realizes the cultural significance of her reconnection as she reflects when Jojo blames her for Mam's death, "He [Jojo] doesn't know what it means, to have the first thing you ever done right by your mama be to usher in her gods" (343). For Leonie, that means being reborn, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally. It proves that far from being a strictly sad occurrence, death in the African American understanding "is one of those major

life events requiring ritual participation of group-aimed at reharmonizing the survivors as well as easing the passage of the dead" (Sjöö and Mor 78). For people of African descent, death is generally perceived as an occasion for strengthening familial and communal ties, including an eternal "spiritual connection with the deceased" (Laurie and Niemeyer 176). This ancestral perception of death is validated by Leonie's nascent feeling of belonging after her mother's death as she wants to tell Jojo, "*we a family*" (346). The sense of familial reconnection transpires in the picture of the family reunited around Mam's dead body, crying "in chorus" (343) and "bonded by their shared loss, but also by their love" (Mellis 12).

Leonie's redemptive act helps her to partly repair her broken relationship with her family, Pop and Jojo in particular. After Mam's death, Pop goes back to calling Leonie by the word "girl," as she herself once wished (345). As he already knows what it means to kill to save a loved one from suffering, Pop recognizes Leonie's act as a "call-to-healing" (James 24). He explains to Jojo, "It was a mercy, son" (344). Much like Pop's merciful murder of Richie, Leonie's contribution to Mam's death embodies an act of extreme daughterly care and love, a love that is like a mother's, "too thick" (164), to use Paul D's expression to Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved*. Even Jojo's perception of his mother changes, and by "recognizing the pain and love that went into Leonie's decision, [he] sees his mother as never before" (Li, "Learning to Listen" 97). Leonie herself is able to sense the change and see some recognition beyond Jojo's resentment of her: "And then he's [Jojo] looking at me . . . I'm a book and he can read every word. I know this. He sees me. He knows it all" (345). Although Jojo remains distrustful of Leonie, his ability at last to read his mother and see through her pain, especially why she failed at mothering, points to his growing consciousness. Accordingly, his view of his mother evolves from "sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I'll ever understand Leonie" (4), in the beginning of the novel, to

"[s]ometimes . . . I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels. . . . I feel it in me too. An itching in my hands" (352-353), at the end. Jojo's empathic realization is prompted by his recognition of the similarities that he and Leonie have despite their core differences. These extend beyond their common telepathic supernatural gift to include a newly shared knowledge of pain and death. Jojo's emergent understanding of Leonie parallels his nascent understanding of death after both his encounter with Richie's ghost and Mam's loss. At the end, Jojo's initial prophecy on his thirteenth birthday, "I like to think I know what death is" (9), comes true. He now knows and feels what it means to lose a loved one, the way Leonie lost her brother before and her original self with that.

Despite this brief familial reconnection, Leonie, unlike Esch in *Salvage*, continues due to her psychological traumas and confusion to reject her maternal identity and decides to leave her children after her mother's death: "*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember, I can't see. I can't breathe*" (348), she confirms. Yet, her departure is redeemed by her daughter's final inferred introduction as the future matriarch of the family. After Mam's death, three-year-old Kayla takes up a healing mothering role, providing solace and relief to everyone around her. She gently comforts Pop, pats his arm, and rubs him "like Pop was a puppy, flea-itching and half bald, starved for love" (352). She hums over her brother's shoulders, "says 'shhh' like [Jojo] is the baby and she is the big brother, says 'shhh' like she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie's womb, the sound of all water, and now she sings it" (360). Kayla's Katrina-like, motherly shushing voice indicates her mothering capacity, which is further evidenced in her sonorous "memory of intrauterine existence" (Antozsek 17). Kayla's remembrance of the amniotic fluid in her mother's womb symbolizes a return to the origins, to "where it used to be" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 99), that is, to the roots, the ancestors, the mothers. As she waves to the ghosts,

Jojo recognizes the movement, “I know it, I know the movement, know it’s how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla’s back, when we were frightened of the world” (359). Kayla’s reproduction of her mother’s caring gestures reasserts her maternal position and propensity. While Leonie is a rupture, a missing circle in the motherline, Kayla is the connecting thread. Her existence makes up for her mother’s absence and helps reinstate the Black woman and the Black mother in her redemptive, leading role in the family and community at large. It is also clear in Kayla’s magic power to make the multitude of ghosts smile with “relief” and “ease” (359-60) through her song, becoming for them like “a mother figure, a metaphorical predecessor, their ancestor” (Suchet 122). Kayla’s healing role further manifests in the way she “takes after and brings together all the members of her family” (Pesce) as pointed out by Jojo: “Her eyes Michael’s, her nose Leonie’s, the set of her shoulders Pop’s, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla” (359). Through her mosaic of identity, Kayla embodies wholeness, futurity, and posterity as she also represents through the diversity of her character, in more general terms, the inherent peculiarity, multiplicity, and integrity of the Black identity.

Chapter 5: Healing through Caring: Community in Resilience

> *Black love is Black wealth and they'll*
> *probably talk about my hard childhood*
> *and never understand that*
> *all the while I was quite happy.*—Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa."

Despite the maternal ruptures and everyday traumas that both the Stone and the Batiste families in Ward's *Sing* and *Salvage* face, the two families are able to survive both physically and emotionally by maintaining a close-knit web of familial care and love. In the two novels, caregiving is featured "as a part of cultural/family history that has been passed on for generations" (Pharr et al. 3), functioning primarily as a means for coping with the everyday hardships of the characters' lives as well as healing personal and more communal traumas. Contrary to a dominant perception of the Black family as pathological and "inherently laden with problems and inadequacies" (Nobles 70; see also Littlejohn-Blake and Darling 468), Ward offers a positive family image and identity. She does so by reclaiming an Afrocentric cultural view of the family[64] as "the incubator of generational knowledge, traditions, values, and behaviors who serve as a protective mechanism against external

[64] In her article "Interpreting the African Heritage in African American Family Organization" American anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa traces the African roots of the African American family asserting that, "Just as surely as black American family patterns are in part an outgrowth of the descent into slavery (Frazier [1939] 1996), so too are they partly a reflection of the archetypical African institutions and values that informed and influenced the behavior of those Africans who were enslaved in America (Herskovits [1941] 1958)"(29). She also confirms that African institutional arrangement and values are "still recognizable in African American family formations today" (30). Similarly, in their explanation of the "emergent model" of the Black family, Mark Fine et al. affirm that the "emergent model of the black family views African cultural background as the primary determinant of behavior" (12). They further indicate that "while there is a great diversity among black families, they share a common cultural theme—an African heritage. This commonality manifests itself in special characteristics of black families (Nobles, 1978). They: (1) are comprised of several households, with the definition of family extending beyond any single household ; (2) have multiple parenting and interfamilial consensual adoptions; (3) are child-centered ; (4) have a close network of relationships between families not necessarily related by blood; (5) have flexible and interchangeable role definitions and performances, with a distinction between role definition which is sex-linked and role performance which is not; and (6) are flexible in response to external conditions" (13). Ward's two novels highlight most of these commonalities, especially the "fluidity of roles" and the "flexibility in response to external pressures."

threats and serves as a catalyst for the next ecological cycle" (Brice and McLane-Davison 26). In so doing, Ward shifts away from "the deficit model" to emphasize the "strength" or "the adaptive model" (Briscoe 109) of the African American family unit, that is, its resilience and adaptiveness.

In the physical and/or emotional absence of mothers in *Salvage* and *Sing*, it is mainly the siblings and the grandparents who provide the necessary care and nurturance and, to some extent, even "othermother" each other. In *Sing*, due to Mam's illness and Leonie's psychological dissociation as a mother, it is Pop, the grandfather, and Jojo, his grandson, who act as the primary caregivers: Pop caring for the entire family (Mam, Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla), and Jojo himself caring especially for his toddler sister Kayla. In *Salvage*, the mother is dead and the father is quasi-absent; so the children—the siblings: Esch, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior—take over the responsibility of caring for the household and mothering each other. Interestingly, in both novels, it is mainly the male characters who emerge as the main caregivers in their families, performing different tasks of care, including care work "previously seen as the terrain of women" (Morell and Jewkes 2). By including Black male characters who can and do care, Jesmyn Ward shows the "fluidity of roles" (Littlejohn-Blake and Darling 464) within the Black family and introduces an exemplary model of Black masculinity. By doing so, she redefines gender norms and deconstructs gender stereotypes, "especially the expectations that men cannot care for and nurture others as well as women can" (Mercer 39).

It is yet important to mention that Ward's oeuvre as a whole presents a non-fixed view of Black masculinity. Although both in *Sing* and *Salvage* Ward emphasizes a favorable male identity, in her debut novel *Where the Line Bleeds* and memoir *Men We Reaped* she provides a mostly different representation. In both books, Ward acknowledges the way historical violence and systemic racism pre-determine the lives and limit the options for Black men, affecting especially

their roles as responsible fathers in their families. Through the examples of her own father in her memoir—who left her mother when Ward was only ten to struggle alone and raise her children—and that of Joshua and Christopher's father in *Where the Line Bleeds*, Sandman—a drug addict and dealer who abandons his two sons at a young age—Ward shows, yet without perpetuating the stereotype of the irresponsible or absent father, that the reasons behind Black fatherless children are far more complex. She particularly renounces the Moynihan Report's idea that "black men violence stems from a dysfunctional African American matriarchal society" (Read 527) by tying the malfunction or dysfunction of Black masculinity to the crippling legacy of slavery, especially with regard to the Black family. In her memoir, she writes: "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 during the yoke of slavery" (*Men We Reaped* 131). She further clarifies that "the hard facts of being a young Black man in the South, the endemic joblessness and poverty, and the ease of self-medicating with drugs" (*Men We Reaped* 172) are some of the main reasons that lead African American men to abandon their fathering responsibilities and leave their children "perhaps searching for a sense of freedom or a sense of power that being a Black man in the South denied them" (*Men We Reaped* 83).

To come back to *Sing* and *Salvage*, the chapter as a whole aims to show the resiliency of the Black family by focusing on familial/communal care as a survival mechanism and the "glue which holds the Black family together" (Butler 2) in the face of traumatic occurrences. It specifically looks at sibling relationships and masculine caretaking as the most salient care practices in Ward's two novels. They serve essentially as a source of self-healing as well as of healing others and ensuring the cultural cohesion of the Black family and community at large.

1. "Where my brothers go I follow": Sibling relationship in *Salvage the Bones*

As the central female figure of the novel, Esch is surrounded by an all-male caring cast. In fact, except for Esch, *Salvage* is almost exclusively populated by male characters: Esch's father, Mr. Claude, her three brothers, seventeen-year-old Randall, sixteen-year-old Skeetah, and seven-year-old Junior, in addition to their male friends and relatives: Manny, Big Henry, and Marquise. At the heart of *Salvage* is the close sibling relationship that the Batiste children forged with each other both naturally and purposefully as a survival tactic and necessity after the death of their mother. As Arin Keeble argues, sibling relationships in Ward's literary texts serve as "sources of strength in the absence of caring and nurturing parents" (41). In particular, the strong sibling connection does not only help the Batiste children to cope with the traumatic memory of their mother's death and deal with the socio-economic challenges posed by the "slow, quotidian violence" (Bares 22) of their impoverished environment, but more concretely it allows them to physically survive a ravaging hurricane. By providing an example of a loving and close-knit poor Black family, "in which cooperation and empathy rather than atomization and selfishness are the distinguishing features," Ward's representation of the Batistes can be read "as a strategy of resistance to the pathologizing of the black family—albeit without romanticizing their struggles—that became so pervasive in post-Katrina discourse" (S. Moynihan 557).[65]

The tragic death of the Batiste matriarch, mother Rose, has had an immense emotional effect on the entire family members: "After Mama died . . . we never stopped crying. We Just did it quitter. We hid it" (206), Esch confirms. As Esch and Skeetah recall together their mother's last words, Skeetah states confidently, "She told us she loved us when she got into the truck. And then

[65] In his article, Sinéad Moynihan draws a comparison, or rather a contrast, between the Batiste family in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage* and the Bundren family in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. He argues that contrary to the Bundren's "atomized" family whose members "are motivated by selfish reasons," the Batistes form a family unit driven by "mutual responsibility for one another" (557, 559).

she told us to be good. To look after each other" (222). In their study, Paul Rosenblatt and Carole Elde argue that "[s]hared reminiscence after parent death is common, particularly between siblings" (206) and that "[t]hrough their shared reminiscence people find social support, facilitation of grief work, and an avenue to building relationships with the living and the deceased" (209). Esch, who can remember her mother's "exact words," yet not her voice, has a different memory than Skeetah's and thinks that her brother is imagining his mother's last words. While Esch's imperfect recollection reveals the persisting traumatic effect of the mother's violent death scene on her, Skeetah's confabulation—that is, the construction of false memories—is a way for him to cope with the trauma of his maternal loss. Yet, his insistence on his mother's last admonition points to his inner sense of responsibility and awareness of the importance for them to look after each other in their mother's absence. Above all, Skeetah's and Esch's act of shared reminiscence, though inconsistent, helps bring them closer to each other, creating thus a possible space for the bereaved siblings to work on their grief and come to terms with the trauma of their mother's loss.

Dying in childbirth, the mother left her husband and children with the immense responsibility of caring for "Mama's last flower"—Junior—"who came out purple and blue as a hydrangea" (2). The hydrangea is a flower of a Greek name meaning "water vessel" (Mitchell 66) due to its special need for a lot of watering, such is the case for Junior who, as a motherless newborn, requires a lot of nurturing and care. The "Benjamin" of the Batiste family, Junior becomes the focal point of their care work, bringing thus his siblings closer to him and to each other. His arrival to the family is described in oxymoronic terms by Esch as a "happy accident" (217); it is both tragic due to its connection to the mother's death and blissful because it creates more unity among the siblings.

Unlike his siblings, Junior is born "washed clean of memory like vegetables washed clean of the dirt they grow in" (91), Esch indicates as she tells her brother Skeetah: "At least we got the memory, Junior got nothing" (221). Esch's statement evokes the importance of remembering and the danger of forgetting, even the most traumatic events. By reaching out to their mother's memories and sharing stories about her, the Batiste children are able to cope with the trauma of her loss. The mother's memories act, in this sense, more like an emotional adhesive, strengthening the siblings' bond and giving them "a present meaning, affect, and connection" (Rosenblatt and Elde 208). Because Junior has no embodied memory of his mother, he is the most affected by her loss. His loss is double: first, by losing her physically the moment he was born and, second, by losing her in memory, that is, by being unable to take part in the reminiscence ritual to which his siblings have access.

Junior's early trauma of coming motherless to the world is reflected in his behavior as he remains trapped in a pre-Oedipal stage, endlessly longing for the sole object of his desire, his mother: "Junior's mouth is always open trying to find the nipples" (185); he is "forever a puppy weaned too soon" (89). Since "breastfeeding is not simply a meal at the breast but also has significant and far-reaching effects on cognition, behavior, and mental health in children and mothers" (Krol and Grossmann 977), Junior's deprivation of his mother's milk results in his psychological distress. Due to his insatiable hunger for his mother's love, Junior—Esch imagines—is constantly digging "sleeping holes" (5, 25). Junior's act may be understood as a compulsive attempt to bury his yearning desire for his absent mother. It could also be read figuratively as a reconnection with a gestational milieu, especially in light of the possible association that could be made between Junior's "sleeping holes" and Mama's sleeping/birthing bed (2), with the latter being simultaneously the site of Junior's birth and the mother's death.

Junior's hunger for his mother's presence comes to the foreground in his act of stealing his father's wedding ring which is still attached to the father's amputated finger after the bloody accident he had. Besides reflecting a strong desire to possess an item that reminds him of Mama, Junior's behavior may be interpreted as a desperate call for his father's attention to fill the emotional void left by the mother's death.

After the death of their mother, it is specifically Esch, together with Randall, who took over her role—young as they were—not only in performing the domestic chores of cooking, washing, and cleaning, but also in tending to and mothering their baby brother, Junior. When the mother died, her husband came back from the hospital and handed Junior to both Randall and Esch, saying, "*Your mama*—" (234). The father's incomplete sentence may be read as the father informing Randall and Esch about their mother's death, or else as the father talking to Junior and introducing Randall and Esch as his surrogate mothers. Patricia L. East refers to this process—after Linda Burton—as the "parentification" or "adultification" of children. It denotes a process "wherein children prematurely assume extensive family care responsibilities and essentially *replace* a parent in overseeing the family's nurturing needs" due mainly to "family dysfunction (such as parental alcoholism or drug abuse), extreme poverty, or parental death or abandonment" (5). While "childhood parentification" (especially sibling child care) is a practice that is considered culturally normative and important in preparing children for adulthood within the African American family unit (Hooper et al. 33; see also East 2-3 and Burton 330), for the "adultified" (Burton 329) Esch and Randall the burden is heavy. They have to deal with the psychic toll of all the above-mentioned parentification factors (their father's alcoholism, their impoverished condition, and the tragic death of their mother) while assuming at the same time

"adult-like personas and family roles" (Burton 329) and providing a care work that they themselves as children need the most.

While as "child parents" (East 2) both Randall and Esch share the parenting of Junior—"When he [Junior] was baby, Randall and I would pass him back and forth on the sofa, feeding him, rubbing his stomach, palming his head" (113)—it is mostly Randall who acts as a "full-time quasi-parent" (Burton 339) to his little brother. Contrary to the common perception that "the companions and caretakers are usually older sisters rather than brothers" (Weisner et al. 181), Randall, the eldest brother, tends to his younger brother's physical as well as emotional needs: he feeds him (91), bathes him (18), puts him to bed (114), and protects him (44, 186). Esch indicates, "Daddy fed him [Junior] until he figured out me and Randall could do it. . . . He taught Randall the right ratio for the formula, how to heat the bottle up in a pan of water so that the milk didn't get too hot" (91). By associating milk, the ultimate symbol of motherhood and maternal nurturance, with a male rather than a female character, Ward deconstructs the stereotypical representation of the Black male in literature "as a character who spoils the 'milk' of motherhood" (Watson 162), offering instead a more culturally progressive image of the Black male as the nurturer or provider of maternal care.

The parental role taken by Randall extends to passing down his mother's memory to his little brother Junior by teaching him how to find eggs as he himself has learned it from his mother: "*Look but don't look*, she said. *They'll find you. You gotta wander and they'll come*" (199). Besides its practical function as a subsistence method, Randall's act of socializing his little brother into their mother's tradition of finding eggs in the woods has a far-reaching and reciprocally therapeutic effect on the two siblings: Junior in having his blank slate and curiosity about his mother partially fulfilled, and Randall in reconnecting to his mother's memory and satisfying his

maternal void by reenacting her actions and words. The healing effect of this two-fold mnemonic practice manifests in a tighter bond between the two siblings, and especially in Junior's strong identification with his older brother, Randall. Junior, as Esch confirms, "shadows" Randall (126).

In addition to Randall's and Junior's strong sibling connection, a similar relationship brings together Skeetah and his younger sister Esch. As Sinéad Moynihan states, "*Salvage the Bones* emphasizes, throughout and to its conclusion, the intimacy that exists between Skeetah and Esch" (559). While Randall, and even Junior, prove to be equally loving and tender to their only sister (11-12, 206), Skeetah remains the closest and most caring when it comes to Esch. Esch is Skeetah's sole confidante (21). She is the only one he could trust to watch over his beloved dog China (111, 183) and the only one he would seek help from when he needs it. As when they go together to the woods to steal medicine from the white people's barn for China's infected puppy and Esch gets caught up in a blackberry vine, Skeetah untangles her and softly "wipes away the droplets of blood that have gathered on [her] legs" (69). Skeetah's touch triggers Esch's memory of their mother when she "cleaned [them] like kittens" (69). The gentle feeling of Skeetah's touch is emphasized previously in the novel by Esch, "When he [Skeetah] touches my back with the puppy-free hand. I know that is how he touches China" (26), that is, a loving parental touch for Skeetah is often described as a father to his dog China (98).

Touch reappears constantly throughout the novel as the ultimate act of care and love language through which the siblings not only connect with each other, but also remember and "embody their mother" (Doble 59). Studies of human psychology have already proven "the therapeutic potential of touch" (Seifert and Längler 1). For example, in her book *The Power of Touch*, psychologist Phyllis R. Davis writes that "touching is beautiful, connecting, survival-oriented, heart-opening . . . Touch affects every individual with whom we come into contact—

our entire culture. It's stronger than verbal or emotional contact" (xxiv-xxv). For the Batiste motherless children, "it is by practicing [their mother's] touch that they learn how to care for one another" (Fiskio 120). In the same way the mother used to softly touch her children's backs to wake them up in the morning (115), her children now deploy a similar haptic practice to care for each other: "Randall pulls Junior to him and puts his hand on his head the same way I put mine on Skeet's when he was wiping off the blood" (74). The interpersonal gesture of siblings tenderly placing their hands on each other's heads reveals their strong love and bond. More importantly, as an embodied mnemonic act, it allows the children to partly fulfill their hunger for maternal love, healing hence themselves and each other.

To come back to Skeetah, he is often described by critics as a tough character. However, Skeetah's toughness is but the flip side of his caring nature. Lisa Bass asserts that "Black male caregivers . . . sometimes practice 'rough love' as care; and they derive a sense of pride from their caring roles" (22), which is relevant as well for Skeetah. Keith Mitchell argues that "Skeetah is portrayed as being selfish toward everyone except China, and he often sees her as being closer to him as a kind of 'blood relation' than his family" (65). While it is true that Skeetah's obsessiveness with China does make him, at times, indifferent to others,[66] his devotion and love for his family are also unquestionable. Although Skeetah—unlike Randall and Esch—does not take an active role in the domestic chores (179), he nevertheless has his own path into caring by performing a more practical and traditionally masculine-centered type of care, that is, providing for his family. Skeetah is, together with China, the family's primary breadwinner. As Andy

[66] Such as when he comes across a white man and a white woman in a road accident and while Big Henry tries to inquire and help, Skeetah "looks straight ahead, ignores the scene out his window, the pacing man" (31) because he wants to go back fast to his nursing dog. Despite his racial separatist approach and obvious resentment of white people, Skeetah's refusal to help here is not motivated by a "selfish" behavior as much as by a deep feeling of love and care for his dog China.

Johnson mentions, Skeetah "brawls, steals, and plots, but always for his family, never for himself" (494). He hunts (46) and steals food from the grocery store to feed his starving siblings (41) and protect them from hunger after the hurricane (182).[67] Like his mother, Skeetah is a trickster, a consummate survivor, and a "cunning strategist" (Johnson 494), who obtains what he or his family needs by any means necessary. As Esch affirms: "Skeetah sketches the plan. It is what makes him so good with dogs, with China, I think, the way he can take rotten boards and make them a kennel, a squirrel a barbecue, make ripped tile a floor" (74-75). His skills at making a way out of no way, of providing food, shelter, and protection to his beloved dog and his siblings attest to his responsible and altruistic character, yet only towards the people he loves and cares about.

Through his connection to China,[68] Skeetah cultivates a perceptive understanding of both womanhood and motherhood, which helps further strengthen his relationship with his sister Esch.

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[67] Randall and Esch contribute to that, too, when they go together to steal food from the white people's house (205).

[68] Skeetah's complex character, that is, both soft and harsh, comes to the foreground in his arguably ambivalent treatment of China. Examples of Skeetah's "rough-handling" (Mitchell 69) of China are numerous, such as when he forces her to walk and work out although she is ill and physically weak (115), or when he takes her to a bloody dogfight while she is still nursing, which eventually leads to the painful mutilation of her nipples (174), or when he chains her as retaliation for forgetting him after he forced-fed her a medicine (138-142). Skeetah's behavior with China is justifiably denounced by several critics as anthropocentric (Raices 3), reflective of an abusive "parent-child dynamic" (Lénárt-Muszka 129), as well as of a gendered "male-female dynamic of mistreatment" (Mitchell 69). However, Skeetah's relationship with China is much more complex and his strong love and devotion to her remain palpable throughout the novel. First, Skeetah's hard-heartedness can be read as the very product of his surrounding ruthless, unforgiving environment. As for his occasional "rough-handling" of China, it can be understood in the light of what Colin Dayan describes in her book *With Dogs at the Edge of Life* as "another kind of love. Something close to attachment and awe . . . [s]omething about viscera and blood and heat and closeness more intense than what can be easily borne" (96). Like Dayan, Harlen Weaver calls this form of "uneasy and different " love between dog men and game dogs as "becoming in kind" where both "the dogs are eager to move into the identities of their handlers desire" (703) and the dogfighters "become in kind with their fighting dogs" (701). Skeetah's "becoming in kind" with China transpires in their overlapping identities. His identification with China makes them not only "equal" (29) but look-alike (193) as they both "glow, each kneeling before the other, eyes together" (193). Skeetah's and China's worshipful, genuine love extends beyond the color line and the human-animal divide, for as Esch confirms, "China is white as the sand that will become a pearl. Skeetah black as an oyster, but they stand as one before those boys who do not know what it means to love a dog the way Skeetah does" (162). Indeed, it is Skeetah's "rough love" (Bass 22) that makes him overprotective and even jealous of her. He force-feeds her in an attempt to heal her. He chains her because he thinks that she has forgotten him after he force-fed her. Finally, he makes her work out while she is weak and ill because he mistakenly believes that exercise will help her recover. Most of all, Skeetah's love of China comes to the foreground in his parent-like devotion to her. He takes menial jobs and works hard to buy China the most expensive food (28-29), he puts his and his sister's life in danger to steal medicine to treat her (67), he builds her a house like "a man [does] for a woman" (60), he sleeps with her in the shed waiting for her to give birth and acts more like a midwife in helping her deliver the puppies (3), he treats her like a daughter as he tenderly "wakes her like Mama used to wake

Skeetah's "clairvoyance" (S. Moynihan 557), together with his experience of China's pregnancy, allow him to notice his sister's "growing" body (86) and—like Mam in *Sing*—to know about her pregnancy just by watching her (57). Early in the novel, Skeetah compares China's birthing of her puppies to a "miracle" (21); and later he defends her and motherhood when Manny makes a derogatory statement about mothers, "Any dog give birth like that is less strong after . . . Take a lot out of animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female" (96). Contrary to Manny's demeaning, narrow perception of mothers and women in general, "Skeetah argues that motherhood is the site of a kind of strength" (Bennett 149) by firmly objecting to Manny's statement: "You serious? That's when they come into they strength. They got something to protect. . . . That's power. . . . To give life . . . is to know what's worth fighting for. And what's love" (96). Skeetah's answer is partly directed to his pregnant sister, Esch, not only because he looks at her when he says it, but because he—himself as a parent to China—knows the meaning of love and the power that comes with having "something to protect" (96). By associating womanhood and motherhood with strength, Skeetah provides, like his brother Randall, a positive image of the Black male.

For the dubious nature of the dog fight, the latter further asserts Skeetah's deification of female power. In her memoir, Ward explains that young Black men in her community often fight dogs "for honor, never for money ("Q&A with Jesmyn Ward" 265). Similarly, Skeetah's involvement of China in a cruel dog fight is primarily driven by a sense of honor and pride that he derives from China herself. While as argued by Keith Mitchell, China's "fighting prowess is a

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[them]"(115), and he watches her "with something like respect and love in his face" (60). As Joshua Brandon Bennet argues, "China is indeed a part of Skeetah . . . though in ways that complicate any easy, straightforward vision of human dominion or doggish servility" (158). In short, China is for Skeetah the mother he has lost and the girlfriend he does not have.

way for [Skeetah] to prove his manhood and masculinity" (71), Skeetah's insistence on the demonstrative dog fight, despite his brother's (Randall) objection, reveals his adamant belief in China's "sheer bodily strength, fierce intelligence and courage" (Dayan 106), as especially conveyed in his litany to China before she starts the fight:

> *China Whit*e, he breathes, *my China. Like bleach China, hitting and turning them red and white, China. China like coca, China, so hard they breathe you up and they nose bleed, China. Make them runny, China, make insides outsides, China, make them think they snorted the razor, China. Leave them shaking, China, make them love you, China, make them need you, China, make them know even though they want to they can't live without you, China. My China,* he mumbles*: make them know, make them know, make them know*. (171)

Skeetah's anaphoric phrase, "*make them know*"[69] may be interpreted as a plea for China *to make* Esch *know* and recognize her own value through persistence in the fight. It could be read as well as a direct invitation from a brother to his sister to *make them know*, that is, to make all the young men in Bois Sauvage, especially Manny, know her strength.

Keith Mitchell contends that Skeetah's use of the expression "China White" in the passage above—a euphemism for cocaine—indicates the monetary import that he accords to China and her puppies. While the financial motivation is asserted by Skeetah himself (74) and may be attributed first to the family's extreme poverty and need for money, Skeetah's reference to cocaine could be read from different perspectives. First, it may stand as a metaphor for Skeetah's addiction to and

[69] Skeetah's anaphora "*make them know*" reiterates a biblical line from Jeremiah 16:21, "Therefore, behold, I will make them know, this one will make them know my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the LORD" (*New American Standard Bible*), which, like the novel's first epigraph from Deuteronomy 32:39 ("See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god with me; I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, neither is there any can deliver out of my hand" (*New American Standard Bible*, Deuteronomy 32:39), represents a call for the recognition of God's strength and authority, thus analogously of China's extraordinary power.

obsession with China. Like cocaine, a drug substance with some psychological and medical uses,[70] China may be considered a healing subject for Skeetah, and his emotional dependence on her reflects his strong need to fulfill the hunger for love left by the traumatic death of his mother. Second, drug abuse as an epidemic affecting the Black community is a major topic that Ward raises in her fictional and non-fictional writing, mainly her debut novel *Where the Line Bleeds* and memoir *Men We Reaped*. Her mention of "coca" may be understood in light of that as a social commentary. Last, like Leonie's use of drugs in *Sing* helps her activate her second-sight gift and enter the spiritual realm, cocaine in the passage above may extend beyond its material meaning as a drug substance to embrace a more spiritual, mystical one. It may denote a stimulant that opens the doors for China to step into the surreal, magical world of the fight, which she does as reflected in the heightened—even venereal—energy and euphoria with which she fights and in the violent sexual imageries and words used to describe her intense encounter with the male-dog, Kilo.

Whereas all the siblings, Randall, Skeetah, and even Junior (147) spontaneously engage in and perform care work blending both physical and emotional care, it seems at first glance that Mr. Claude, Daddy, is the only one who diverts from the Batiste male-based network of care. Yet, a close reading of his characterization, especially a comparison of his character before and after the mother's death, reveals two different, and even contradictory, identities. Even more so, Daddy proves to be capable of moral change and development as a father, which becomes clear especially at the end of the novel. Esch's memories of their life as a family before her mother's death picture Daddy as a loving husband and a caring father. Just like she uses the affectionate word, *Mama*, in referring to her mother Rose, Esch calls her father *Daddy*, a word of endearment that suggests a similar sense of intimacy. Despite his apparent detached character, Daddy has a sense of

[70] Read, for instance, P. F. Brain and G. A. Coward's "A Review of the History, Actions, and Legitimate Uses of Cocaine" or S. L. Sgan's "Therapeutic Uses of Cocaine."

responsibility towards his family. He, as Esch recounts, "taught everyone of us how to swim" (22). The father's swimming lessons designate both an entertaining and an adaptive activity, which actually turned out to be the family's savior in the end as they all, including seven-year-old Junior, had to swim to the grandparents' attic to survive the floodwaters of the hurricane. Furthermore, the father's happy and loving relationship with his wife before her death transpires in several stories told by Esch, including the dancing and blues nights they used to hold (93, 135-136). It also comes to the foreground in the family's wall picture in which Daddy and Mama stand "chest to chest" with their hands on each other's shoulders (134), a posture that reinvokes the tropes of touch and hand as symbols of love and care.

Although Daddy appears to be in a state of denial after the death of his wife as he pretends to be strong (206), at heart he is grieving. In their description of the five stages of grief,[71] Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler indicate that during the second phase of grief—anger—the grieving person is hit by a myriad of feelings, with anger "usually at the front of the line as feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness also appear, stronger than ever"(20). Daddy's pain and grief manifest in the sudden change of his character and the outward rage he projects onto his children. Early in the novel, Esch states, "Daddy spins away from us like a comet into the darkness" (3), pointing to his deep bereavement and despair after his wife's death. He falls more into alcohol and becomes, like Leonie in *Sing*, physically and emotionally abusive of his children (105). As anger may even include the grieving person's loved one (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 21), Daddy's indignation at his wife for leaving him behind grows into a feeling of resentment towards all women, which transpires in two different yet related acts of aggression in the novel. The first

[71] The five stages of grief are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. For more insights on the characteristics of each stage, read Chapter 1 of Elizabeth Kübler Ross's and David Kessler's book *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*.

is when he makes a derogatory comment about the hurricane's name, "The storm has a name now. Like the worst. She is a woman. Katrina" (124), a phrase which, like Manny's, reflects a wary and pejorative view of women. The second is even more serious as it concerns his impulsive act of pushing his daughter, Esch, into the floodwaters upon learning about her pregnancy. The father's reaction is evidently hasty and uncalculated because the second he pushes Esch, he reaches out to her with his "good" hand, "his eyes open and hurt and sorry as I haven't seen him since he handed Junior over to me and Randall, said, *your mama*—" (234). Esch's juxtaposition of Daddy's regretful look when he pushed her with his look when the mother died indicates that the father's inadvertent gesture of putting his daughter's life in danger is triggered by his unprocessed trauma and confused association of pregnancy with death—much like Esch's initial connection of China's birth-giving with the memory of her mother's death. The father's subsequent change of character, as he becomes caring and loving once again after his struggle with the hurricane, marks the beginning of the last stage of his grief, that is, acceptance or healing, where anger starts to dissipate giving way to the readjustment and reintegration of the grieving person (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 30-31).

Ultimately, in the absence of systemic or institutional care, the family's strong connection emerges as a counterforce in coping with the hurricane. Indeed, the Batistes' survival would not have been possible without their collective struggle. As they fight the raging waters of Katrina, the Batistes have to cling to each other and move as one body to reach the attic of Mother Lizbeth's house and escape drowning (235). Both Skeetah and Randall prove to be the family's main saviors: Randall by making an opening in the window through which the family entered the attic, saving both himself and his younger brother Junior, and Skeetah by tending his hand first to his drowning sister and later to his sinking father. As they made it painstakingly but safely into

the attic, the family—wet and cold—"huddled together in Mother Lizbeth's attic and tried to rub heat from each other, but couldn't" (237). The overwhelming picture of family members disintegrating into "human debris" (237) yet sticking together and trying desperately to collectively create a friction of warmth reemphasizes their strong physical and emotional connectedness, as it also symbolically reproduces the touch effect. In this "apocalyptic" moment (Doble 51) of "remainderless destruction" (Dillon 377), the only thing the Batistes are left with is their faith in their power as a family. Their failure to defeat their hypothermia does not prove their deficiency as a family, but rather the surpassing destructive power of the hurricane, which made it impossible for them, at that moment, to operate effectively, neither individually nor collectively.

As argued in the previous chapter, Esch has emerged as a central family and community figure in the aftermath of the hurricane. Her rise as such is partly facilitated by the male characters around her: Skeetah who acted, metaphorically, more like a midwife by delivering Esch from the floodwaters; Randall who promised Esch to take revenge and "beat the shit out [Manny]" (244); Daddy who came to regret his deed as he looked at Esch after the storm with "shame flittered across his face" (241) and wants now to check on the health of his daughter and the baby "to make sure nothing will go wrong" (247), most probably in reference to the unfortunate death of his wife in childbirth; and Big Henry who "becomes the last of the men to finally see Esch as she really is" (Clark 357) and introduces himself, as he reaches out to "his big soft hand" (255)—the symbol of his caring and generous character—like a family member by reassuring Esch that her baby has got "plenty daddies" (255). After the storm, Esch describes her brothers and her daddy as her "arms" (239), empowering and protecting like Medusa's tentacles, and refers to Randall as "her

shield, her warm cover" (244) for she recognizes that part of her nascent strength comes from the assurance and relief that the presence of her brothers, her father, and Big Henry provides.

The novel ends with a sad yet powerful and hopeful picture of siblings' love and communal/familial care, with the Batiste children, along with Big Henry, sitting together on the remnants of their house, waiting with Skeetah for China's return:

> We will sit with him here, in the strange, insect-silent dark. We will sit until we are sleepy, and then we will remain until our legs hurt, until Junior falls asleep in Randall's arms, his weak neck lolling off Randall's elbow. Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah, and Skeetah will watch none of us . . . He will look into the future and see her [China] emerge into the circle of his fire. (258)

The collective voice reemphasizes the sense of communality that is strengthened in the aftermath of the hurricane. The siblings' insistence on standing by Skeetah despite their weak physical and emotional condition reasserts their deeply shared love and compassion. Their love is even more obvious in their promise to "watch" over each other. Besides the primary meaning of protection connected to "watching," the latter makes an intertextual reference to Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In Hurston's book, the phrase "They seemed to be staring at the dark but their eyes were watching God" (151) comes right before the arrival of the Okeechobee Hurricane, marking a moment of revelation for Janie as she becomes "aware of her condition in the universe" through her "encounter with the divine" (Gaál-Szabó, *Zora Neale Hurston* 77, 71). In Ward's *Salvage*, however, the act of "watching" happens after the hurricane, yet with a similar emphasis on the spiritual awakening that the characters experience at the end as they come to understand their position in the world as well as in each other's lives.

2. "I would give anything to taste bread made with such love": Familial Bonds in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Like *Salvage*, *Sing* presents a poor Black family living in Bois Sauvage and struggling with a traumatic past which affects their present life and shapes the familial relationships between the different characters. Unlike *Salvage*, however, where the mother is dead, in *Sing* the mother is physically present, yet emotionally absent and self-absorbed. As discussed in the previous chapter, due to her traumas and drug addiction, Leonie is unable to function properly as a mother and becomes abusive to her children, Jojo and Kayla. Michael, her partner and the father of her children, is also absent for half of the story because he is in prison, and even when he gets released he proves to be violent and removed as a father. Still, the redeeming presence of the grandparents, Pop and Mam, provides the children, Jojo and Kayla, with all the care and love they need. While Mam is sick and dying, so unable to perform any physical caring tasks, it is especially Pop and Jojo who become the family's main caregivers. Like in *Salvage*, reciprocal familial care, especially sibling love, in *Sing* acts as a means of healing and fulfilling an insatiable hunger for love that most of the characters display.

While it is clear through the narrative that Mam used to be the primary caretaker of the entire family, her illness makes Pop take over her role as the family caregiver, looking after Mam herself, his drug-addict daughter, Leonie, and his two young grandchildren, Jojo and Kayla. As the family's main caretaker, Pop presents a strong male model, who is family and community-centered and spiritually and culturally oriented. The novel opens with Pop slaughtering a goat for Jojo's thirteenth birthday and leaving a "trail of tender organ blood . . . a trail that signals love" (22) as he walks into the kitchen to make food for his sick wife and the rest of the family. Although Pop's act of slaughtering the goat features a subsistence activity that is generally viewed as

masculine, his presence in the kitchen and act of preparing food—a task traditionally attributed to women—is a labor of love further asserting the "fluidity of roles" within American families of African descent. By being associated with food, Pop plays the role of the nurturer of his family, both physically and spiritually. Besides its physiological import, food, as psychological studies confirm, has an "interpersonal" and "emotional" aspect. It especially represents a means "to show affection to loved ones" and "increase affect for both recipient and—when the offer has the desired effect—provider" (Hamburg 1). The affective part is embodied in the trail of blood that Pop leaves behind for Jojo to follow as well as in the "little heart around the meat" (23) which the gravy forms in the liver plate that Pop makes as a cure for his bedridden wife.

Like food, storytelling emerges as another practice of care performed by Pop with a similarly spiritually healing and nurturing effect. Clarissa Pinkola Estes defines storytelling as a "medicine" and "a healing art" (5), and Sunwolf indicates that storytelling "can induce a soothing, familiar light trance" and that "listening to narratives can be therapeutic . . . there is evidence that the listening to oral tales can meaningfully penetrate even organic brain disorders, producing significant moments in people's lives" (239). As discussed in the third chapter, through storytelling Pop functions like a "cultural bearer" (O'Reilly 1) and an "ancestor" (Li 92) to his grandson Jojo, passing on to him ancestral "survival-oriented knowledge and wisdom" (Warfield-Coppock 471), mainly spiritual groundedness and subsistence economy.[72] Pop's stories have both a protective role, serving essentially as means of "social and cultural inoculation" to Jojo (Warfield-Coppock 480), and an emotionally soothing impact. Describing the magical healing effect of Pop's stories, Jojo confirms: "Hearing him tell them makes me feel like his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever makes me feel like I'll never be able to

[72] Mam also takes part in teaching Jojo about life and passing down ancestral knowledge and traditions to him. She is, for instance, the one who instructs Jojo about the meaning of death and the spiritual world (300-304).

stand as tall as Pop, never be as sure" (30). Just like in *Salvage*, the hand motif reappears here to symbolize the connecting power of storytelling and to emphasize its therapeutic effect. As Stephanie Li argues, "[Pop's] stories guide [Jojo's] action, delineate important values and affirm his connection to a deeply rooted family and community" ("Learning to Listen" 88-89). In other words, through Pop's collective stories and memories, Jojo is able to find his cultural self and forge a sense of identity.

Besides storytelling, Pop puts his ancestral wisdom and spirituality into practice to protect his loved ones. As they prepare to go to Parchman prison to collect Michael, Pop slides a gris-gris bag for protection into Jojo's bag, which would eventually prove useful in saving Jojo when he gets pulled over by the police on the way back from Parchman prison. Before leaving, Jojo notices Pop's "pleading eyes" where he can read "what [Pop] said without words: *I love you, boy, I love you*" (85). Pop himself expresses his great love to his grandson when he tells him: "When Given died, I thought I'd drown in it. Drove me blind, made me so crazy I couldn't speak. Didn't nothing come close to easing it until you came along" (327). Pop's love of his grandson emerges both as a natural feeling produced spontaneously by blood and cultural ties and as a coping mechanism that Pop uses to come to terms with the traumas of not only his son's death, but of his painful memories of Parchman and Richie as well.

Far from being a mere response to a familial duty, caregiving is an integral part of Pop's identity and cultural values. Sociological studies confirm the cultural embeddedness of caregiving in the life experience of African Americans and define caretaking as a cultural imperative that is passed down throughout generations, extending beyond the immediate family to reach the wider community (Pharr 3). This is due to the rootedness of the African American culture in the African kinship system where "every member of the community is a relative, with all the privileges and

responsibilities that go with the status" (Mekoa 101). A "natural" caretaker, Pop has a propensity to care for others even outside his family, as is especially revealed in his relationship with Richie. Despite being a young boy himself during his incarceration in Parchman prison, Pop acted like a father or kin to his fellow inmate, thirteen-year-old Richie: "he was the only daddy I knew," Richie affirms (285). Pop's care for Richie represents a means for both resisting the systemic dehumanizing conditions of Parchman as well as healing Richie, physically and emotionally. Pop cleaned Richie's wounds when he was whipped (161), protected him from violent inmates (184), "worked himself hard" to help him finish the hoeing and harvesting tasks, and thus "was able to save him, kept him from getting beat" (103). Even Pop's "gruesome" act of killing Richie is driven by love and presents an extreme gesture of care and sacrifice, albeit with a traumatizing effect for Pop and Richie alike.

To come back to the grandfather-grandson dyad, Pop plays a pivotal role in Jojo's passage into adulthood and manhood, socializing him into an ancestral model of the Black male as a culturally responsible individual. Pop's understanding is rooted in an African value system that tightly connects masculinity to the male's power to care for his family and community. The male's role in African thought actually extends "beyond provision and protection to include hands-on ministering to the sick, aged, young, and infirm and an emotional engagement with those to whom care is provided" (Morell and Jewkes 2). This respective ancestral view of masculinity is reflected in Pop's character, who takes care of everyone including the aged, the sick, and the young, and in Jojo himself as the disciple of Pop. For instance, the novel's opening scene of Pop teaching Jojo how to "humanly" (Chase 203) slaughter a goat—a sacrificial act of African origin initiating Jojo into manhood[73]—offers an example of the man's duty to provide physically for his family. Pop's

[73] Mbiti highlights the importance in the African context of shedding blood in the initiation ceremony which marks the individual's "passing from childhood to adulthood" (*Introduction to African Religions* 93-94), which is usually

instruction to Jojo to watch over his mother and sister on their way to Parchman, reminding him, "You a man, you hear" (84), embodies as well another example stressing the man's cultural imperative in not only providing for but also protecting his family.

Taking his grandfather as a role model, Jojo idealizes and fully identifies with Pop. Jojo, as his mother Leonie describes, is "all Pop" (10). Besides looking physically like his grandfather (75) and even carrying the same scent, "the aroma of the bowel of the bayou" (175), Jojo acts like Pop: he eats like him (24), walks "back straight and shoulder's even as a hanger" like him (9), and always follows him inside and outside the house. Early in the novel, Jojo himself acknowledges his profound connection to Pop: "I like most of the things Pop did, liked the way he combed his hair straight from his face . . . liked the way he ate, even, fast and neat, liked the stories he told me before I went to sleep. When I was nine, Pop was good at everything" (24). Particularly, Jojo's identification with Pop is prompted not only by his fascination with his grandfather's altruistic character, but more so by the feelings of safety and belonging that Pop's presence grants in the quasi-absence and detachment of both Jojo's mother and father.

Jojo's parallel with his grandfather comes to the foreground in his similarly caring nature, which mostly crystalizes in his relationship with his toddler sister Kayla. When he sees Jojo for the first time, Richie recognizes him immediately as "Riv's son" through "the way he holds the little sick golden girl as if he thinks he could curl around her, make his skeleton and flesh into a building to protect her . . . He protects as River protects" (176). Indeed, much like in *Salvage*, sibling love in *Sing* is central and works as an alternative system of coping with parental absence and lack of maternal care. Similar to Randall's and Junior's, and even more compelling, is the

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done either through circumcision, i.e., the cutting of human flesh, or "where circumcision is not practiced" by "slaughtering a goat for the older men, who then ceremoniously welcome the young adolescent to their status" (*Introduction to African Religions* 96).

genuine love and deep connection between Jojo and his three-year-old sister Kayla. Commenting on Jojo's caring essence, Ward states in one of her interviews: "For Jojo, it seemed a natural thing that if his mother was not caring and providing for him—and he had Pop as a model—he would act in ways that seemed very maternal and nurturing" ("Ghosts of History"). Ward's statement defines Jojo's propensity to care not only as a necessity, but more so as a both culturally ingrained and culturally inherited tradition.

In the absence of his mother, Jojo performs motherwork and day-to-day care by tending to Kayla's most basic physiological and emotional needs. He feeds her (122), plays with her (35), sings her nursery songs (34, 198, 232), and cares for her when she gets sick (132). When they sleep, Jojo "pulls her into him. His hand in protection, stiff as siding" (197). Jojo's protective hand brings forth the hand and touch motifs used in *Salvage* as the ultimate symbol of sibling care and love. Even more telling is Jojo's association, like Randall in *Salvage*, with "the milk of motherhood" (Watson 156). Early in the novel, Jojo mentions: "When Kayla was a baby, she got used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle. So I sleep on the floor next to Leonie's bed, and most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's mostly gone" (33). Besides sacrificing his own comfort for his sister, Jojo takes his mother's role as Kayla's primary nurturer, reaffirming therefore, like Randall and Pop, the caring potential of Black men and boys and showing the possible intersectionality of manhood and motherhood, that is, the fact that men, as much as women, are also able to act in maternal ways and provide motherly care.

In her turn, Kayla proves to be a part of the family's culture of care by loving back and looking up to her older brother Jojo. Like Junior in *Salvage*, Kayla was never breastfed. As research "provides evidence for a positive influence of breastfeeding on the mother-child dyad" by enhancing "maternal sensitivity" and the "attachment between mother and child" (Krol and

Grossmann 9), the effects of Kayla's deprivation of her mother's milk are obvious not only in her lack of connection with Leonie, but in her somatic behavior as well. While Junior's attempt to cope with his mother's absence in *Salvage* involves digging holes, Kayla has a habit of kneading her brother's ear, which "she does for comfort because she never breast-fed" (41), as Mam explains. By turning to Jojo for succor, Kayla identifies her brother as a substitute mother figure, from whom she could derive a sense of love and compensate for the emotional maternal void she has.

Another way of doing that for Kayla is by reciprocating the love she gets from Jojo. As much as he takes care of her, Kayla also proves to be protective of her older brother Jojo. This manifests especially in her reaction to Jojo's violent humiliation by the police officer when they get pulled over on their way back from Parchman prison. As soon as the police officer handcuffs Jojo and points a gun to his head, three-year-old Kayla "runs to Jojo, throws herself on his back, and wraps herself, arms and legs around him. Her little bones crayons and marbles. A shield. . . . She wrestles" (214-215). In the same way Jojo would turn "his skeleton and flesh into a building" to protect his sister (176), Kayla would make of her bones "a shield" to save her brother. Kayla takes even more revenge for Jojo later by coating the officer's uniformed chest with a "golden toss of vomit" (217). Contrary to Leonie and Michael, who both remain passive and indifferent to their son's aggression, Kayla—little as she is—displays courage and takes an active role in defending her older brother. Small acts of love thus become a kind of weapon through which the most defenseless—the two children—may cope with the combined effect of both parental failure and systemic violence.

In this closely-knit web of familial care, not adults only are able to look after children but children too have the power to care for and protect adults, as especially evidenced in the way Jojo

tends to his grandparents, Mam and Pop. By including male children who are as able as adults to provide care work, Ward's concept of caregiving not only challenges the normative division of gender roles, but also deconstructs the hierarchical structure of caregiving as embodied in the more common disposition of adults taking care of children. As much as he is cared for by his grandparents, and hence is socialized into the ethics of caring for the family and the community, Jojo equally plays an active role in supplying physical and emotional care to both Mam and Pop. Besides helping his terminally ill grandmother in performing basic tasks, such as eating, drinking, or even turning over in bed (298, 129), Jojo soothes Mam and expresses his love for her, like the Batiste children, through the palliative power of touch. When he visits Mam in her room, he rubs her hands and gently ducks his head under her palm so that his scalp and face are in her sheets, and "he could breathe it all though it hurts" (300). Jojo's affective gesture echoes his mother's previous act of love when she takes Mam's hand and sniffs "all the green of the earth in her hands" (276). As an interpersonal sensory practice, care here connects not only Mam to Leonie and Jojo, but more so Leonie to Jojo. Despite their conflictual relationship and apparent contradictory characters, their shared haptic expression of love to Mam—through touch and smell—binds them together into the same family, tradition, and culture of care.

In the same way he cares for his ill grandmother, Jojo provides emotional support to his grandfather by keeping him company and attentively listening to his stories. While, as discussed previously, storytelling has a psychotherapeutic effect both on the teller and the listener, so is storylistening. Indeed, storylistening is as important for healing as story sharing. Sunwolf asserts that "listening and affirming is one way of demonstrating recognition of others" (253). For John Forester, listening—unlike hearing[74]—"requires care. . . . In listening we create a relationship, a

[74] In his distinction between "listening" and hearing," John Forester explains that "[l]istening is clearly active, while hearing is often more passive . . . Hearing is easy. Listening seems, mistakenly, not to be. We can hear words, but

sense of mutuality" (110). Listening "is an act of participation, nurturing a 'we'" (118), he adds. In the novel, Jojo helps his grandfather in coping with his painful memories of the past by being an active and deep listener. Jojo's power to listen, with full attention and no judgment, to his grandfather's stories attest to his maturity, receptivity, and empathy. As "[n]arratives function *to transform and reshape identity*" (Miller et al. 295), Pop's ability to share his traumatic memories of Parchman prison with his grandson and Jojo's capacity to respond with sensitivity and care, offering both recognition and affirmation to Pop and his stories, prove to be healing for Pop and Jojo at the same time. In fact, even Pop's "brutal" story of how he killed Richie does not affect in any way Jojo's view of his grandfather. On the contrary, it brought him closer to Pop as he came to recognize the amount of pain and love that went into Pop's act of killing Richie.

Like touching, listening emerges therefore as a performative, interpersonal practice of care with a similarly therapeutic value. It specifically helps suffering individuals to work on their trauma by offering them an inclusive space to articulate their pain in a meaningful and coherent way and by creating an affiliative relationship, a sense of communality, between the teller and the listener. The healing effect is embodied in Pop's and Jojo's powerful gesture of "embracing in the grass" right after Pop finishes narrating the gruesome details of Richie's death for the first time, with Jojo holding him affectionately "like he hold[s] Kayla" (328) and "rubbing [his] back" (331). This cathartic moment marks a switch of roles between Pop and Jojo, where Jojo becomes the care provider and Pop the care receiver. The ensuing "soft air and yellow sunlight and drifting pollen" (328) that enveloped the scene reassert the overall sense of spiritual relief and inner peace that result from storytelling and storylistening as co-acts of care.

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miss what is meant. We can hear what is intended, but miss what is important. We can hear what is important, but neglect the person speaking. As we listen, though, we can learn and nurture relationships as well . . . Only hearing, we subordinate the uniqueness of the speaker to the literal meaning of his or her words. Listening, we understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the speaker's life" (108).

In Ward's fictional world, care is not only confined to the world of the living, but extends to the realm of the dead, or the "living dead," to use a more accurate term. As mentioned in the second chapter in relation to the haunting trope, the "living dead" maintains connection with the world of the living, and ghosts usually return "to give aid and advice, to rectify wrongs, take revenge, protect kin, complete unfinished tasks, or comfort the sick and lonely" (Gorn 559). The concept has roots in African thought where death (as also clarified in the second chapter) is believed to be a continuation of life and not its end, hence the continued interaction between the dead and the living in the afterlife. The ghosts' presence emphasizes the high importance accorded to kinship and family or communal ties in African and—by extension—African American societies. In particular, "the living dead/ancestors act as guardians of morality," as author Itumeleng Mekoa argues in line with his concept of "ancestor guardianship" (99). According to Mekoa, "the realm of spirits (living dead) interacts with and affects the living" and ancestors "look after their descendants' welfare and expect cooperation in return" (100). This is true as well for the spirit of Given-not-Given, who shows similar characteristics of the ancestors, especially with regard to his sister Leonie, her two children, and Mam.

To use Gorn's "ghostlore" as an analogous backdrop, the first mission for which phantom Given comes back to haunt the living is to "protect a kin" (559), namely his sister Leonie and her two children, Jojo and Kayla (197). Aware of Leonie's failure as a mother and daughter, Given-not-Given tries, on two occasions, to cover for his sister's absence: first by "sitting outside the kids' room, guarding them" when Leonie is high on drugs, making love to Michael (197) and, second, by reaching out to Jojo when he is handcuffed as both Leonie and Michael watch helplessly (216). In addition, just like before his death (56), Given-not-Given continues to watch over his sister from the spiritual world with the same care and attention (52). Although phantom Given

does not communicate in words with Leonie, he attempts to save her, mainly from her self-destructive character. He does so by acting both like a "moral guardian'" and a "ghostly conscience who reminds her about the power of familial love" (Cucarella-Ramon 94-95). Just by looking into his eyes, Leonie could see Given-not-Given's discontent with her drug addiction (74-75) as well as his objection to her similarly unhealthy, addictive relationship with Michael (196-97). As he sits with her on the table when she is at Misty's snorting drugs, Given-not-Given, Leonie narrates, "slid his hand across the table, his big-knuckled, slim-boned hand, towards mine. Like he wanted to support me. . . . Like he could grab my hand and lead me out of there. Like we could go home" (55). Given's "big-knuckled" hand reminds of Big Henry's "big soft" hand (255) in *Salvage*, which, besides symbolizing care and love, points to Given's attempt to lead the path for his disoriented sister and show her the way back to her original self, that is, to her family and culture. Much like the embodied metaphor of the hand connecting the Batiste children in *Salvage*, the hand in *Sing* links not only the siblings to each other, but also the living to the dead.

Given-not-Given's second mission as a "living dead"/ancestor is to "comfort the sick and lonely" (Gorn 559), that is, his dying mother. This is clear in the sense of relief that Mam displays when she sees the phantom of her son for the first time as she "bares her teeth in something like a smile, something like a rictus" (338). Given's return as a ghost fulfills his mother's two wishes of "seeing the dead" (305) and "walk[ing] straight to the bayou, to the water" (277) to join her ancestors, her son included. Her ceremonial, peaceful departure attests to the healing power of connection to the dead and the ancestors, especially when read from the perspective of care.

Like in *Salvage*, the end in *Sing* confirms the importance of familial care and love. As "death stories reveal . . . love" and "show the positive functions of Black families across time and place" (Adkins 145), the Stone family remains strong despite Mam's painful departure thanks to

their shared love. Although Mam is gone and Leonie decides to leave after her mother's death, the bond between Kayla, Jojo, and Pop is strengthened as they come to be a comfort for each other. Leonie's departure marks Jojo's official introduction as an alternative mother figure to his toddler sister, Kayla: "I sleep in Leonie's bed now" (350), he proudly declares. While Jojo's act of taking his mother's place in the bed is symbolic of his position as a substitute mother figure to Kayla, it may reveal as well his ongoing hunger for his mother's presence, a hunger that he satisfies by turning to his sister as an alternative source of maternal love. Kayla herself, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is introduced at the end of the novel as the future matriarch of the family, the one who takes a "piece" of everyone and "holds them together" as an organic whole (359).

Conclusion: On Witness, Survival, and "Respair"

> *Our superpower, I was told since I was a child, was perseverance, the ability to survive no matter how much they took from us. I never understood how surviving was our collective superpower when white folk made sure so many of us didn't survive. And those of us who did survive practiced bending so much that breaking seemed inevitable.*—Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir*.

Throughout the dissertation, I have provided a reading of the major aspects of African American cultural memory and trauma as they figure in Ward's two critically acclaimed novels, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Memory and trauma have presented effective conceptual tools for exploring the complex Black cultural landscape in the two texts.

As Ward's cultural universe testifies, cultural memory—due to its cultural focality—offers a generative point of departure for African American cultural representation, reclamation, and authentication. In the novels, a specific focus on non-institutionalized forms and/or media of Black cultural memories, mainly memories and stories passed down among generations in informal ways like storytelling or socialization, remains the most reflective of the African American cultural core. As the analytical subchapters on "cultural haunting," ecospirituality, motherhood, and familial care show, Black familial and communal epistemologies or values, together with ancestral spiritual traditions and cosmological worldviews that organize and harmonize the characters' relations to themselves, to each other, and to the environment, embody some of the key cultural elements that Ward celebrates and proposes as—even universal—cure to social ills and cultural alienation.

Trauma, both individual and/or collective as well as event-based and/or quotidian, provides an equally central port of entry into the Black present and historical experience in the two novels, due not only to the painful nature of the past and its persistence as an unresolved, ongoing process, but also to the very import of remembering—even the most traumatic events—as an identity-unifying factor, on the one hand, and as an instrument for historical "re-visioning" and possibly healing, on the other. As discussed in the different chapters, especially the ones on traumatic haunting in *Sing* and Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage*, the cultural traumas of the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow and their current recursions in overt systemic racialized forms of discrimination, such as the prison system, or in everyday instances of covert racial othering, environmental racism, and socio-economic injustice, are evoked both directly and indirectly in the two texts with a view to questioning the past and show its temporal continuum in the present as well as to instigate a process of "healing or psychic liberation" (Levy-Hussen 6).

Thus, by alternating between the discourses of subjugation and agency and incorporating memories of both Black pain and Black joy, Ward reconceptualizes past and more recent Black memories and traumas, turning them into narratives of survival and healing. As both texts confirm, the physical, emotional, and cultural survival of the individual and the wider community hinges upon a mnemonic process of cultural return, reconnection, and reclamation, which holds a therapeutic power in enabling psychological and cultural healing from within the culture and community itself.

Ward's respective philosophy of survival is beautifully articulated at the end of her memoir, *Men We Reaped*:

> We who still live do what we must. Life in a hurricane, and we board up to save what we can and bow low to the earth to crouch in that small space above the dirt where the wind

> will not reach. We honor anniversaries of deaths by cleaning graves and sitting next to them before fires, sharing food with those who will not eat again. We raise children and tell them other things about who they can be and what they are worth: to us, everything. We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die. We survive; we are savages. (250)

Ward's definition reverberates here with her fictional representation of survival in both *Salvage* and *Sing*. Her reference to life as a hurricane and to the acts of "board[ing] up to save what we can" and "crouching in a small space" where the wind will not reach recalls the Batiste family's coping strategies to survive the hurricane by first preparing and later seeking shelter from the storm in the small space of the grandparents' decaying attic. Honoring anniversaries of deaths and reconnecting to ancestors align with what the characters in *Sing* do to survive spiritually and physically. Teaching love and maintaining ties in life and after death also embody the ultimate method of familial and communal survival in all of Ward's writing, her two novels included.

Ward's engagement of the notions of memory, trauma, and survival is reasserted in her essay "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic," published in *Vanity Fair* in September 2020. The piece is a moving eulogy that Jesmyn Ward wrote in memory of her late husband and the father of her children, who died in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Describing her deep feeling of grief, Ward writes: "Without his hold to drape around my shoulders, to shore me up, I sank into hot, wordless grief" ("On Witness and Respair"). Ward's sinking deeper into a state of ravening grief reinvokes the metaphor of the stalking "wolf of darkness and grief" she uses in her memoir (21) to emphasize the immensity and inescapability of grief in her life. With its insatiable appetite and omnipresence in time and space/place, the wolf evokes a gothic

"figurative image of a predator in the dark . . . a hungry beast" (Choiński 169) who continues eating up at the writer's family and the people of her small community in DeLisle.

As she does in her fiction, in confronting and fighting the "hungry beast" of grief Ward merges the individual and the collective. In particular, she embeds her personal tragedy in a larger communal and even transnational context of suffering. Halfway through her article, she links her own loss to two other tragic events of a larger scope, the unfortunate death of George Floyd, with its profound significance for the African American community, and the coronavirus pandemic, with its far-reaching worldwide effect. After describing the harsh challenges that COVID-19 has brought into the entire world, Ward defines George Floyd's death as a deep moment of consciousness for her, resurrecting the haunting specter of the "wolf" and reactivating, through its imagery of suffocation, not only the painful memory of her husband's last words, "*I Can't. Breath*," but also of a more common narrative of premature death. In a profound sense of both despair and connection, Ward cites a litany of names pertaining to victims of anti-Black police violence as she ties her own grief to that of the families of the dead ones.

In search of self-healing, Ward further takes the grammar of trauma from the personal and collective level into the wider international one. She describes the protests that swept into different parts of the world following the killing of George Floyd as a global act of bearing witness, in which she finds both validation and recognition of personal and communal pain beyond local or national borders:

> I cried in wonder each time I saw protests around the world because I recognized the people. . . . I recognized their action for what it was: witness. Even now, each day, they witness. They witness injustice. They witness this America, this country that gaslit us for 400 fucking years. Witness that my state, Mississippi, waited until 2013 to ratify the 13th

> Amendment. Witness that Mississippi didn't remove the Confederate battle emblem from its state flag until 2020. Witness Black people, Indigenous people, so many poor brown people, lying on beds in frigid hospitals, gasping our last breaths with COVID-riddled lungs, rendered flat by undiagnosed underlying conditions, triggered by years of food deserts, stress, and poverty, lives spent snatching sweets so we could eat one delicious morsel, savor some sugar on the tongue, oh Lord, because the flavor of our lives is so often bitter. ("On Witness and Respair")

Ward connects here the historical traumas of slavery and racial terror to the global traumatic event of COVID-19 as she recognizes its overly detrimental effects on a cluster of already psychologically and physically fragile racial and ethnic groups. She insists on the historical continuation of pain, identifying a link between past and very present contexts of oppression and pointing to the ripple effect of a history of violence that tends to reproduce itself. However, by seeing her own pain in and through the pain of her people and other marginalized social groups, Ward finds a therapeutic sense of belonging and shared humanity, translated not only in her burst of awe—her "wonder"—at seeing protests sweeping the streets worldwide, but more so in the collective voice in which she utters it.

Despite the "bitter" flavor of both experiencing and witnessing traumas, Ward always reserves a narrative space for memories and moments of beauty and joy. In her article, as in her fiction, she describes love and care as antidotes to trauma and loss. Also, like in her novels, she understands care in the interpersonal context of the family and the community, including the nurturing role of the Black male. Tending to her husband's memory, Ward pictures him as a loving father and a caring spouse. Much like Pop and Jojo in *Sing* or Randall and Skeetah in *Salvage*, Ward's late husband exemplifies a favorable model of a family- and community-oriented man.

Ward opens the essay by describing her husband's "large, beautiful dark eyes and *dexterous, kind hands*" (emphasis added) and by emphasizing his role in the family as a nurturer and caregiver: "His primary job in our household was to shore us up, to take care of the children, to be a househusband," she writes. Like the Batiste children who are able to find solace and comfort in their shared reminiscence of their mother's palliative touch, Ward's bittersweet memories of her protective and cheering husband have a similar healing impact. They not only offer a refuge for her in moments of despair, but also reinforce her commitment to write—a therapeutic process itself: "My loss was a tender second skin. I shrugged against it as I wrote, haltingly" ("On Witness and Respair").

In their introduction to their collection of essays, *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*, Sheri-Marie Harrison, Arin Keeble, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo argue that Ward's "On Witness and Respair" provides "a potent example of the unique way [Ward's] writing combines expressions of grief and anger with expressions of love and solidarity (3). The combination transpires in the vision of "Respair"—a theorem blending together hope and despair—in which Ward envelops her essay. In her interview with Anna Hartnell, Ward defines hope as an integral part of her writing process: "In everything I write I like to at least leave the reader with something to hang on to . . . I think there has to be hope in any story" (216). Hope, for Ward, does not hinge upon a belief in a better future as much as it emerges from a faith in the power of the individual and the community to resist and survive. Although hope does not mean full closure or erasure of pain, it nonetheless offers a certain degree of agency not to be culturally defined or crippled by historical atrocities and everyday traumas.

Ultimately, Ward's texts suggest that, to use Margo Natalie Crawford's words, "Black melancholic subjects move on, sometimes most profoundly when they are most aware of the

everyday epistemology of this afterlife of slavery" (804). For Ward, "the moving on" is a work of memory made possible by "amplify[ing] the voices of the dead that sing to [her], from their boat to [her] boat, on the sea of time" ("On Witness and Respair"), that is, by recovering and telling their stories across space and time, even if the process entails "re-inhabit[ing] a slave past" (Levy-Hussen 224) and reliving the pain of "others," the ancestors. The retrospective approach—a mnemonic archeological project "concerned with caring for and about the dead" (7), as Patricia Saunders calls it—is yet liberating in the way it enables cultural re-membering and historical re(con)figuration. Ward's new novel *Let Us Descend* (2023) is a pure direct historical engagement of the slave past, reaffirming Ward's preoccupation with the issues of history, memory, and trauma and her determination to honor the dead and bear witness through literature.

By opting to end the dissertation with Ward's vision of survival and "Respair," my aim is neither to romanticize the Black experience nor to overemphasize the rhetoric of hope, but rather to provide a non-essentialized view of African American subjectivity which illuminates both the dark and the bright sides of Black experience, a view that I was able to sense and trace by reading through and between the lines of the cultural beauty-and-burden paradox in Ward's texts.

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