

**Death-Worlds and Literary Form:
Capturing Black Death in Jesmyn Ward's Novels**

Reilly Torres

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Professor Courtney Baker

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What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death?

- Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2008

Introduction

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* opens with the words, "I like to think I know what death is."¹ Spoken by thirteen-year-old Jojo, one of the novel's three narrators, the statement seems nonsensical, even foolish. How can anyone, much less a child, "know" death? This is the crux of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and of Ward's body of work in general: to trouble the idea that death is a distant and obscure state, the ultimate uncharted terrain. Instead, in Ward's figuration, death is not unknowable but intimately known insofar as it is bound up with Blackness. Ward's novels critically engage the notion, echoed in wider U.S. society by the well-publicized and all-too-frequent deaths of Black people, that to live life in a Black body is to face the insistent push of death. More than this, her novels highlight the material conditions of such a reality by narrating the lives, albeit fictitious, of those for whom ongoing suffering and death "simply is."² Indeed, as the novel continues, Ward illustrates that Jojo, a young Black boy living in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, is constantly exposed to death by hegemonic political forces, and therefore, does "know what death is" in many ways.

I invoke this moment in Ward's novel to assert that literature is a particularly useful means to illustrate that Black life abuts death and, thus, to enact an ethical resistance to the normalization of this reality. In the two novels I explore in this essay—*Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*—Ward both reveals and refuses the ordinariness of Black suffering by

¹ Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, (New York: Scribner, 2017), 1.

² Christina Sharpe, "What Exceeds the Hold?: An Interview with Christina Sharpe," interview by Selamawit Terrefe, *Rhizomes* 29 (2016).

illustrating the quotidian experience of existing in a liminal state between life and death. Ward, a two-time winner of the National Book Award and the recipient of the MacArthur genius grant, has been recognized as a writer who represents “what it means to be poor and black in America’s rural south,” and she shows that death is an acute dimension of this reality.³ These novels, then, provide a point of entry to explore the concept, theorized by Black studies scholars, that African Americans live in particularly close proximity to death because the nation deems their lives expendable. A number of scholars invested in the reality of Black death have also looked to find ways of articulating the embodied knowledge generated by inhabiting a structural position punctuated by lethal violence. For her part, celebrated author, editor, and essayist Toni Morrison has advocated for storytelling in general—oral, musical, and literary—as an essential strategy in countering dehumanizing histories of Blackness. However, she has championed literature, more specifically, as a form of storytelling which can transmit cultural knowledge and allow buried voices to speak.⁴ Literature, as Morrison’s theorization suggests and as Ward’s work demonstrates, has the power to craft counternarratives of Blackness which take seriously profound suffering without reducing the Black being to commodified flesh.

In the project at hand, I aim to evaluate literature’s capacity to tell the story of Black death in a way that refuses to obscure both the fullness of Black subjects and the conditions which lead to their deaths. Interrogating how Black death is translated into a literary aesthetic raises questions about what effect this aesthetic achieves, particularly in a nation which actively disposes of Black people’s lives and a society which normalizes their deaths. What can narratives of death give back to bodies stripped of value and life? Are these stories a way to

³ Lisa Allardice, “Jesmyn Ward: ‘Black girls are silenced, misunderstood, and underestimated,’” review of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward, *The Guardian*, May 11, 2018.

⁴ See: Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates et al., 3rd ed., vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 1070.

make sense of endemic Black death, a way to heal from the trauma of racial terror? Can these stories mediate between the living and the dead; can they help the dead speak?

Examining the way *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* represent the social reality of Black death moves us closer to answering questions about what it means to write and read stories of African American pain and mourning. Both novels are set post-Hurricane Katrina in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi and center characters like Jojo—the poor Black people who, subjected to federal neglect and state-sanctioned violence, struggle daily to assert their humanity. Ward utilizes elements of the Southern Gothic genre—particularly the aesthetics of decay, despair, and the uncanny—to force the reader to confront the trail of Black bodies littering history and to make visible the political forces which administer lethal violence against African Americans. By simultaneously painting Black death as “the ground on which we stand” and rendering the precarity of Black life extraordinary, Ward attempts to defamiliarize this social reality.⁵ In order to understand Ward’s work, this essay will first analyze prominent theorizations of the mechanisms that produce Black death and then move into a discussion on the possibilities of literary form to represent this reality. Finally, I will explore Ward’s novels to show how they testify to the trauma—past and present—endured under anti-black terror, showing that storytelling has the power to speak the knowledge of death.

Theories of Black Death: Necropolitics, Bare Life, and Disposability

Ward undertakes the challenge of capturing in literary form the methods through which the U.S. government renders the disposability of Black bodies a regular feature of our everyday world. In both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Salvage the Bones*, Ward achieves this by representing

⁵ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.

death as an omnipresent shadow which looms over each character, a specter which haunts every life in the Mississippi Gulf Coast. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* opens with Jojo's meditation on death and closes with him finding a tree teeming with ghosts whose violent killings cause them to tarry between the material and the spirit world. In between, the novel directly grapples with death through the story of a Black family's trek across Mississippi. Along the journey, the family gains the accompaniment of two ghosts, faces fatal perils, and confronts reminders of history's violence at every turn. The characters in *Salvage the Bones* navigate a similarly deadly environment. This novel traces the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina as they unfold for a rural Black family in the Gulf Coast, but Ward de-centers the storm itself. Instead, she focuses on the daily realities of unwanted pregnancy, the tenderness and brutality of men, and the loss of hope for a future outside of the barren and bleeding South. Death remains an eerie backdrop, however, because the reader is aware of the impending menace of Katrina and because death underlies many of the family's quotidian concerns. In order to understand the implicit and explicit means through which Ward engages the nearness of death for African Americans, it is useful to first look to Black studies scholars' theorizations of Black death.

Over the past few decades, scholars have become increasingly invested in the nature and politics of Black death, falling in line with an era of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName which center Black death as a social concern. These scholars have investigated how, in many ways, Blackness in the U.S. hinges on death and abjection. While some of the texts I explore here have been labeled as Afro-pessimist, I am not conceiving of death as the absolute ontological arrangement or singular orientation of Blackness. Rather, I find the works which take seriously the pervasiveness of Black death and suffering to be useful in addressing the complexity of the African American lived experience and structural positioning. The following

discussion will trace the theories of necropolitics, bare life, and disposability to provide critical frameworks for understanding the role of death in Ward's novels. These theories provide grounding for my analysis of how the novels represent African Americans' bodily vulnerability due to historical and contemporary anti-black structures.

Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics provides a strong foundation for understanding how death operates as a political tool in racialized societies, such as the Gulf Coast setting in Ward's novels. Mbembe takes up Michel Foucault's theory of biopower which holds that nation states have the capacity to "ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order."⁶ While Foucault acknowledges that techniques of bodily management can either "foster life... or disallow it to the point of death," his focus remains on how biopower is utilized to maintain life.⁷ Mbembe, however, shifts his focus to the production of death, asserting that death, more so than life, is the force which configures social, political, and economic relations across the contemporary world. According to Mbembe, the political order is indeed governed by the power "to dictate who may live," but biopower does not adequately account for those bodies targeted as the ones "who must die."⁸ To flesh out this order, Mbembe theorizes "necropower" as the technologies of control which subject bodies to death, whether this be visible violence and genocide or more invisible institutions such as the deprivation of basic necessities, restriction of movement, and other mechanisms which interfere with daily life.⁹ The state's mobilization of these lethal technologies creates "death-worlds" or political realities in

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 138.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 1.

⁹ Ibid., 25.

which "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."¹⁰

For our purposes, the most relevant aspect of Mbembe's work on necropolitics is the answer to one of his central questions: "under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?"¹¹ In simpler terms, Mbembe asks: which people does the state designate to live or to die, and what material realities arise from this order of power? Essentially, he questions who becomes the "living dead" and how. Mbembe argues that those deemed *Other* are perceived as a danger to life, and that race, a visible marker of *Other*, is one system which filters who will die so that others can live. In other words, racism is a technology of death which places racial *Others*—particularly Black people—in the position of living dead. To ground his theory, Mbembe refers to spaces in which necropower operates, such as the colonial world, South African apartheid, and the plantation. The native, the African, and the slave, in these respective social and political formations, are regulated by necropower as they live as non-beings under conditions which manufacture death.¹² In Ward's novels, it becomes clear that the Gulf Coast also becomes a death-world which subjects African Americans to the status of living dead.

To better understand this position, we can examine how racism produces what Giorgio Agamben terms "bare life." Similar to Mbembe, Agamben theorizes that the nation state has the power to strip bodies of their political significance and, consequently, to kill them with impunity. According to Agamben, bare life is life that is excluded by the state from the political sphere and social order, yet still remains subject to the state's ability to regulate life or allow death. Because

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 12.

¹² Ibid.

bare life, according to the hegemonic forces in the political sphere, has no perceived social or political value, it is life that can be killed without consequence; therefore, those in the position of bare life are indefinitely vulnerable to the threat of death at the hands of the state.¹³ Agamben's theory clarifies Black people's subjection to death-worlds. In necropolitical logic, racism reduces Black lives to bare life by divesting them of political and social value, even as they remain under the power of the state. Since their lives are deemed meaningless, the state can place Black bodies into death-worlds without consequence in order to establish a particular sociopolitical order.

Ward's novels make clear that the African American inhabitants of the Gulf Coast are also reduced to bare life and placed into death-worlds, since the state deprives them of privileges and protection. Cultural critic Henry Giroux argues that Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophe which Ward represents in *Salvage the Bones*, brought into focus the state's racist discrimination which left poor Black people vulnerable to the storm. Giroux asserts that since it was mostly Black people who were left dead or helpless after Katrina, the storm drew attention to the lethal structural methods through which the state reduces African Americans to the status of bare life. Not only did the storm's effects uncover that the Bush administration made the informed decision to underfund efforts to build levee infrastructure which could have protected Gulf Coast citizens, but Katrina also illuminated the daily ways African Americans are covertly exposed to death. Giroux writes:

Katrina lays bare what many people in the United States do not want to see: large numbers of poor black and brown people struggling to make ends meet, benefiting very little from a social system that makes it difficult to obtain health insurance, child care, social assistance, cars, savings, and minimum-wage jobs if lucky, and instead offers to black and brown youth inadequate schools, poor public services, and no future, except a possible stint in the penitentiary.¹⁴

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Henry A. Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (2006): 177-178.

Ultimately, Katrina made visible how the U.S government’s lack of responsibility toward Black life produces both spectacular episodes of Black death and daily disadvantages—what Mbembe terms “invisible killing”—to eliminate the “valueless” portions of society.¹⁵ Since the quotidian horrors which Giroux highlights function insidiously, mainstream society can easily overlook the state’s active efforts to dispose of Black bodies, rendering Black death an utterly familiar aspect of our everyday reality. As Joy James & João Costa Vargas put it, “Black death [is] a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy.”¹⁶

The shattering catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina is a recent product of a much longer genealogy of Black bodies being susceptible to bodily violence and degradation at the hands of the state. Literary critic Saidiya Hartman and civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander have mapped out how various social and political forces throughout time have sustained a “total climate” of violent anti-blackness which continuously marks the lives of African Americans and pushes them toward death.¹⁷ Hartman asserts that contemporary anti-blackness stems directly from the trans-atlantic slave when Black bodies were first turned into commodities and removed from the sphere of politically recognized humanity. She writes:

... 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.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 30.

¹⁶ Joy James and João Costa Vargas, “Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs,” in *Pursuing Trayvon: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Latham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 193.

¹⁷ Sharpe, “*In the Wake*,” 15.

¹⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 6.

For Hartman, the racial persecution of the past is intimately connected to the racial persecution which persists today. Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow*, cogently dissects this historical thread by tracing how the government has consistently mobilized the law to disadvantage African Americans and to privilege whites. Alexander traces how the specific legal systems have shifted—from commodification during slavery to Jim Crow segregation to contemporary practices of racial profiling and the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans—but she makes clear that the structure of anti-blackness ultimately remains the same. Alexander writes that “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it” in a way which allows for the continued “management and control of the dispossessed.”¹⁹ While the structures Alexander highlights sometimes produce spectacular deaths, such as lynchings or being publically shot down by the police, these systems more often operate covertly, particularly in the current age of colorblindness which allows the state to silently implement policies which disadvantage African Americans.²⁰ Put into the language of necropolitics, Hartman and Michelle reveal that African Americans are always subject to legislative systems which show no regard for the lives or deaths of Black bodies which do not matter. Therefore, a state-sanctioned death-world is created in which Black people, void of value, are constantly exposed to various visible and invisible technologies of death which operate throughout time.

Necropolitics, bare life, and the genealogy of disposability provide important frameworks for understanding the endemic suffering under anti-blackness. Tracing these theories reveals that African Americans exist as bare life in a society which considers them disposable without consequence. The state marks African Americans as the racial enmity who threaten the stability

¹⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 2, 188.

²⁰ Ibid.

of civil society, and therefore, they become marked as lives meant for death. The state has deployed technologies of death, such as slavery, Jim Crow segregation, mass incarceration, police brutality, and racialized poverty, to dispose of “valueless” Black bodies. These anti-black systems produce covert yet violent structural disadvantages which make African Americans’ lives unlivable. Simply put, African Americans are consigned to diminished states of being and a close proximity to death. This is the reality which has produced the loss of Black life for centuries and which has generated spectacular and quotidian catastrophes in the death-world of the Gulf Coast. Ward’s novels undertake the challenging project of representing those who live in this death-world, those poor African Americans who are typically rendered invisible and unrepresentable in mainstream narratives.

The Possibilities and Ethics of Literary Form

In *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the ontological reality of Black death is translated into literary form. Thus, Ward’s work responds to the quest, undertaken by several Black studies scholars, for a way to express and address the overwhelming loss of Black life. Black suffering cannot be fully understood through statistics and body counts, and everyday language cannot seem to capture the gravity of Black death. Ward herself has commented on the difficulty of representing Black pain: “[Writing] account[s] of loss and grief and of black lives being devalued over generations [was] very difficult because I didn’t yet have the language. I felt like a crazy person.”²¹ Ward and others have searched for a language and form that can tell what Hartman terms the “impossible story” of Black life and death, a story which may serve as a salve for the “crazy” feeling of living in a world marked by violent antiblackness and the continual

²¹ Jesmyn Ward, “Novelist Jesmyn Ward’s Haunted, Meth-Fueled Odyssey,” interview by Maddie Oatman, *Mother Jones*, September/October 2017.

failure of racial equality.²² Hartman, who focuses on constructing the narratives of enslaved women, dubs these stories impossible because the archive, written in a “grammar of violence,” records Blackness only in terms of commodification, brutality, and death.²³ Meanwhile, the affect, knowledge, and humanity of Black subjects remain absent. Like Ward, Hartman seeks methods of telling the story of Black death which does not violently obscure the fullness of Black subjects.

While Hartman is primarily invested in the stories which reside, perpetually incomplete, in the historical archive, her work opens up important ways of thinking about storytelling and literature. She writes: “How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?”²⁴ In other words, the endeavor is to reconfigure the representation of Blackness so that the stories told do not revisit the violence which produces widespread death in the first place. Instead, these stories should recognize the inescapable violence which circumscribes Black life, while also embodying the humanity which resists such violence. Literary critic Christina Sharpe explores the potential which sites of artistic production hold for telling such stories. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe interrogates how “literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate” Black death and the possibilities of “depict[ing] aesthetically... the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity.”²⁵ In “trying to find the language for this work, find the form for this work,” Sharpe theorizes an aesthetic model, termed “wake work,” which attends to the trauma

²² Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 11.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 3.

²⁵ Sharpe, “*In the Wake*,” 13.

and mourning inscribed in the African American reality.²⁶ Moreover, Sharpe asserts that wake work should delineate what survives and exceeds the violation of Black life so that one can imagine a Black subjectivity apart from abjection.

If the narrative models presented by Hartman and Sharpe are realized, literature can function as an experiment in living an unlivable life, in surviving the unsurvivable, and in imagining a world in which Blackness is not bound to necropolitics. However, as literature scholar Courtney Baker points out, literature also has the power to further exploit the dead both in terms of reducing stories to mere literary pleasure or capitalist profit within the publishing industry. Concerned with the commercial and affective ethics of literature based on real-world murders, Baker urges readers and writers to engage stories of death with care and responsibility. She writes, “It is important that this work of [literature] be conducted... on behalf of the other. In this scenario, it is not the dead who are put to work, but the dead who put us to work.”²⁷ In other words, literature which aestheticizes Black suffering must be treated as labor by both the writer and reader in order to work toward racial justice. Toni Morrison also emphasizes literature’s responsibility to labor for the African American community, to provide sustenance and guidance in a world which drives Black bodies toward death:

[Literature] should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.²⁸

Literature cannot overcome the climate of anti-blackness or even fully represent those who live under its thumb; stories cannot restore the dead, restart the heart, or extract blood from the water.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Courtney Baker, “The Grift of Death The Ethics of Murder Narratives,” *Parallax*, Survival of the Death Sentence, 22, no. 1 (2016): 63.

²⁸ Morrison, “Rootedness,” 1068.

However, literature can enact an ethical refusal to normalize anti-blackness and, instead, be mobilized to bear witness to Black pain and humanity, to circulate knowledge about living in a state of loss, disposability, and pervasive death.

To ground this conceptualization of literature, we can examine Ward's novels as an example of literary work that ethically responds to the ongoing crisis of racist subjection. Ward aestheticizes the social reality of persistent Black death by representing the affective experience and embodied knowledge of Black subjects, rather than by simply re-commodifying the Black being. Her stories capture African Americans' everyday encounters with structural persecution, calling attention to but also resisting the normalization of these experiences. Moreover, she illustrates the humanity and dignity of those who live under the insistent shadow of death, showing that they inhabit a position of deep knowledge rather than one of negation.

The Precarity of Black Life in *Salvage the Bones*

In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward initiates a consideration of the precarity of Black life by telling the story of a poor Black family who faces Hurricane Katrina as it strikes the Mississippi Gulf Coast. *Salvage the Bones* narrates the twelve days before the storm through the eyes of Esch Batiste, a reflective fifteen-year-old girl living in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage. As the days play out, the novel establishes that Esch, the rest of the Batiste family, and the entire Bois Sauvage community inhabit an atmosphere of decay, danger, and imminent death; for these poor African Americans living on the margins of society, dying seems to be more of a guarantee than living. Placing the novel in conversation with Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, it becomes clear that the characters in *Salvage the Bones* inhabit a death-world where various forces subject them to extreme bodily vulnerability. Ward weaves the pressing force of death into *Salvage the*

Bones in both subtle and horrifically conspicuous ways, highlighting how African Americans' position on the threshold of life and death produces both quotidian and spectacular disasters.

Ward illustrates this tenuous relationship with life primarily through themes of motherhood. Esch is the only daughter in the Batiste family and the only surviving female member. She is surrounded by her three brothers, their male friends, and her reclusive, alcoholic father; her mother, it is revealed in the beginning pages of the novel, passed away when Esch was eight. After her mother's death, Esch has no model for maternity other than the Greek goddess Medea, who she reads about in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, and China, her brother's pit bull who recently gave birth to her first litter of puppies. Therefore, when Esch discovers that she is pregnant by Manny, one of her brother's friends, she must discover what it means to be a mother. Much of the novel revolves around Esch's fraught relationship with maternity, and it becomes clear that in her world, motherhood is not just an act of giving life. Instead, experience teaches Esch that to be a mother is to bear, fear, and produce death. Thus, throughout the novel, Ward closely links the reproduction and the expiration of life through Esch's meditations on motherhood.

Salvage the Bones begins with two scenes infused with both birth and death. The novel opens with Esch's description of China in the midst of a bloody labor in which "she seems to be turning herself inside out."²⁹ Although the scene is raw and painful, Esch emphasizes the fact that "what China is doing is fighting" and for Esch, this is what stands in contrast to another childbirth she once witnessed: "What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior."³⁰ For a moment, Esch's narration moves away from the

²⁹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

childbirth she currently watches to recount the memory of her mother's labor, which, like China's, was a brutal and drawn out event:

Daddy said that Randall and Skeetah and me came fast, that Mama had all of us in her bed, under her own bare burning bulb, so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same. It didn't work that way. Mama squatted, screamed toward the end. Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower. She touched Junior just like that when Daddy held him over her: lightly with her fingertips, like she was afraid she'd knock the pollen from him, spoil the bloom. She said she didn't want to go to the hospital. Daddy dragged her from the bed to his truck, trailing her blood, and we never saw her again.³¹

Esch's mother dies in the process of giving birth to a healthy baby boy, contrasting China's labor in two ways: China ultimately survives but one of her puppies comes out dead. Still, in both incidents, the act of giving birth is intimately tangled up with the act of dying.

By weaving together the narration of China and Mama's respective experiences of labor, Ward effectively establishes that, in Esch's world, making life means battling death. This opening sequence exemplifies one of the major motifs in *Salvage the Bones*: the collapse of the human-animal binary. In this scene, Ward creates an association between Esch's mother and China, and throughout the rest of the novel, Esch uses China as a mirror to reflect on her own pregnancy and impending motherhood. Holly Cade Brown connects the fluidity between species in *Salvage the Bones* to the theory of bare life, discussed earlier in the essay, by tracing Agamben's idea that humans who are seen to possess animal traits are deemed bare life. Ward engages the racialized history of marking Black bodies as animalistic in *Salvage the Bones* in a way that "expose[s] the processes by which forms of life are positioned as disposable."³² However, Ward turns the trope of the animalistic Black body on its head by subtly condemning structural forces for restricting African Americans to a diminished form of life, rather than

³¹ Ibid., 2.

³² Holly Cade Brown, "Figuring Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker," *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (February 2017): 9.

simply portraying Black subjects as nonhuman. By coupling visceral descriptions of China in labor and Esch's mother giving birth/dying, Ward illuminates one technology which consigns Black female bodies to death. Esch's mother births Junior "in her bed, under her own bare burning bulb," with no support.³³ Esch reflects, "Me, the only girl and the youngest at eight, was of no help, although Daddy said she told him she didn't need any help."³⁴ China, meanwhile, births her litter on the dirt floor of a shed but under the care of Skeetah, one of the Batiste brothers, who is there to lovingly stroke and massage the dog and to catch and clean the puppies as they arrive. Therefore, Esch's mother gives birth with slightly more comfort but much less care than the family's pitbull. In this scene, Ward manipulates the animal-human binary not to dehumanize Esch's mother but to display her vulnerability as a poor African American woman who struggles to maintain her or produce another's life, both of which are considered disposable.

This is a vulnerability which Esch, now fifteen and pregnant, must confront herself. She discovers her pregnancy the day after watching China give birth and, though she does not reflect upon this directly, Esch must know that she risks the same fate as her mother. At one point, Esch recalls ways to abort the baby based on talk among girls at her school: taking a month of birth control pills, drinking bleach, throwing herself on something hard enough to induce a miscarriage. She considers them:

This is what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you... I could find something big enough and hard enough to jump on: Daddy's dump truck hood, Daddy's tractor, one of the old washing machines out in the yard. We have bleach in the laundry room. 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 if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department. Who would bring me? Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets that I

³³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

am a girl? Big Henry, one of the few of our friends who has a car? ... These are my options, and they narrow to none.³⁵

Without access to healthcare, Esch must choose between risking death in childbirth or risking death through dangerous methods of self-induced abortion. No matter which path she takes, the possibility of dying remains, making clear that the state truly condemns Esch to a death-world comprised of lethal conditions. The structural disadvantages produced by federal neglect highlighted in this passage—poverty, insufficient healthcare, and lack of access to transportation (a structural reality which will later trap the residents of Bois Sauvage during Hurricane Katrina)—make reproduction a fatal endeavor for Esch. This paradox reveals that people like Esch, poor African Americans deemed societal waste by the nation-state and mainstream society, are not meant to create or sustain life. Ultimately, the close link between procreation and death in *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates that the Esch and others in Bois Sauvage's poor Black community are subjected to necropolitics—the social and political power to produce death—rather than biopolitics—the power to maintain life.

Esch must come to terms with the meaning of her pregnancy at the same time that another catastrophic force, Hurricane Katrina, threatens Bois Sauvage. As the days go by and the storm grows nearer to the town, Esch is increasingly forced to contemplate the nature of motherhood. China continues to function as the animal mirror of both Esch and Esch's mother throughout *Salvage the Bones*, and Esch often uses her observations of the pit bull and the puppies to inform her understanding of motherhood:

The red puppy undulates toward [China], a fat mite. China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy's neck as she does when she carries him, but there is no gentleness in it. She is all white eyes. She is chewing. She is whipping him through the air like a tire eaten too short for Skeetah to grab... China flings it away from her. It thuds on the tin

³⁵ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 102.

and slides... China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*³⁶ (130)

Witnessing China kill her offspring builds another association between death and maternity in Esch's mind. The novel additionally compares China to the Greek goddess Medea who also murders her children in order to establish that to be a mother is not to create and sustain life but to put your children in the hands of death. Ward strengthens the idea of motherhood as a murderous force when Katrina strikes:

[China] is already swimming, fighting. Skeetah jumps. 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 but the hand of the hurricane pushes it down, down again... the puppy must be dead in my shirt because it is not moving and I pull it out as I cough and cough up the water and the hurricane and the pit.³⁷

In the thick of the storm, Esch works to keep the puppies alive, taking China's place as mother of "the babies." However, she fails because "Katrina, the mother... swept into the Gulf and slaughtered."³⁸ Therefore, Ward simultaneously portrays maternity as a fight to protect life and as a lethal weapon, illustrating that forces of life cannot be dissociated from forces of death, that to be a mother in the Gulf Coast is to fight a losing battle against and to be complicit in producing death.

Although *Salvage the Bones* is structured around Katrina, with each of the twelve chapters narrating a day leading up to or following the storm, the novel barely addresses the impending menace of the hurricane until the day before it hits. Instead, both the novel and its narrator are more concerned with Esch's pregnancy and China's litter, which are dying one by one. While these are seemingly less urgent concerns than the approaching storm, Ward gives

³⁶ Ibid., 130.

³⁷ Ibid., 235-236.

³⁸ Ibid., 255.

more space to these disasters than she does to Katrina and she frames them as having similarly catastrophic effects. The two previous passages are the most climactic moments of the novel, the only times when Ward's typical languid narrative pace and poetic prose switches to quick, action driven sentences. By mirroring the narrative styles of these two scenes, Ward suggests that the seemingly trivial death of China's puppy, which symbolizes how the pressing force of death begins at birth, holds the same gravity as the spectacular calamity of Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, Ward refuses to normalize the quotidian tragedies which produce invisible deaths; instead, she makes pregnancy-related fatalities, structural disadvantages, and the daily proximity of Black life to death feel as horrific as a category five hurricane. Like Giroux, Ward situates Katrina within a larger system of anti-blackness which disposes of African Americans in a number of ways. Ward, however, makes clear and resists the normalization of the more insidious manners in which African Americans are exposed to death.

By drawing a strong correlation between motherhood and death, *Salvage the Bones* represents the precarious nature of Black life. The novel shows that the reproduction of Black life, or bare life, leads directly to the reproduction of Black death, because African Americans are subject to state exerted necropower. Moreover, Ward, by revealing the everyday reality of living in a landscape of danger and decay, refuses the ordinariness of Black death; instead, Ward makes the Gulf Coast death-world feel harrowing and uncanny—something she also does in a much more explicit and supernatural way in her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

The Ghost Story and the Oral Tradition in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward draws heavily on the Southern Gothic tradition to create a narrative that is, according to the book's back cover, "part ghost story, part road novel."³⁹ Southern Gothic literature is known for putting characters face-to-face with the uncanny in order to both explore the environment of an evil American South and reveal what is ultimately unknowable.⁴⁰ Indeed, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, utilizes supernatural elements—namely ghosts—to force the characters into a confrontation with a bloody Southern landscape and a violent racist history which refuses to be repressed. The novel tells the story of thirteen-year old Jojo, his drug-abusing mother Leonie, and his baby-sister Kayla as they drive to the Parchman state-penitentiary to pick up the children's white father, Michael. Along the cross-state journey, they are persistently haunted by the threat of dying, memories of the deceased, and the lingering ghosts of the dead. While ghostly presences are a common feature of Southern Gothic literature, Ward manipulates their function in her novel; rather than use specters to comment on the unknown, Ward incorporates ghosts and haunting to illustrate how Black death is intimately known but actively ignored by mainstream America.

In this way, the ghostly presences in Ward's book are reminiscent of other works of African American fiction which utilize spirits and hauntings to reckon with racial oppression. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) most famously spins the ghost story genre—commonly associated with Gothic and Victorian literature—to confront the trauma of slavery.⁴¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, several other works of African American literature—Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), to name a few—employed ghosts to explore historical oppression and the wounds

³⁹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied Sing*.

⁴⁰ See: Jay Ellis, *Southern Gothic Literature* (Amenia, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2013).

⁴¹ For information on the ghost story tradition see: Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840-1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010).

of the past.⁴² Ward continues the work of updating the Southern Gothic and ghost story genres to properly address the brutality and survival embedded in African American history. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward uses ghosts and hauntings to emphasize the historical and contemporary proximity of Black life to death and to illustrate the importance of storytelling for living with the burden of history.

The characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, much like those in *Salvage the Bones*, always hover on the brink of death. Along the arduous journey from their Gulf Coast town to the Parchman prison, each member of the family comes uncomfortably close to dying, making clear the precarious nature of their lives. First, three-year-old Kayla becomes ill at the start of the journey, and it quickly becomes apparent that her incessant vomiting is not due to car sickness but something more serious. Kayla gets sicker and sicker as the family moves further from home, making the reader increasingly fearful that her death is imminent. Next, Jojo winds up with a policeman's gun—"black as rot, as pregnant as dread"—pointed at his face after the family gets pulled over on their way back home.⁴³ The policeman drags the family out of the car after Leonie reveals that they are coming from Parchman, a detail which seems to confirm the association between Blackness and criminality that, according to Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, has become a lethal connotation for Black people, especially Black men, across the country.⁴⁴ Finally, Leonie nearly overdoses from swallowing a baggie of meth, a rash decision she makes to protect Michael as the police pull them over. After the officer lets the family go, Leonie is racked with convulsions, "swallowing and breathing and choking... vomiting so hard her back curves

⁴² See: Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998); Other works of African American literature which take up spirits, ghosts, and haunting include: *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson (1987); *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* by Randall Kenan (1992); *Baby of the Family* by Tina McElsroy Ansa (1989).

⁴³ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 170.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

like an angry cat's."⁴⁵ Kayla, Jojo, and Leonie all survive their deadly episodes, but their near-demise makes clear that the family exists in an ongoing state of liminality in which structural disadvantages and political forces cause them to constantly verge on death. Poverty, illness, drugs, police brutality, and criminalization are impossible to escape, causing death to lurk around every bend. Thus, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* illustrates that from infancy to adulthood, poor African Americans are implicated in a death-world where life and death are not distant, impermeable states. Rather, African Americans occupy a liminal position in which they exist not as full life but as precarious, bare life because the state constantly administers lethal violence against their bodies.

The presence of ghosts amplifies the death-cast which shrouds the world in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Two ghosts are present throughout the three near-death experiences: the spirit of Given, Leonie's brother who was murdered by a white teenager, and the spirit of Richie, a twelve-year-old boy who was imprisoned with River, Jojo's grandfather, at Parchman during the Jim Crow era. The ghost of Given appears only to his sister Leonie, who dubs him "Given-not-Given," while Richie materializes for Jojo after they arrive at Parchman. The two phantoms haunt the family as they repeatedly confront death, a reminder that any of them could soon cross the tenuous threshold to the afterlife and join the ranks of tarrying ghosts.

The novel's invocation of ghosts also serves to create a historical connection between past and present forms of racial oppression. The undead in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* make visible a historical thread, much like the one Alexander draws, of anti-black violence which the family has suffered throughout time. Richie embodies the horrors of Jim Crow culture which committed Black boys as young as twelve to labor camps that force them to work under conditions almost

⁴⁵ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 179.

indistinguishable from slavery. Meanwhile, Given-not-Given, who is murdered at the the turn of the twenty-first century by a white boy whom he beat in a hunting bet, exhibits the persistence of the anti-black terrorism that failed to disappear with the institution of Civil Rights. These specters of racial violence loom over Jojo as he crouches by the side of the road, facing the muzzle of a policeman's gun, as if to collapse into a single moment the various forms of anti-black technologies which have been deployed throughout history. The ghostly apparitions make clear that Jojo is just as vulnerable to the logic of racial disposability that resulted in the deaths of the spirits who surround him. In having the dead and the living occupy the same space and time, the novel calls attention to the vicious continuity of history and the evolution of racial injustice which continues to condemn Black bodies, particularly Black male bodies, to death.

The ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* remain tied to the material world because they died traumatic deaths and, following the conventions of the ghost story, they rupture the present to demand a reckoning. The ghost story is predicated on the idea that a discordant past cannot be repressed, that ghosts appear when the trauma of history must be confronted and redressed. In his work on "hauntology," French philosopher Jacques Derrida theorizes the figure of the ghost as a form of the past breaching the present, a "spectral moment" in which the dead disrupts linear temporality to show that "something is missing" in the here and now.⁴⁶ Put differently, the ghost is the immobilizing tug of a tormented past on a present which gapes with unresolved trauma. Literary critic Renée Bergland expands on the specter's ability to bring past contusions to the surface: "The entire dynamic of ghosts and hauntings, as we understand them today, is a dynamic of unsuccessful repression. Ghosts are the things that we try to bury, that refuse to stay

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993, reprint; New York: Routledge, 1994), xx; Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (1997; reprint, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 15.

buried. They are our fears and our horrors, disembodied, but made inescapable by their very bodilessness.”⁴⁷ In literature, the ghost often functions as a plot device to illuminate characters’ troubled past or to catalyze amends. In American literature, more specifically, ghosts have been employed to force readers to acknowledge the “forgotten, discarded, or repressed” aspects of the nation’s unjust history—usually in regards to Native and Black dehumanization.⁴⁸ In the African American literary tradition, writers often invoke the aesthetic of haunting and ghosts to demand a recognition of historical injustices, racial brutality, and a past of slavery and oppression for which the nation has never atoned.

Indeed, Richie’s ghost compels the readers to confront the buried horrors of the nation’s past. In his phantom form, Richie is trapped at Parchman in a cycle of ghostly return and repetition. He is dropped by the “scaly bird” of death in the place “where [he] was worked... where [he] was whipped” because, as the bird tells him, “*There are things you need to see.*”⁴⁹ Richie remains bound to the space but not to the time of his death; he pseudo-time travels throughout different iterations of Parchman to witness the “passing of all those Black faces” throughout the penitentiary’s history:

How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? ... I despaired, burrowed into the dirt, slept, and rose to witness the newborn Parchman: I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the barracks for gunmen and trusty shooters. I thought I was in a bad dream. I thought that if I burrowed and slept and woke again, I would be back in the new Parchman, but instead, when I slept and woke, I was in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball and smoke. Bewildered, I burrowed and slept and woke to the new Parchman again, to men who wore their hair long and braided to their scalps, who sat for hours in small windowless rooms, staring at black boxes that streamed dreams. Their

⁴⁷ Renee Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2000), 5.

⁴⁸ Judith Richardson, *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

⁴⁹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 134-136.

faces in the blue light were stiff as corpses. I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized that this was the nature of time.⁵⁰

Derrida's notion of the "spectral moment" is illustrated in Richie's looping appearances and disappearances, a phenomenon which reveals Parchman's evolution from Native land to a maximum security prison. Parchman, this passage illustrates, transforms past and current inmates into the living dead, "corpses" who, like Richie, are trapped in a place of punishment and brutality. Richie's temporal dislocation highlights the continuity of Black captivity and disposability and leads him to understand time as "a vast ocean [in which] everything is happening at once," echoing Morrison's pronouncement in *Beloved* that "everything is now."⁵¹ By invoking Richie's ghost and the spectral puncturing of time, the novel conjoins distant and current temporalities, once again emphasizing the historical connectedness of anti-black oppression. Moreover, the reader witnesses the terrors of history along with and, since they are presented through his narration, *as* Richie. In this way, the bird speaks to both Richie and the reader when it says, "*There are things you need to see,*" and the novel, through its ghostly disjuncture of time, forces us to witness the theft of Native land and Black dehumanization.

Just as the novel's ghost story form obliges the reader to face the devastation of the past, storytelling also surfaces the weight of history for the characters in the novel. Storytelling plays a prominent role in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* through the character of River, Jojo's grandfather, who acts as the carrier of the African American oral tradition. As Jojo explains: "This is what Pop does when we are alone, sitting up late at night in the living room or out in the yard or woods. He tells me stories."⁵² Throughout the novel, River tells one story in fragments: the story of his time

⁵⁰ Ibid., 186-187.

⁵¹ Ibid.; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 198.

⁵² Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 17,

at Parchman, of his friendship with Richie, of Richie's death. Bits of the story—Richie's arrival at Parchman, that time he is whipped, how they trained the prison dogs to chase down escaped inmates—are scattered throughout the novel, fractured memories of a hellish past. As Jojo laments:

Pop's told me some parts of Richie's story over and over again [but] I ain't never heard the end... He always seemed to tell me part of his Richie story when we were doing something else: eating red beans and rice, picking our teeth with toothpicks on the porch after lunch, sitting in front of the television in the living room watching westerns in the afternoon, when Pop would interrupt the cowboy on the screen to say this about Parchman: *It was murder. Mass murder.*⁵³

River, the novel signals, cannot process Richie's death or his experience in an institution designed for dehumanization and death. Psychoanalytic thought commonly conceptualizes trauma as rupture and fragmentation, a shattering of the psyche which cripples the capacity to narratively weave together memories into a coherent whole. River's inability to tell Richie's full story, to tell it in anything other than segments which come out at random moments, points to repressed trauma that is struggling to surface. Like ghosts, however, trauma does not disappear; it haunts the memory, a ghostly trace which demands to be recognized.

Both River's trauma and the phantom Richie insist upon storytelling to address their wounds. However, sociologist Avery Gordon asserts that:

haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done... haunting [is] precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving when, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., 72-73.

⁵⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

Indeed, it is not until Richie appears that River is compelled to finish his story, to address the trauma and fill in the gaps. Richie does not know how he died and he tells Jojo: “I want to remember.” He requests: “Ask Riv. Ask him to tell you.”⁵⁵ Here, the dead calls Jojo and River to action by requesting a story that will resolve the spectral turmoil and surface River’s trauma. Jojo asks and River tells, recounting how Richie broke out of Parchman with another inmate, Blue, who attacked a young white girl during their escape. A mob of white men, River reveals, caught Blue and lynched him, “[cut] pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose.”⁵⁶ To save Richie from the same brutal fate, River, who led the pack of prison dogs in the chase, found the young boy and stabbed him in the neck. River’s reaction to speaking his trauma is visceral. He crumbles and Jojo responds by “hold[ing] Pop like I hold Kayla. He puts his face in his knees and his back shakes... There is soft air and yellow sunlight and drifting pollen... and me and Pop embracing in the grass. The animals are quieting in grunts and snorts and yips. *Thank you*, they say. *Thank you thank you thank you*, they sing.”⁵⁷ Ultimately, Richie’s haunting catalyzes a form of storytelling which allows River’s repressed trauma to emerge, though not necessarily to heal. Narrating the horror simultaneously burdens and liberates River, who cannot wash Richie’s blood from his hands no matter how many times he recounts how it was spilled. However, finishing the story also seems to alleviate surrounding chaos, suggesting that stories can soothe lesions, despite their inability to suture them.

River’s storytelling answers to the Richie’s blatant demand to reveal how he died, but it also answers to the larger unspoken call to circulate stories of Black death and anti-black violence. Throughout the novel, River’s fragmented storytelling reveals more deaths than just

⁵⁵ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 240.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 254,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

Richie's. In describing Parchman, River elaborates on the "mass murder" that occurred at the penitentiary: the "trusty shooters," or the inmate guards, who abused and killed other inmates; the white convict who cared for the prison dogs and shot escapees in the head; the dehumanizing labor that drove prisoners to the brink of death. The novel also utilizes the oral tradition to invoke historical moments of racial violence beyond the convict leasing system. When finishing the story of Richie's death, River also recounts Blue's murder, a savage lynching much like the thousands of others which occurred across the Jim Crow South. River's storytelling traces anti-black violence even further back in time by conjuring up stories of slavery passed down across generations:

Once my grandmama told me a story about her great-grandmama. She'd come across the ocean, been kidnapped and sold. Said her great-grandmama told her that in her village... everyone knew about the death march to the coast, that word had come down about the ships, about how they packed men and women into them. Some heard it was even worse for those who sailed off, sunk into the far. Because that's what it looked like when the ship crossed the horizon: like the ship sailed off and sunk, bit by bit, into the water. Her grandmama said they never went out at night, and even in the day, they stayed in the shadows of they houses. But still, they came for her. Kidnapped her from her home in the middle of the day. Brought her here, and she learned the boats didn't sink to some watery place, sailed by white ghosts. She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked. That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under somewhere far away, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal.⁵⁸

Through storytelling, River connects his own dehumanization to that of his ancestors who endured the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The novel, therefore, uses the oral tradition to illustrate the genealogy of Black commodification and abjection from its beginnings in the slave trade to the contemporary U.S. moment. Ward's novel reflects scholars' theorizations of the legacy of slavery. Hartman argues that the current devaluation of Black lives is the "afterlife of slavery"

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69.

while Sharpe conceptualizes African Americans, who exist in “an ongoing present of subjection and resistance, as living “in the wake” of slavery.⁵⁹ Both scholars understand slavery to be both past and present, still unfolding and shaping the lives of African Americans such as River, who, like his enslaved ancestors, knows what it is like “*to be made a animal.*”

In telling stories, River builds a collective memory of racial violence and makes visible the ghostly presence of history. Gordon argues that “the ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure... a history of barely legible traces imagined or conjured up.”⁶⁰ Put differently, residues of the past—particularly of the wounding past—haunt the present, even if they are obscured from the official historical narrative. As Hartman recognizes, the full records of the lives and deaths of the enslaved are excluded from the historical archive, rendering them “impossible stories” even as their presence haunts the archive and the present.⁶¹ River answers history’s haunting call to uncover the buried accounts of his ancestors by passing down the history of their deaths as a story. In circulating these tales of ancestors and other dead, River imparts historical and racial consciousness onto his kin. Poet and literary scholar Elizabeth Alexander argues that storytelling in the African American community has the capacity to build a “collective memory that rests in the present moment” because it allows the receiver of the story to aurally “witness” experiences of death and bodily trauma which can be “recorded in memory as knowledge.”⁶² E. Alexander writes, “In the absence of first-person witnessing, the stories are passed along so that everyone knows the parameters in which their bodies move.”⁶³ Indeed, River, through storytelling, passes on the knowledge of death. He teaches Jojo about a past

⁵⁹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6; Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

⁶⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

⁶¹ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts.”

⁶² Elizabeth Alexander, ““Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 1994, no. 7 (1994): 83-84.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

which has indelibly shaped the boy's present, unraveling the thread of history which leads Jojo to fear and anticipate the deaths of his loved ones; to grieve and be haunted by those who died so tragically they cannot help but leave a mark; to stare into the muzzle of a policeman's gun and come face-to-face with his own demise.

Therefore, River's stories of history's haunting and pervasive death are put in the service of the present. They teach Jojo and his family how to live in a death-world and how to bear the burden of a history saturated with lethal racial violence. Returning to Jojo's opening lines, "I like to think I know what death is," it becomes clear throughout the novel that he gains this knowledge of death, in large part, through River's oral stories.⁶⁴ However, as Richie observes when he first meets the young, living boy: "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."⁶⁵ Stories told by the living, Richie seems to say, still cannot give the full accounts of the dead. Trauma prevents those who survive from remembering every gory detail, and the living cannot possibly know the visceral experience of dying or what it is like to be trapped in a spectral loop of time. While River's stories warn Jojo of the various ways which death pursues him and exemplify how to carry on in the aftermath of a fatal storm, only Richie's haunting can show Jojo what death is in its full, ghostly form.

Therefore, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* employs two types of storytelling to impart onto the reader the knowledge of Black death. In its function as a contemporary African American ghost

⁶⁴ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

story, the novel fractures the notion of a present that is separate from the past. The story makes clear that the dead have not disappeared and that the past lingers on, invoking spectral presences to force the reader to look straight at the ghostly traces of history which continue to shape the contemporary moment. Given-not-Given and Richie materialize past racial violence which is now unseeable, and they make visible the continuous nature of anti-blackness. By having ghosts persist alongside Jojo and his family, both of whom exist as living dead in an ongoing liminal state, the novel makes clear that anti-blackness is, as Richie describes of Parchman, “like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same.”⁶⁶ The ghost of Richie summons another type of storytelling in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*: the African American oral tradition. The trauma which continues to haunt River, as well as Richie’s specter himself, demand for a story that will acknowledge the wounds of the past. River delivers this through his fragmented narrative which chronicles various iterations of anti-black violence from the slave trade to the convict leasing system and mass lynchings during the Jim Crow era. By passing on these stories, River allows Jojo to “witness” the history of Black death, thereby imprinting the memory and knowledge of this history into his own body. Through stories, Jojo can come into consciousness about the society in which he lives—a society which constantly mobilizes death against him. Ultimately, the way storytelling functions within *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reveals what work stories can do for the African American community: they can circulate the knowledge of living near death, they can illuminate the present by bringing critical visibility to the past, and they can provide sustenance despite continued terrorization.

Conclusion

⁶⁶ Ibid., 172.

Ultimately, however, stories cannot truly heal the wounds of either the living or the deceased. After River finishes recounting Richie's death, the specter does not leave the material world and pass on to a paradise across the ocean. Instead, he joins a mass of lingering phantoms who search aimlessly for a way to "go home."⁶⁷ The story is told, but the ghosts are not liberated, prompting us to wonder what stories can really do to work for the dead. As Hartman questions:

Is narration its own gift and its own end, that is, all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not? And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?⁶⁸

The work of stories and literature are limited. They cannot reverse the past or, as Richie points out, satisfy our craving to fully know or make sense of death. However, literature can uncover and illuminate the invisible deaths which litter the ghostly aspects of both past and present. The malleable, imaginative space of a literary text can recover, to a degree, and narratively reconstruct the slippery, elusive aspects of Black life and death which typically remain excluded from the dominant narrative. In inscribing the story of Black death, literature can carry the dead across time and function as a textual embodiment of the specter who intrudes upon the present to remind us of the continuity of racial injustice.

Ward's novels exemplify the literary possibilities of representing the social reality of Black death. *Salvage the Bones* portrays motherhood as being intimately intertwined with death in the world of Esch Batiste and the rest of the poor African American community of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. The novel elucidates the injustices which Black women suffer everyday, particularly as related to reproduction, in order to emphasize the necropolitical power which the hegemonic state mobilizes against Black bodies from birth. Moreover, by correlating the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 284.

⁶⁸ Hartman, *Venus In Two Acts*, 3.

everyday precarity of Black life and the spectacular event of Hurricane Katrina, the novel defamiliarizes the quotidian ways the nation reduces Black people to bare life and exposes them to death. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, meanwhile, experiments with form in order to represent the proximity of Blackness to death and the historical continuity of anti-black terror. Ward employs the ghost story to illuminate the social remains of the past which continue to mark the contemporary moment and to shatter any notion that historical racial violence is detached from the present. Ward also incorporates the oral tradition within the narrative itself to emphasize that the characters' structural placement is shaped by a historic lineage of subjection. Moreover, the injection of the oral tradition into the literary form exemplifies the capacity of storytelling to circulate the cultural knowledge acquired by living near death.

Ward's novels enact an ethical refusal to normalize the injustices which manufacture Black suffering. Ward writes that "Bodies tell stories," and by representing bodies which suffer from premature labor, unwanted pregnancy, poverty, cancer, illness, drug-abuse, police brutality, and fatal exhaustion, Ward tells a larger story of state-sanctioned violence perpetrated against Black flesh.⁶⁹ By taking us to various sites of anti-black oppression, the novels insist upon a recognition of this overwhelming violence which circumscribes Black lives. In this act of resistance against the ordinariness of anti-blackness, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also open up the possibility of mobilizing the knowledge of Black death to build a counternarrative of Blackness and even to enable future survival. Morrison has argued that the reader has the responsibility to determine the ends of literature, and Baker argues that the only ethical responses to literary works of murder and death are to mourn with care and to work

⁶⁹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 83.

toward the justice which the dead are owed.⁷⁰ We, as readers, then, have a responsibility to Ward's texts, and others which also illuminate the social reality of state-produced Black death. As readers, we must recognize both the brutality and humanity which these literary works disclose and use this knowledge to imagine what futures may exist for Black life in spite of and perhaps even beyond the confines of systemic racism. The literary aesthetic of Black death ultimately offers possibilities of turning an active elegy into community sustenance through passing on the knowledge of death.

⁷⁰ Baker, "The Grift of Death," 62-63; Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction.*, ed. Carolyn Denard (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

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