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WHAT IS WARDIAN?: FORMULATING JESMYN WARD'S LITERARY STYLE  
AND TECHNIQUE THROUGH TEXTUAL ANALYSIS, COMPARISON, AND  
DIFFERENTIATION

A Thesis Presented

by

Ryan Anthony James Conroy

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Specializing in English

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past twelve years, Jesmyn Ward has published three novels, one memoir, one anthology, and a series of articles. After two National Book Awards, Ward has risen to the top ranks of contemporary literature, invited to universities and lecture series across the country. This thesis seeks to delineate the distinct style with which Ward writes. In doing so, her relation to other authors, both old and new, will become apparent. Not only is Ward writing fiction that is good, even great, but her writing is always urgent and contextualized within contemporary politics.

From *De Lisle, Mississippi*, Ward often employs Southern gothic themes in her fiction. Further, she develops these themes to fit a present voice and subject. Her engagement with the tradition always seeks to create space for marginalized narratives that canonical literature has typically ignored or suppressed. Ward's narrative structure lends itself to the polyperspectivity she desires to produce at a metaliterary level. Thus, her technique often aligns with writers ranging from William Faulkner, Ernest J. Gaines, and Toni Morrison.

Ward's writing is astoundingly fresh, yet other contemporary Southern writers exhibit stylistic similarities with her style. This thesis shall investigate why certain commonalities appear across these authors works and how their artistic decisions reflect and influence the reality within which the texts are situated. In total, I seek to offer a comprehensive examination of Ward as a writer, as a student of literary history, and as a contemporary voice conversing with others.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING, JESMYN WARD

### 1.1. Introduction to Thesis

“Time floods the room in a storm surge” (269). The personal history of this thesis begins with these words. After tensely turning through the pages of *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing*’s climax, I reached this line, the words standing alone beneath a paragraph that drips with anticipation. Jesmyn Ward’s novel blew me away and seeded a hunger within me. The following pages reflect my pursuit to satiate that hunger.

While first reading *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I thought I heard echoes of William Faulkner in Ward’s words. Naturally, I was pleased to find that my observation had already been confirmed by the author herself.<sup>1</sup> I began considering this literary relationship as a viable point of inquiry for my graduate research. And so, I was less pleased to see that I was not the first to the table. A quick google search showed me several articles on the link between Faulkner and Ward. Yet, as I read them, I found that commentary on the authorial lineage was often superficial. Some critics lazily asked, “is she the new Faulkner?” as if it were a question of reincarnation, while other more nuanced critics recognized that Ward was exploring black narratives that Faulkner’s writing had failed to adequately represent. Despite Ward’s own admiration for the modernist’s oeuvre, she noted “the lack of imaginative vision regarding [black characters], the way they don’t display the full range of human emotion, [and] how they fail to live fully on the page” (Hoover). Indeed, *As I Lay Dying* invites the most obvious

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<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth Hoover, *The Paris Review*. Nearly every article concerning Ward’s Faulknerian influence quotes this interview, where she says “The first time I read *As I Lay Dying*, I was so awed I wanted to give up. I thought, ‘He’s done it, perfectly. Why the hell am I trying?’ But 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, how they fail to live fully on the page—work against that awe and goad me to write.”

comparison to *Sing, Unburied Sing*, despite featuring no black voices amongst its fifteen different narrators.

Other markers of Faulknerian influence are present in Ward's use of stream-of-consciousness style and interior monologue, multiperspectivity, the Southern gothic texture, and overall subject matter of poverty and struggle. Both authors depict fictional settings rooted in Mississippi geography while inscribing the heavy weight of real history into imaginary environments. Political reality is palpably present in Ward's novel, as Sarah Begley writes for TIME, it "deals with problems that are representative of a town in a state that set a new record for deaths by drug overdose [in 2016]. Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the country and one of the highest unemployment rates, and is often ranked among the hungriest, unhealthiest and worst-educated places to live." Or, as some of her longtime friends concisely put it, Ward writes about "real shit" (*Men We Reaped*, 69).

Reading Toni Morrison provided the critical insight that guides this thesis. Like Ward, critics persistently pointed to the textual relationship between her and Faulkner. Morrison repeatedly characterized his influence on her as overstated, sometimes even absent, and at the very least critically naïve and problematic (See Duvall, 95). The insistence surrounding the alleged literary relationship reflects a desire to read Morrison's emphatically black works against a white background and origin, rather than contextualize within an African-American tradition which primarily informs her writing. Despite Morrison and others' sustained elaboration of this point, we nonetheless see the same phenomenon occurring with Jesmyn Ward. I am not trying to be sneaky either; my initial reaction to *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reflects the biased approach to African-American literature that I will herein argue against.

Thus, my project seeks to broaden the interpretative approach to Jesmyn Ward's writing by expanding the conversation of her influence to include more than William Faulkner. Perhaps the second-most popular comparison is between Ward and Natasha Trethewey. While I will give attention to this relationship myself, the commentary on the two often seems limited to biographical coincidences (black, female, Mississippian, post-Katrina), despite the abundance of thematic similarities. Both authors write extensively about history and memory, grief, and writing itself. While Ward writes prose and Trethewey poetry, both continue to collect impressive accolades at the national level and create a literary landscape of a new Southern Gothic.

Ernest Gaines presents another author that deals with Faulknerian influence and the struggle to distinguish oneself from the modernist writer, especially from a black perspective. The confluences between Gaines and Ward are striking. Structurally, the authors both approach story-telling through narratives of multiperspectivity. Both feature fictional communities that appear across their texts. While the same can obviously be said about Faulkner, we will see that Gaines and Ward are often closer thematically and stylistically. Returning to Morrison, we will examine both how the two black female authors compare to each other and how they individually revise the Faulknerian text. This discussion will highlight similarities between the two and appropriately identify Morrison as a deeply important figure in Ward's authorial maturation, as stated by the author herself.

Along with Trethewey, other contemporary peers of Ward will be brought into conversation as well. Tayari Jones and Randall Kenan both contribute in different ways to the construction of a Southern literary landscape. Ward, Jones, and Kenan all write consistently from a child perspective in ways that reimagine political and social reality.

The trio each focus on marginalized experiences in an intersectional fashion that represents the expanding focus of post-New Black Aesthetic writing.

Throughout these comparative analyses, the aspects of writing individual to Jesmyn Ward will become apparent. This thesis will incorporate her three novels (*Where the Line Bleeds*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*), her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, her anthology, *The Fire This Time*, and her various interviews and speeches. Each publication is highly involved with each other and by studying them together, an understanding of recurrent themes and styles arises out of the growing oeuvre. In short, I think Jesmyn Ward is one of the greatest writers of our current moment and I aim to contribute to a new discourse that critically considers her alongside other literary giants.

### **1.2. *Men We Reaped* as Context**

Two events imprint themselves on all of Ward's writing: the loss of her brother in 2000, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. While both events suggest wider political implications, the primary focus of her writing concerns the personal effect that these socially relevant calamities embed in an individual. Ward diffuses these traumas within her writing, granting her the rightfully accorded label of a "Katrina writer" despite seldomly writing about Katrina in explicit terms. Of all her books, *Salvage the Bones* most directly confronts the topic, yet eighty percent of the novel occurs before the storm. Instead, Ward weaves the emotion of the cultural trauma into the very texture of the novel through imagery, diction, and a foreshadowing that relies on the reader's knowledge of the historic event. Later, we will discuss the critical implications of this narrative weaving. For now, suffice it to say that Ward's masterful technique is "what makes the novel so powerful," as Washington Post journalist Ron Charles writes, all the

while “[w]ithout a hint of pretension... she evokes the tenacious love and desperation of classical tragedy.”

The same love and desperation is palpable in Ward’s writing about her brother, Joshua. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, she intertwines childhood memories with premature eulogies. Ward writes about five young men, all friends of hers, that all passed away within four years. These stories concern racism, sometimes a “blatant, overt, individualized racism,” but much more often “a systemic kind, the kind that made it hard for school administrators and teachers to see past [Joshua’s] easygoing charm and lackluster grades and disdain for rigid learning to the person underneath” (208). This racism fundamentally structures all of her novels and bears “all the weight of the South” down on her young characters (195).

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward explicitly states that personal losses inspired her to write, yet representing systemic racism presented an obstacle for her. She describes this obstacle as more emotional rather than technical:

I knew the boys in my first novel, which I was writing at that time, weren’t as raw as they could be, weren’t real. I knew they were failing as characters because I wasn’t pushing them to assume the reality that my real-life boys, Demond among them, experienced every day. I loved them too much: as an author, I was a benevolent God. I protected them from death, from drug addiction, from needlessly harsh sentences in jail for doing stupid, juvenile things like stealing four-wheel ATVs. (70)

These boys are Christophe and Joshua. Reading *Men We Reaped* alongside Ward’s fiction, like *Where the Line Bleeds*, astoundingly illuminates the texts and highlights the continuity across her writing. The first line of Ward’s debut novel reads, “The river was

young and small”. The second line continues to describe the landscape of the river as it progresses toward “the river’s end”, where “two teenage boys, twins, stood at the apex” (*Bleeds*, 1). The proximity between the natural world and modern human appears across Ward’s fiction, particularly *Salvage the Bones*; notably, within the first published paragraph of the author’s fiction, this metaphorical relationship occurs. The paragraph closes with: “Underneath them, the water of the Wolf River lay dark and deep, feathered by the current...They were preparing to jump”. This river’s title, “Wolf River”, derives from a river of the same name in Ward’s hometown of De Lisle, Mississippi. The first chapters of Ward’s memoir discuss the history of the location, how the town was once called “Wolf-Town”, and that Ward wants “to impart something of its wild roots, its early savagery” (*Reaped*, 9). Savagery is an important word in the Wardian lexicon, as we shall see further on, but even here it “hints at the wildness at the heart” of Ward’s beginnings.

The Wolf figure reappears throughout the memoir as a representation of systemic racism that hunts the people of De Lisle. The figure is first introduced through a prosaic lapse in the memoir, its italicization conveying both interiority and mythic quality:

*The creature loped out of the woods before us, and we startled and shouted, and it looked at us and loped back into the darkness, and it was darkness, colored black, and had a long, fine snout, and it was soundless, this wild thing that looked at us like the intruders that we were before we drove away from it to more well-traveled roads, away from that place that was everything but a dead end, that place that seemed all beginning, a birthplace: Wolf-Town. (10)*

The Wolf is equated with “darkness”, signifying both presence and absence through the void. That the creature is described as viewing the speaker as “intruders” suggests something not only hostile but also native or natural, preexisting and primordial; this

signification is bolstered by assigning De Lisle as the “all-beginning” and “birthplace”. These abstract qualities, couched in sinister imagery, are then applied to the ubiquity of racism in the South: “When my brother died in October 2000, it was as if all the tragedy that had haunted my family’s life took shape in that great wolf of De Lisle, a wolf of darkness and grief, and that great thing was bent on beating us” (21).

Although the Wolf figure is isolated to Ward’s memoir, the endemic racism that it represents pervades her fiction. The immediate appearance of “Wolf River” in *Where the Line Bleeds* suggests as much, with the two young black boys perched above its darkness, unaware of its depths. The inclusion of Wolf River reflects Ward shedding her “benevolent God” approach to writing and allowing her characters to confront the real menace of black life in Mississippi. Indeed, just as the darkness of the Wolf surrounds De Lisle, the waters of the Wolf River surround Bois Sauvage, the fictional setting of the Wardian intertext: “Natural boundaries surrounded it on three sides... To the south, east, and west, a bayou bordered it, the same bayou that the Wolf River emptied into...” (*Bleeds*, 6). Since Ward metaphorically reads into the historical landscape she exists in, it corresponds that this same relationship between physical setting and emotional experience characterizes her work.

Ward’s deployment of metaphor and figurative literary methods to evoke the intangibilities of her black experience reflects a reality that is also numerically represented. Towards the end of her memoir, she lists several statistics “about what it means to be Black and poor in the South”:

Thirty-eight percent of Mississippi’s population is Black...In 2001, a report by the United States Census Bureau indicated that Mississippi was the poorest state in the country...About 35 percent of Black Mississippians live below the poverty

level, compared to 11 percent of Whites...By the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing. (*Reaped*, 236-237)

These statistics illustrate obvious social problems and while deep seeded racism undeniably promotes the widespread dismissal of these crises, the very nature of statistics fails to convey the truth of experience. Indeed, while Ward researched these statistics in her “search for words to tell this story”, it is the story itself that fills the pages of her writing, not the numbers. Ward observes the numbers and sees her experience in them; perhaps this is why she knows the percentages fail to represent humanity as effectively as her stories. While she is obviously not the first author to do this, her skill at depicting the local, the personal, and the realness of quotidian existence allows her and the reader to confront the endemic problems that the stories exist within. These statistics are the Wolf; they chase Ward’s characters chapter after chapter. Fiction becomes the prime medium to communicate the emotional and subjective truth of each body that comprises the number. Thus, Ward confesses that “all I can do in the end is say” and provide testimony and witness to the truth and reality of experience (6). Naturally, she begins with what is dearest to her – her brother.

### **1.3. Establishing Style in *Where the Line Bleeds***

While we have so far briefly engaged *Where the Line Bleeds*, we will now take a closer look at the text. Ward’s debut novel establishes the intertextual setting that will house her later novels. Bois Sauvage is to Ward what Yoknapataphwa is to Faulkner or what St. Raphael Parish is to Ernest Gaines. This analogy surpasses superficial likeness.

Like Ward, Gaines openly admits the influence of Faulkner on his writing.<sup>2</sup> John Wharton Lowe, the official biographer of Gaines, discusses how the late novelist improved upon Faulkner's shortcomings. He "built his texts on the rich foundation of the oral black culture of Louisiana", which is especially notable since his "academic training as a writer did not place him in contact with key African-American writers, who at that time had not been 'rediscovered'" (162). Gaines' use of vernacular never comes off as gimmick either; instead, the linguistic variety between characters creates a rich literary texture that brings verisimilitude and identity.

Gaines' realist elements do not suggest the ideological monotony that sometimes underlies such a genre. Lowe examines the novel *A Gathering of Old Men* and notes that, like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the text features fifteen different narrators; however:

By contrast [to *As I Lay Dying*], the entire point of the Gaines novel is a kind of running collective dialogue, akin to public confession and communion. Bakhtin has stated that an element of response and anticipation penetrates deeply inside intensely dialogic discourse...This, of course, suggests the profoundly African pattern of call and response, which is evident on virtually every page of Gaines's novel, unlike *As I Lay Dying*, where the Bundrens are isolated in their own private worlds of grief and silence. (166)

This dialogic approach to narrative creates a "polyperspectival" text. Faulkner's radical development of this approach clearly influenced authors to adopt the style – however, the black experience of an author like Gaines prompted him to "centrally [address] the tragic

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<sup>2</sup> Gaines considers his writing in the context of Faulkner during multiple interviews. As later discussed, John Wharton Lowe examines their textual relationship and offers insights from Gaines himself. For analysis, see Lowe 161-182; for interviews, see Rickels, 133; Beauford, 19.

racial situation of the Deep South, skillfully employing Faulkner's narrative breakthroughs in breathtaking new ways" (164).

While Ward employs polyperspectival narrative more totally in her later fiction, *Where the Line Bleeds* presents her initial attempts. The omniscient narrator shifts between the twin brother protagonists without any formal transitions like chapter breaks. The psychologies of the twins begin close together – they graduate from high school, they deal with their basically absent parents, and they care for their aging grandmother, Ma-mee. The inseparable brothers are wholesomely concerned with providing for Ma-mee, who has recently become legally blind, and set out searching for jobs to financially support their home. The narrator speaks through Ma-Mee's conscious: "They were boys, and they were grown...They called her ma'am, like they were children still, and never talked back...They were good boys" (11); this contrast between boyhood and being "grown", or the expectations of maturity, underlies the conflict of the novel.

As Joshua and Christophe apply to typical blue-collar jobs immediately following their high school graduation, their narrative divergence begins. Christophe explains that "We got to work at the same time because we got to share a ride...That's why we put down the same hours for availability" (31). Of course, the labor force to which the brothers apply does not see two different individuals with differing sets of skills and personalities; what chiefly matters is that their availabilities are identical and inflexible. Only one of the boys, Joshua, is able to get a callback in this scarce job market, and Christophe is left discouraged and unemployed. The latter begins to suffer feelings of inadequacy: "When had he become the one who followed one step behind, the one who eyed and followed the other's back the one who was led?...Now, he would have to find his way alone" (51). Quickly, the twins become alienated from each other. Joshua's job at

the marina physically exhausts him and while it pays the bills, he does not enjoy it; Christophe begins selling weed which pays him nicely but makes him feel dirty and eventually causes him to confront his father, Sandman, who suffers from various substance addictions.

The two brothers diverge paths drastically within the course of a summer, pressured to meet the demands of being men, and both head towards seeming dead ends. Thus, the novel concludes by returning to the marine imagery that it begins with, suggesting cyclicity more so than unity. Christophe imagines the mullet fish swimming beneath him, his cousin Dunny warning “Don’t think just ‘cause they little now, they ain’t about shit...they some little savages” (238). The final lines take on clear metaphorical significance:

They would float along with the smooth, halting current that was slow and steady as a heartbeat. He could imagine them sliding along other slimy, striped fish and laying eggs that looked like marbles as the sun set again and again over the bayou and hurricanes passed through, churning them to dance. He could imagine them running their large tongues over the inside of their mouths and feeling the scars where the hooks had bit them, remembering their sojourn into the water-thin air, and mouthing to their children the smell of the metal in the water, the danger of it. They would survive, battered and cunning...Out and out through the spread of the bay until their carcasses, still dense with the memory of the closed, rich bayou in the marrow of the bones, settled to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico and turned to black silt on the ancient floor of the sea.

Despite the love that the twins have for their hometown, the antagonisms of U.S. racial and class politics that were codified in the landscape through the Wolf River metaphor

are reinforced at its conclusion. Images of scars, decay, and death close a novel about two young boys. Textually, the boys are even explicitly linked to fish, “The fissures across Joshua’s hands felt like fish gills...” (215). Brian Railsback reads this conclusion pessimistically, writing, “As tough as the people of Bois Sauvage may seem, an overwhelming tide is coming their way. The future, ever dim, is becoming darker” (189). While *Bleeds* only offhandedly refers to Hurricane Katrina, Ward’s next text will take confront it more centrally. Still, the storm backgrounds the textual world that Ward begins to build in *Where the Line Bleeds*.

Lastly, drugs and substance abuse focalize the text and often drive the plot forward. The reality of substance abuse arises throughout Ward’s fictions. She discusses her own alcohol abuse, and theorizes what motivates such behavior within her community: “We’d gone crazy... We’d lost three friends by then, and we were so green we couldn’t reconcile our youth with the fact that we were dying, so we drank and smoked and did other things, because these things allowed us the illusion that our youth might save us...” (*Reaped*, 64). Joshua and Christophe drink and smoke frequently throughout the novel, and although the first chapters associate the habit with celebration (the night before graduation) and teenage fun (swimming at the bridge), as the story progresses the drinking and smoking occur during moments of tension and conflict (after Christophe fails to get a job call back, when Joshua learns of Christophe’s drug dealing, upon seeing their substance abusive father, etc.).

The other side of the coin is the selling of substances in *Where the Line Bleeds*. The main conflict arises from Christophe’s decision to start dealing, which he does as a direct result of not being able to secure a traditional job. While Christophe never ventures past marijuana, other side characters who also sell drugs end up consumed by crack and

cocaine addictions themselves. In *Reaped*, Ward writes: “They sold dope between jobs until they could find more work as a convenience store clerk or a janitor or a landscaper. This was like walking into a storm surge: a cycle of futility” (121). Note again the diction that signifies Hurricane Katrina through “storm surge”. Cyclical poverty metaphorically mirrors the force of nature that Katrina represents: violent, engulfing, partially man-made and partially natural disaster.

While undercelebrated in comparison to her other works, *Where the Line Bleeds* launches the thematic directions that Ward continues to drive forward in her later texts. These themes include youth poverty, Katrina experience and trauma, substance abuse, and black Southern life. Stylistically, her debut novel introduces the narrative tendencies that Ward will further develop in her next two novels: centrally featuring a youth perspective, setting her story in the fictional Bois Sauvage, and operating on a polyperspectival narrative. Later, we will discuss how these structural decisions benefit Ward’s ability to uniquely story-tell. Also, by contextualizing the novel with her personal memoir, we understand that her literary journey begins from home. Ward’s fiction reflects her personal initiative to “say,” to bear witness, and describe her experience in a way that surpasses the communicative failings of statistics. As we move forward, we will continue to revisit all these Wardian aspects and observe how the author develops them in each successive work.

## CHAPTER II: *Salvage the Bones* and Reclaiming the Canon

### 2.1. Defining Wardian “Salvaging”

*Salvage the Bones* marks Ward’s mainstream acceptance, despite Ward’s relative obscurity at the time. The author won the National Book Award for her second novel, published by Bloomsbury in 2011. Of all Ward’s texts, *Salvage* has received the most critical attention from literary academia. Many articles focus on the Katrina narrative, while a smaller but still considerable amount analyze the figure of Medea in the novel. While both strands will be discussed, I will focus more on the latter. By featuring Greek mythology, Ward invokes Western literary tradition and rewrites a traditional narrative to include her character’s experience. I will primarily engage with Benjamin Eldon Stevens’ pointedly titled, “Medea in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*”. His article examines Ward’s use of literary iconography; part of my own objective is to link Ward within a preexisting yet expanding canon of authors who have clearly influenced her. The article will assist in drawing these connections within the text.

Compared to *Where the Line Bleeds*, Ward engages the Southern Gothic tradition more deeply in *Salvage the Bones*. While a landscape of decay existed within the former text, it was always counterbalanced with acknowledgements of the natural beauty of coastal Mississippi. In *Salvage*, the textual geography is littered with trash, mud, and eventually even carcasses. A large portion of the novel takes place in and around “the Pit”, an excavated site filled with runoff which the characters use as a swimming hole. Whereas images of Spanish moss decorated the final scene of *Where the Line Bleeds*, in *Salvage* it is compared to “the dust caked up around” the toilet (37).

The main character, fifteen-year-old Esch, learns she is pregnant and that the father, Manny, wants nothing to do with her besides occasional sex. Her role as an

unrequited lover continues within the Gothic fashion. Speaking on “the strong affinity” between the “American psyche and the gothic romance”, Toni Morrison argues that this proclivity reflects “Americans’ fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal” (*Playing in the Dark*, 36-7). For Esch, this fear is affirmed by reality on all fronts. All of her intersectional identities push her into a state of radical exclusion: black, female, poor, child. Her teenage pregnancy compounds this. Multiple episodes feature Esch in the bathroom as she assesses her ability to disguise her growing maternal body. Living with all males, she does not want any of them to “see until none of us have any choices about what can be seen, what can be avoided, what is blind, and what will turn to stone” (88). This specific instance highlights the fear of powerlessness that Morrison identifies in the Gothic romance tradition, into which Ward firmly enters with *Salvage*.

The above quotation also invokes the Medean myth, through which Esch redefines her identity. Emily Bernard’s hypothesis that the “equation of writing and regeneration is fundamental in black American experience” is demonstrated through Esch’s identification with and subsequent recasting of the Greek myth that she reads out of Edith Hamilton’s well-known *Mythology* (xiv). Indeed, Hamilton’s collection is part of her summer reading and, as John Guillory illustrated, the syllabus and the canon share a deep relationship. Thus, Esch’s redefining of the canonical work represents the individual struggle of a young, imaginative black girl trying to interpret and apply a work of the Western literary canon.

Benjamin Eldon Stevens examines this reclamation in one of the more remarkable analyses of *Salvage* and, more widely, Ward’s fiction. His essay explores Esch’s

identification with Medea as a source of knowledge about desire and motherhood. Initially, she links herself closely to Medea's unbalanced relationship with Jason as analogous to her relationship with Manny. The textual link between Esch and Medea is explicit, yet avoids heavy-handedness:

“Here is someone that I recognize. When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by my throat. I can see her. Medea sneaks Jason things to help him: ointments to make him invincible, secrets in rocks. She has magic, can bend the natural to the unnatural. But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her.” (38)

The metaphor of a “young pine in a hard wind” follows in the Wardian style of texturing her stories with language that evokes the image of the hurricane/Katrina. Here, it is linked with Esch's femininity, although later on Katrina will inform her conception of maternity.

Figures of maternity appear through several characters. While we have already noted Katrina and Medea, the first two that appear are Esch's late mother, Mama, whose memory appears frequently throughout the pages, and China the pit bull. *Salvage* begins with China giving birth to a litter of puppies that Skeetah, Esch's brother, desires to raise, sell, and sometimes fight. The first line reads, “China's turned on herself” (1).

Immediately, maternity is presented as a self-infliction, a violence, a suffering. However, the second paragraph begins, “What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior”. Thus, the text sets two competing images of maternity with which Esch must psychologically grapple. The first, violent conception is present through China, Medea, and Katrina. The second, more amicable version of motherhood is absent and displaced through Esch's own loss of Mama.

Mama's absence is the loss that Esch seeks to recuperate through the rewritten narratives that she creates for herself. Stevens links this recuperation with the titular term, *salvage*, defining it as "an act of recuperation after the fact that is at once richly creative and a reflection of impoverished necessity". So, while Esch identifies herself with Medea, her salvaging of the narrative avoids the infanticide of the original myth. Stevens notes that China also kills one of her own puppies, further associating motherhood with death and violence. He contrasts this with the language that Esch describes Katrina with at the novel's conclusion:

"I will tie the glass and 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. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage."

First, this paragraph begins with Esch stating her desire to "tell the story of Katrina", which she then goes on to do. This reiteration is itself an authorial moment, a moment of rewriting. The explicit mention of the Greeks links Katrina with Medea and the "blind puppies" point toward China. Stevens argues that since Katrina is a mother that leaves her children alive, unlike China and Medea, this represents a progressive development in the text's figuration of motherhood:

Such abandonment surely constitutes a kind of violence, as Ward herself emphasizes in *Salvage and Reaped*, and in seeking to specify the difference we must avoid merely splitting hairs. But *Salvage* suggests that the difference

between killing and abandonment is crucial: killing is more final—and in the Medea story, more selfish?—while abandonment, however awful, leaves open the possibility of recuperation and recovery: precisely, of salvage. (173)

While Stevens notes the life-affirming progression that Esch's salvaging represents, he does not fully explore the weight of her decisions. Indeed, she boldly states in the final line: "She [China] will know I am a mother", signifying that not only has Esch decided against infanticide but also the abandonment that Katrina and, in a much different and less violent way, her own mother place upon her (258).

Esch's salvaging resolves the Gothic conflict described earlier by Morrison by asserting agency in the face of helplessness. Stevens highlights an important textual repetition between Esch and China, the former wondering about her child, "Will I keep it safe? If I could speak to this storm, spell it harmless like Medea, would this baby...maybe, hear?" (219) Stevens notes that not only does this foreshadow the concluding line, that China "will know" Esch is a mother, but also that this mirrors her figuration of China after the pitbull mother kills one of her own puppies: "If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: Is this what motherhood is?" (130) That Esch eventually does affirm that China will know she is a mother shows a change from the subjunctive doubt of *if* to the deontic necessity of the modal *will*.

The radical change to a confident agency arrives from Esch's salvaging of the Medean myth. Through her reading, she is foremost able to link herself to an idea of motherhood with which she identifies. As previously noted, she understands her relationship with Manny through Medea and Jason's relationship. Further, she links other maternal figures to Medea, like China and Katrina, as well as her brother and her child to Jason, "If it is a boy, I will name it after Skeetah. *Jason*. Jason Aldon Batiste" (248).

Through these applications, Esch begins to modify the Medea narrative to her own individual desires. She rejects the myth's fratricide, obviously not wishing to imitate Medea when she "kills her brother" and "chops him into bits"; it is this part where she finds herself "stuck in the middle" and wishes to "get away from her, from the smell of Manny still on me a night and morning afterward" (154). As Esch notes, "for Medea, love makes help turn wrong".

Esch's "salvaging" is precisely these receptions and rejections. "The author says that there are a couple of different versions of how it happened", and Esch recognizes this multiplicity as an indication that her own version contains possibility and potential. Her ultimate disavowal of maternity as violence and abandonment reflects the radical creativity and agency that salvaging provides for young girl caught in the clutches of socioeconomic maladies. Esch salvages her own story and identity from the canonical Greek myth, thus claiming a piece of it for her own.

## **2.2 *Beloved* and Subverting Language**

Here, we shall discuss the literary and textual relationship between Jesmyn Ward and Toni Morrison. Morrison's literary fame already positions her as a canonical figure in several traditions. Her recent passing will likely spur even more critical attention to her oeuvre, which has already received a high volume in the author's accomplished lifetime. Since the secondary critical readings about Ward's fiction are comparatively smaller, the link between the two has been underappreciated. When discussed, it is often as an aside. In this section, we will draw textual connections between their works, as well as discuss the similar challenges that both writers face as black female American novelists.

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison passed away August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Her widely acclaimed works earned her the Nobel Prize for Literature and several other notable awards. Naturally, her death was deeply felt by the literary world, amongst professionals and casual readers alike. A few days after her passing, the New York Times published an opinion article by Jesmyn Ward where the author recounted her personal relationship with the older writer's works. Despite never directly meeting Morrison, it is clear that her fiction weighed heavily in Ward's own construction of characters:

Here were women doing the best they could with what they'd been given. Here were children given agency and soul and room on the page to grapple with both. Here was language as jarring as baby venom, crafted to disrupt, to immerse, to reveal. Here was poetry and tension and vivid, evocative imagery. Here were men named Paul D, women named Baby Suggs, twins to folks I knew in my little rural Southern community, which was awash with pseudonyms: Fat Shark, Boochie, Weenie, and Dot. In short, here was home.

Ward's summarization of Morrison's writing as home reflects her personal recognition of the stories told. She remembers reading the Bible early on in her life, then graduating to other texts as she developed her reading skills as a child. Yet, none of these works seemed to speak for her and she awaited "a word that would sound out of the wilderness to declare that it was speaking to me, for me, within me".

Ward found this word in *Beloved*. As she read more of Morrison's works, she discovered stories about people who were generally ignored and thus, she felt that she had found stories that were real. In these stories, she heard an "absolute narrative presence that communicated this: *You are worthy to be seen. You are worthy to be heard. You are worthy to be sat with, to be walked beside. Even in your quietest moments, you*

*are worthy of witness*". Ward's longing for this proof of witness mirrors her own desire to write from a place of witness herself, as she most clearly states in *Reaped*. Thus, the pivotal inspiration to write, by Ward's own account, is deeply influenced by Toni Morrison.

Morrison's *Beloved* centers around Sethe, a character inspired by the historical Margaret Garner who decided to kill her own child rather than return it to slavery. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel ventures into the psychology of this marginalized woman, who tries to continue living after her traumas. Already, the theme of infanticide brings us back to *Salvage*. Stevens briefly mentions the textual connections between Esch and Sethe. Speaking of Manny and how she believes that their relationship was different from her other sexual partners, Esch states that "I was beloved" (16). Yet, Esch and Sethe inhabit completely different worlds, despite facing a similar decision. In the historical context of slavery, Sethe's infanticide is often read as an act of agency and radical opposition to her oppressed situation. Hence, Stevens cites Tracy Walters' interpretation of Sethe as "re-imagin[ing] what precipitates [the] decision to commit infanticide": "Medea is recast not as the malicious wife who mercilessly kills her children, but as a victimized slave who desperately tries to protect her brood" (Walters 107/9). This decision, however, literally haunts her. The supernatural character of *Beloved* appears and causes emotional and physical chaos within Sethe's home, 124. The outer community, comprised of other former slaves, also marginalizes and alienates Sethe despite the shared oppression for their blackness.

In contrast, we have just read Esch's decision to not kill her child as another act of agency. Rather than simply agreeing that different things are different, we can find how both of these mothers achieve their agency through similar means. For both Esch and

Sethe, the path to reclaiming their selfhood arrives through the creative act of salvaging. To understand how Sethe “salvages” herself, we must take a closer look at how language functions, especially from the standpoint of the marginalized identity that she occupies.

Language structures subjectivity. Hence, the subjugated body also encounters subjugation through language. The black citizen navigates a language that is not her or his own. I am not merely speaking of the national tongue (although American English as a linguistic system prescribes whiteness) but also of the cultural code that breathes life into the concept of America. This cultural code is linguistic inasmuch that it employs signs and narratives, and it relies on a logic — or a grammar, if you will. These two modes of American language, the official language and the cultural code, privilege whiteness and efface blackness. French linguist and philosopher Jacques Derrida states “there’s no racism without a language” (331); African-American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. asks, “How can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?”; the alleged absence of an African history or literary discourse supported the racist ideology of the white hegemony that oppressed the enslaved black people in America (Introduction, 12). The relationship between racism and language is symbiotic.

Violence is one mode of language as a function. This is the violence that Toni Morrison spoke of during her 1993 Nobel Lecture, this “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge”. As we shall see, Morrison illustrates in her fiction how language may be used to oppress, police, and limit. Henceforth, what I refer to as “American Language” should be considered as within this mode. What I mean by American language is twofold. First, I refer to the official or national language of the United States

that many linguists refer to as Standard or Mainstream American English. These same linguists may be inclined to describe this language as a unicorn. Standard American English and unicorns share the characteristic of not just being culturally recognizable and easily reproducible, but also of being imaginary. In fact, it is the conjunction of these two characteristics that justifies the comparison. Despite the knowledge that a unicorn is imaginary, “your description of a unicorn would be a great deal like everyone else’s, because the concept of a unicorn is part of our shared cultural heritage”, as Rosina Lippi-Green explains (57). And while neither Standard American English nor unicorns typically instill fear in the average human heart, it turns out that the former presents a serious threat since, unlike a unicorn, not everyone recognizes or fully grasps that language is, indeed, imaginary.

This “shared cultural heritage” brings me to the second aspect of our term American Language. It manifests as “American culture” through the (not necessarily linguistic) signs that we are all able to read given our positionality within this culture. This positionality allows certain individuals to see certain signs that others may not see given their different positioning. American Language is the cultural coding that provides metanarrative, identity, and ideology; it requires and reinforces privilege and power. Both dimensions of this definition are interrelated and codependent.

Violence is at the very foundation of language. Given the limits of perception, we can never ordinarily step out of our subjective positioning. It is from this perspectival finitude that we also exist within and deploy language. The speaking subject, unable to step out from their own limited positioning, can only conceive as another— rather, the other — as an alter-ego. Analyzing Jacques Derrida’s writing on the subject, Rick Parrish describes the condition of language and subjective limitation:

According to Derrida, discourse is always violent to some extent because in making a universally iterable claim one always does violence to another by denying that other as a source of meaning...Discourse is increasingly violent to the extent that it '*reduces* the other' to a mere object or attribute of one's own life. ("Derrida's Economy of Violence")

This condition is made "inescapable" if we accept the proposition that any "articulation requires a positioning by those within discourse" and that "any claim — any discursive position — is a universal claim", simply given that something has been articulated at all. This most basic aspect of violence underpins all of language. Sociohistorical contingencies further complicate the violence by inhabiting the context within a specific language (like American Language) that it must function in. However, rather than making any attempt to reach across the subjective divide of experience, the white ideology of racism has sought to ignore and erase the existence of the black other. This level of violence is more overt, more physical, and more horrible than the abstract and theoretical violence that Derrida describes. And yet, these two realities necessarily overlap.

As a writer, Toni Morrison "thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences", and it is through language that one is trying to assert identity while simultaneously negotiating that identity within the bounds set by the social ("Nobel Lecture"). The coercive power of American Language is effective, elusive, and everywhere — the primary struggle of the writer, according to Morrison's Nobel lecture, is to "[shift] attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised", i.e. language itself. For the black author, achieving this awareness quickly reveals that American Language has sought to silence their identity throughout

history. Since this silencing has often been successful, the presence of the black author “marks as well an absence because ‘black’ has in Western European discourse long signified ‘blank’” (Perez-Torres, 179).

With this knowledge, Morrison understands that she is not writing in a language that is entirely her own and that seeks to forget her identity into total absence. Yet she also wishes to use American Language to her benefit, to shift the power, so that she can participate in the production of a black literature. She expresses these recognitions in the preface to *Beloved*, writing, “the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive...To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way” (xix). To hear these denials of language in the preface of a novel seems nearly nonsensical at first; how does an author who wants to get language out of the way end up writing a novel? Yet, Morrison’s meaning becomes clearer as the plot unfolds.

Knowing that blackness is already an absence in American Language, *Beloved* structures itself around absence rather than presence. The first page tells of characters who are already dead and/or gone and yet exercise significant influence throughout the story. Likewise, the spiteful ghost of 124 becomes quickly apparent. As Rafael Perez-Torres notes, the ghost epitomizes the collapsing binary of absence/presence: “Readers are placed generationally in a space that floats somewhere between an absent past and an absent future...Into this static fictional present a ghostly past perpetually attempts to insert itself” (181). Much information and plot developments arrive through memories, again making present events that are temporally absent. Memory in *Beloved* manifests as something both external and internal. Sethe’s explanation of “rememory” denotes their externality, as she says, “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” (43). Yet Denver, her child, feels her own exclusion from Sethe and Paul D’s memories of Sweet Home: “They were a twosome, saying ‘Your daddy’ and ‘Sweet Home’ in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her...that her own father’s absence was not hers” (15).

Similar to how American Language excludes blackness, Denver feels kept out of Sethe and Paul D’s narratives of the past, even though they implicate her own personal history through her absent father. That the negated presence can be “owned” also reflects the social power dynamic that American Language sustains.

Morrison mimics American Language and ideology elsewhere in *Beloved*, even at its most crucial scenes. While the novel certainly lacks a clear center, one of the most important moments – and another example of absence – is Sethe’s Medean act of infanticide. While this event is indirectly mentioned multiple times, it most clearly manifests at two points, both of which utilize absence as presence. Shockingly, Morrison launches us into the focal point of the white master for the first sustained description of the traumatic event. At no other point in the novel do we find ourselves looking out of white eyes, except for this scene. That we, the reader, occupy this perspective for the most traumatic event of narrative is clearly indicative of importance. As readers, we are likely to have built up some sympathy for Sethe by this point – at the very least, we have more sympathy for her than for her white masters. Yet by positioning us in the white gaze, we occupy a non-sympathetic perspective that does not recognize humanity within blackness. Instead, blackness is portrayed as animalistic and compared to “a snake or a bear” or described as “making low, cat noises” (174). Through this structuring, the narrative effaces black subjectivity at its most traumatic and complex moment.

While the author's intentions may be unknowable or unnecessary to our reading, considering the possibilities of why Morrison would have chosen this perspective is insightful. By turning back to the preface and her Nobel lecture, we can compare those statements with the narrative strategy displayed in *Beloved*. By locating the perspective in the white master position, Morrison declines an attempt to reproduce the subjective experience of not just Sethe but also of anyone who might be sympathetic, like Baby Suggs. This can be read as a gesture of respect for the true narrative of the historical Margaret Garner, suggesting that somehow (linguistically) reproducing the event is not only disrespectful but also precisely because doing such always and already fails to fully represent the suffering. No writer could truly convey the horror and yet by absenting it, the emotional weight still affects the reader. As quoted earlier, Morrison states her intentions to get language out of the way in the preface to the novel. In her Nobel lecture, she provides a similar sentiment:

It is the deference that moves her [the writer], that recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all...Nor should it... Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war...Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so...Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.

Rather than assuming a Manifest Destiny attitude toward writing, Morrison writes with artistic restraint and respectful humility. For Morrison, language is not an infinite expansion outward but inward; language is limited but the possibility within those limitations is without bound. Thus, by refusing to confine the traumatic event within American Language, Morrison effectively writes subjectivity through its absence.

Language again fails to fully reproduce the event when Paul D confronts Sethe about the newspaper clipping given to him by Stamp Paid. He describes Sethe as

“spinning” so much that it “made him dizzy”, and that she was “[c]ircling him the way she was circling the subject” (187-188). Unlike the newspaper or the white abolitionist movement that appropriated her gruesome story, Sethe is unable to limit her trauma within the confines of not just narrative, but a narrative built by American Language. Paul D, himself unable to recognize this, can only understand through his conversation with Stamp Paid and the newspaper clipping, the latter significant since it is a literal inscription of the event thus showing that the material word always fails to represent the reality of experience.

Perez-Torres reads *Beloved* in a postmodern context and illustrates how the novel suggests a re-envisioning of narrative technique, one that is useful for marginalized writers and people. Necessarily, this re-envisioning reflects a resistance: “The novel places into play an aesthetically decentered novel with a historically dispossessed constituency to re-envision the relationship between storytelling and power...The novel deploys a narrative pastiche in order to contest *history as a master narrative*” (emphasis added, 194). History as metanarrative represents another function and manifestation of American Language. Some characters like Sixo outright reject using American Language – we learn through Paul D that “he stopped speaking English because there was no future in it” (30). Yet abstaining from engaging the problem does not solve it. Instead, *Beloved* demonstrates how one can exist within American Language while refusing to fall to its demands. “[By] ambiguously suggesting *Beloved*’s story should neither be forgotten nor remembered” in the novel’s conclusion, Morrison is effectively pitting language against itself, negating its use by using it (Perez-Torres, 181). The paradox occurs again and again throughout the novel through “the motif of absence and presence”, and reflects the

resistance to American Language that Morrison executes so brilliantly. This postmodern re-envisioning of American Language significantly mirrors Ward's strategy of salvaging.

### 2.3. Agency in *Salvage* and *Beloved*

On its face, Esch's life seems invariably different from Sethe's aside from some identity labels. Indeed, their differences do matter and contribute to the vastly different outcomes each face. Most importantly, they both learn to salvage. Sethe's salvaging involves the reclamation of her agency through the narrativization of her trauma, which the text of *Beloved* mirrors in style. Her salvaging involves rejecting the American Language that has violated her and creating new ways to describe her life. While Esch does not reject the American Language that surrounds her, she rewrites the narrative that it passes down on her. In this way, both characters assert agency and identity through narrating their own story, despite the attempts of others to do it for them.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's source of trauma and helplessness are much more material and present: the institution of slavery is palpably present and certain characters like Schoolteacher and the rest of the community threaten her wellbeing. For Esch, she struggles against something more intangible that is not embodied within a specific character. Esch struggles against the same dark Wolf that stalks the characters of *Where the Line Bleeds* and hunts the men in *Reaped*. The only white characters in *Salvage* are the owners of the farm that Skeetah steals Ivomac from, and they are extremely peripheral. However, the life and death of the puppies, and by proxy Skeetah's financial possibilities, are contingent on acquiring something that belongs to them. Abigail Manzella comments on the trace of racial oppression in *Salvage*:

The history of slavery remains always at the periphery of this family's reaction to their environment. For instance, the book's very first mention of the storm says that "they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses" (4) with the knowledge that previous confinements for the enslaved now demonstrate a new generation of wealth that can afford to have guesthouses. (*Migrating Fictions*, 192)

Of course, the novel's sociopolitical context of Katrina places systemic racism in the very fabric of the story's setting. The radio issuance of mandatory evacuation before the storm frames the discordance between Western conceptions of individual responsibility and the reality of migratory constraints for under-resourced communities: "*If you choose to stay in your house and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions*" (217). Commenting on this scene, Manzella writes, "This attribution of blame highlights how different social and racial groups perceive 'agency,' which white middle-class people generally define as independent control over the environment, while black working-class people emphasize interdependence and resilience" (193). Ward's story of the Batiste family shows that they were not passive, as real-life stereotypes posited, but rather industrious in their preparation to weather the storm. Racism in *Salvage* is palpable without being present.

*Beloved* itself is an act of salvaging. Rather than leaving the history of Margaret Garner to nonfictional recordings, Morrison takes the risk of illustrating the gruesome story – the delicacy with which she does so attests to her mastery. In discussing the archival scholarship surrounding the slave trade, Jennifer L. Morgan writes, "a simple turn to the archive will not resolve these questions... we must tell stories, we must engage in the project of mounting counter-histories of slavery and enslavement, and we

must navigate the ethics of historical representation” (186). *Beloved* presents this narrative engagement with history. Morrison’s progression from archival knowledge to the emotional truth of fiction reflects the same spirit with which Jesmyn Ward writes beyond the statistics of black Southern poverty. Both authors depict black mothers who face severe threats to their agency given their historical context and respond with self-authorizing strategies of narrativization.

I expect the literature analyzing Morrison and Ward together will expand, especially as the latter continues to publish. If you Google search the pair, you find multiple pages that quote Betsy Burton, who touts Ward as “the new Toni Morrison.” However, just as the critical sphere benefits from looking deeper into characterizations of Morrison and Ward as “the next Faulkner,” there is much to be gained from more insightful examinations of the two female authors. Ward will continue to write in an evolving social context, and thus her works will compound upon what Morrison has established, as they already have.

## Chapter 3: *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and the Chorus of Predecessors

### 3.1. Plot Analysis of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Six years after winning the National Book Award for *Salvage*, Jesmyn Ward earns the title a second time with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. With her reputation already established in the literary world, it is impressive that she managed to surpass the already high expectations with her third novel. Through creative narrative and stylistic decisions, Ward continues to focus on the themes that guide her previous work like Southern poverty, substance abuse, family, blackness, and motherhood. Her engagement with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* creates a space for the author to expand upon the canonical writer's own literary innovations. Thus, Ward tells stories that have been largely untold through frameworks that feel both familiar and fresh. In this chapter, we shall examine exactly how *Sing, Unburied, Sing* refigures the Faulknerian intertext. Furthermore, we will return in depth to the late Ernest Gaines, another black Southern writer who grappled with Faulkner's influence. John Wharton Lowe's essay, "From Yoknapatawpha County to St. Raphael Parish" will offer profound insight into this relationship and provide analysis to Ward by proxy. While Faulkner provides a common antecedent to the two writers, they both importantly transform his narrative techniques in similar ways that reflects a progression from modernist themes of alienation.

Finally, we shall return to Morrison and Faulkner's textual relationship to demonstrate how the former and Ward each navigate comparisons to the white male author. In turn, we shall also see how Ward and Morrison approach portrayals of community differently. My argument will consider *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, two of Morrison's most well-known and widely read texts, as significant statements on community. By analyzing *Sing* and bearing in mind our previous analysis of Ward's other

texts, we shall continue the project of last chapter and trace how the two authors differentiate from each other, despite the strong relationship of influence. As we reach the current conclusion of Ward's fiction, we shall see in total how she relates to broader literary discourses. With *Sing* presenting a culmination of Ward's literary strategies, her placement among these traditions will be fully illuminated through this analysis.

Like all of Ward's novels, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* centers around a family in the South. Once again, we return to Bois Sauvage, Ward's intertextual town. However, unlike *Bleeds* and *Salvage*, previous characters do not appear in this text. In those novels, Skeetah progressed from first being a background character to occupying a major side character role in *Salvage*; in *Sing*, each character is entirely new to even the returning reader and, thus, the family seems simultaneously removed and entrenched in what Bois Sauvage represents. The family struggles with similar plights that we have seen within the community: poverty, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and systemic racism. *Sing* intensifies the conflict that each category presents to the characters. Poverty manifests through malnourished children; substance abuse progresses from weed and cocaine to meth; teen pregnancy becomes single motherhood; systemic racism materializes in an infamous prison institution. Thus, while the family does not interact with any previous characters, their intertextual engagement with Bois Sauvage is clear.

The plot begins with Jojo, who turns thirteen at the start of the novel. Jojo accompanies his maternal grandfather Pop, with whom he lives, to slaughter a goat on their small farm. The first paragraph begins with him telling the reader, "I like to think I know what death is" and ends with "Today's my birthday" (1). Immediately, death, life, and youth are connected. This thematic triad recalls an observation by Ward in her memoir,

The land that the community park is built on, I recently learned, is designated to be used as a burial site so that the graveyard can expand as we die; one day our graves will swallow up our playground...In the end, our lives are our deaths.

Instinctually C.J. knew this. I have no words. (*Reaped*, 128)

Like her other novels, *Sing* represents Ward's struggle to find the words to describe the condition she sees afflicting her community. Also similar to her previous works, Ward locates narrative perspective in a young teenager. As such, all of these texts can be read as *bildungsroman*. These narrators get younger with each text; Christophe and Joshua are recent high school graduates, Esch is fifteen years old, and Jojo is only thirteen. Like Christophe and Joshua, Jojo feels he must learn to be a man, particularly to prove to Pop that he's "earned these thirteen years" (1). Thus, *Sing* focuses on a young boy's induction into self-awareness of his identity.

Jojo lives with Pop, his three-year old sister Kayla, his dying grandmother Mam, and his mother Leonie. Jojo describes Leonie as "mean" and expresses an extreme alienation from his mother: "Sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I'll ever understand Leonie" (25). Likewise, he feels alienated from Michael, his white father, who's distance is physically reinforced: "Back then I still called Michael Pop...Before the police took him away three years ago, before Kayla was born" (7). In this respect, Jojo's character shows similarities to Christophe and Joshua, who were also neglected by their parents and shared the strongest familiar bond with their grandparent(s). Whereas in *Bleeds*, Ma-mee's physical deterioration had only recently begun, *Sing* begins with Mam already in her twilight, as "the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the sun and the air do water oaks" (1). By likening Mam's

declining health to the decaying natural world, Ward quickly reintroduces us into her Southern gothic world.

After several pages from Jojo's perspective, the text shifts to Leonie's narration. While Jojo's attitude toward his mother initially sides the reader against her, relocating to her perspective quickly complicates her character. She conveys love and guilt side by side:

I'd felt so happy when I got the phone call, when I heard Michael's voice saying words I'd imagined him saying for months, for years, so happy that my insides felt like a full ditch ridden with a thousand tadpoles. But when I left, Jojo looked up from where he sat with Pop in the living room watching some hunting show, and for a flash, the cast of his face, the way his features folded, looked like Michael after one of our worst fights. Disappointed. Grave at my leaving. And I couldn't shake it. (33)

For Leonie, her romance with Michael is perpetually bound with a sense of guilt and betrayal of family since, as we learn, Michael's cousin is responsible for murdering her brother, Given. Her solution to these painful emotions is drugs; immediately after the above quote, Leonie snorts a line of cocaine, "A clean burning shot through my bones, and then I forgot". In *Bleeds*, marijuana initially signified juvenile fun and only later became associated with "forgetting." In *Sing*, substance abuse is immediately introduced with forgetting and the actual abused substance abandons the connotations of triviality. Even though it seems straightforward to state that cocaine addiction is much more threatening than marijuana dependency, Ward herself reinforces the particularity of cocaine in her personal experience:

There is a stigma associated with coke among the young in De Lisle and Pass Christian because it is too close a cousin to crack. Kids will take shots of white strong liquor, they will smoke weed wrapped in thick blunts, they will even take Ecstasy or prescription pain pills, but they will not casually pull out an eight-ball of coke and push it across the table at a house party. Why? Because the specter of the cousin or the uncle or aunt or the mother or father who couldn't stop partying, whose teeth are burned brown from the pipe, sits next to them at that table.

*(Reaped, 34)*

While Leonie perhaps represents the generation that Ward speaks of, she deals with a different drug-influenced specter. "I see Given-not-Given whenever I'm high," she states and indeed, once she first snorts a line he appears shortly after, silent and ghostly (39). Leonie's naming of the reoccurring spectre as "Given-not-Given" suggests presence and absence in the text's structure of forgetting and memory. Ward contains this structure within the magical realist elements of the story, for Mam is able to "see" certain things and suggests that Leonie may be able to as well. This ability is described through natural language. As Mam says, "I think it runs in the blood like silt in river water...Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees" (40); while "sunk trees" suggest decay, the metaphor of water conveys a power that was absent in the descriptions of Mam by Jojo, who also shares this "seeing" ability. Thus, the ability to "see" these specters is genetically passed down through generations.

Although the text primarily focalizes in Jojo and Leonie's perspective, other characters receive narrative agency as well. Some sections are formally narrated by Richie, the ghost of a Parchman prisoner that Pop knew during his own time there. Pop himself is an informal narrator, as Jojo recalls him sharing memories, typically about

Parchman, in extended italicized sections. The narrative shifting in *Sing* creates a polyperspectival text which structurally does not privilege one voice over another, each equal in importance, even when these voices conflict as they do with Jojo and Leonie.

The trip to Parchman prison presents three discrete episodes of racial violence that focus on systemic racism with a directness previously not attempted by Ward. Jojo, Kayla, Leonie, and her friend Misty go to pick up Michael upon his release from prison. Richie has been “trapped” at Parchman until Jojo arrives – who is able to see Richie – and follows them back to their home. Through Richie and Pop’s recollections, we learn of the violently racist history at Parchman prison that exploited the mass incarceration of blacks for free labor. Later, we learn that Pop actually kills Richie out of fear that the younger man will eventually be falsely accused and lynched. Furthermore, the text’s portrayal of Parchman prison is historically based on its real-life counterpart, Mississippi State Prison (See Grabenstein, “Inside Mississippi’s notorious Parchman prison”). Thus, Ward’s linking of institutional violence and oppression to personal trauma gains further resonance in this context.

After retrieving Michael, the family turns back home. On the way, they stop at the residence of Michael’s lawyer, Al, for a night. Leonie and Michael smoke meth with Al and take a sizeable portion with them to bring home. As they drive back, they are pulled over by a police officer and Leonie eats the meth to hide it. Nonetheless, the officer handcuffs Michael and Leonie – he also arrests Jojo and even draws his gun on the thirteen-year old. Eventually, the officer lets them go. This scene captures the real violence that afflicts black children like Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old who was shot and killed by police who mistakenly took the boy’s toy gun for a real firearm. Tamir’s death is a fatal outcome of the systemic racism that a then-growing Black Lives Matter

movement protests against at a national level. While the impact of BLM will be discussed in the next chapter, it is clear that deaths like Tamir's inform this scene. Jojo's search to understand what it means to be a man coincides with the police officer's labeling him as a possible threat.

The material reality of systemic racism is again illustrated when the family goes to visit Michael's parents, Maggie and Big Joseph. Joseph is openly racist and vehemently opposes his son's life with Leonie, who he calls "a nigger bitch" in front of his grandchildren when they visit (208). Leonie provides the narration for their visit and recalls that this is only the second time she's heard Big Joseph's voice, the first time being "in the courtroom, but he didn't mean anything to me then, beyond being the uncle of a boy who shot my brother" (204). Leonie's dismissal of her relation to someone involved with the unpunished murder of her brother clearly contrasts with Big Joseph's deep hatred of her and Michael's interracial relationship; speaking about Jojo and Kayla, Joseph says, "Hell, they half of her...All bad blood. Fuck the skin" (207). Whereas whiteness had been peripheral in *Salvage*, Ward places it much closer to the center in *Sing*. Notably, however, despite the text's polyperspectival shifts, narrative agency is never given to the white characters and their subjectivities are solely mediated through dialogue.

The death of Mam is the climax of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The family gathers in her room as she passes with the ghosts of Given and Richie also in attendance. Mam asks Leonie to recite a litany to ensure she passes safely into the afterlife; yet the chaos of the scene suggests that the litany doubles as an exorcism: "My [Leonie's] crying and Mama's entreaties and Michaela's wailing and Given's shouting fill the room like a flood, and it must have been as loud outside as it is in here, because Jojo runs in to stand at my elbow

and Pop's at the door" (267). Ward evokes the pandemonium stylistically, moving swiftly from paragraphs filled with polysyndeton to rapid fire dialogue that frantically disrupts Leonie's internal narration.

While Given's ghost seems to disappear with Mam's death, Richie's remains into the text's denouement. Furthermore, Jojo witnesses even more ghosts in a tree at the edge of their property:

[Richie] ascends the tree like the white snake. He undulates along the trunk, to the branches, where rolls out along one, again in a recline. 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. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people. 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 idle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe.* (Author's italics, 283)

The stream of trauma that the ghosts communicate to Jojo attests to the history of racial violence that haunts the text. Indeed, each instance of haunting figures the living past in a different way. Given represents the most personal, and haunts Leonie specifically when she is trying to forget through substance abuse. While he manifests as a sign of her

personal trauma, his death is also couched in racially motivated violence. Richie focalizes racial trauma from a more immediate history through his associations with Pop and Parchman. He is also a mirror to Jojo; both are young black boys who are marginalized by society and face institutional violence on account of their skin – it is no coincidence that Richie’s ghost appears shortly before the police officer brutalizes Jojo.

Finally, the tree of ghosts symbolizes a collective and generational violence. Their stories are largely lost to history and resist narrativization (“None of them reveal their deaths”), yet their suffering is still presently palpable. Indeed, some of the descriptions of violence carry weight in our current context; “*I put my hands up and he shot me eight times*” suggests the contemporary killings of unarmed black men, women, and children and the line “*I couldn’t breathe*” recalls the death of Eric Garner, whose dying statement “I can’t breathe” became symbolic for the Black Lives Matter movement. The weight and urgency that *Sing* conveys is illuminated by looking at Ward’s publication timeline. *Reaped* was published in 2013, where she states her desire to “say” and bear witness to the material effects of systemic racism – that same year, the Black Lives Matter organization began in earnest. Four years later and we have *Sing*, a text that illustrates the past’s effect on the present through literal hauntings, individualized racism, and the material manifestations of structural oppression.

### **3.2. Differentiating from Faulkner: Ward and Ernest J. Gaines**

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Jesmyn Ward discusses how she “was thinking about *As I Lay Dying* a lot” during the writing of *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*. She goes on to say, “I love that novel, and I love the way, in part, that it’s about this family’s trip through Mississippi...So it’s [*Sing*’s] a novel about a journey, but it’s also very specific

to that time and to that place, and to Mississippi”); she also grounds Faulkner’s book as an inspiration for her polyperspectival shifts. Even if we are wary of committing any crimes of intentional fallacy, the text supports this connection, as we shall see. By examining this connection, we shall also see how Ward’s novel is markedly different and why this difference is important – *Sing*’s differentiation from *As I Lay Dying* is reflective of the specificity that Ward notes in her interview. By reading Ward and Faulkner in this manner, we can avoid a conventional reading that hoists Faulkner as the primordial father (replete with all the patriarchal and racial connotations that ought to carry) and instead study how *Sing* revises the modernist text and innovates discourse through differentiation.

For the reader familiar with Faulkner, it is difficult not to quickly compare the two. Both Mississippi writers, the two focus on life at the margins through illustrations of poverty, rural families, alienation, and race. Structurally, Ward fully engages with Faulknerian style through the perspectival shifts, the family road trip format, and the intertextual fictional settings. Faulkner’s famous line, “The past is never dead...It’s not even past” summarizes Ward’s magical realist use of ghosts in *Sing*. Within the context of African-American history, this concept can deeply resonate; however, this transferal is not automatic. Ellen O’Connell Whittet notes how Faulkner’s past-present dynamic differs in function from Ward’s own figuration:

Both novels also show characters grappling with the past, *only Ward’s characters can’t mourn the decaying glory of Faulkner’s South*. Instead, these are the descendants of the enslaved people who worked generation after generation for people like the original settlers of Faulkner’s South. Ward’s characters have their tragic past thrust upon them, their choice and freedom stripped by others, their

present cast under the long shadow of poverty, desperation, and erasure.

(“Apocryphal Counties,” emphasis added)

Thus, the relation between the past and present premises the idea of systemic racism about which Ward writes; the legacy of racial oppression can be traced into modern statistics pertaining to racial gaps in education, labor, housing, and judicial treatment, all of which Ward brings to life in her novels. Consider this line from Richie as he talks to Jojo: “And how could I conceive that Parchman was *past, present, and future all at once?* That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?” (emphasis added, 186) All of the ghosts have suffered from racial violence and this history is passed onto Jojo as evidenced through his run in with police brutality. Ward’s use of haunting aligns with Faulkner’s conception of time and engages with Southern Gothic tradition.

Ward departs from Faulkner in significant ways. The concept of addiction has substantially transformed between the two writers’ times. Whereas Faulkner never directly addresses addiction (although, alcoholism certainly affects several characters, most notably Jason Compson), substance abuse is pervasive across Ward’s oeuvre and *Sing* concentrates on its specific impacts. For Leonie, cocaine is simultaneously what allows her to “forget” her troubles and what literally causes trauma to haunt her. This dynamic prevents her from self-realization. Recognizing her failures as a mother, her addiction develops once Michael leaves to prison; despite her pregnancy, she “couldn’t help wanting to feel the coke go up my nose, shoot straight to my brain, and burn up all the sorrow and despair...” (51). Leonie expresses several times her desire to be a better mother – of Kayla she expresses “I want to answer her question, want to be her

mother..." – yet she finds herself incapable of doing so (203). Ultimately, she admits defeat after her own mother dies:

"I can't," I say, and there are so many other words behind that. *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.* And he [Michael] hears them, because he rolls forward and stands with me... We hold hands and pretend at forgetting. (author's emphasis, 274-5)

This is the final narration that Leonie gives, and she reinstates her desire to forget; however, she is now aware that she can only ever pretend to forget. A small victory, certainly, yet a progression that opens up future possibility. Leonie's relationship with substance abuse parallels her inability to function as a mother. With cocaine, she can't stop; with mothering, she can't begin. The two conflicts exacerbate each other and suggests that Leonie's incapability is not merely neglect. Her desires contradict each other; as Jojo yells at her, she thinks, "I want to hit him again and I want to hold him to me and palm his head again like when he was a hairless baby...but I don't do none of that" (272). Thus, Ward illustrates addiction in its full complexity and thereby displays ambiguity within human experience. Leonie reflects a real population in the U.S., and by portraying her perspective Ward creates a line of sympathy between the reader and a compromised mother.

The most glaring difference between Ward and Faulkner is their treatments of race. Faulkner's personal attitude toward U.S. race relations is complicated, and while I will not presently dive into the biographical records, Jay Watson's introduction to *Faulkner and the Black Literatures of the Americas* provides a holistic account of such. While the Southern writer was certainly one of the first white authors to deeply investigate race in America, his texts represent blackness problematically. Black

characters in Faulkner's writing exclusively exist in conflict with or in service of whiteness; Ernest Gaines concisely remarks that "it makes a big difference whether you're listening to Dilsey in the Compson kitchen or in her kitchen" (Lowe, 171). Like Gaines, Ward follows Faulkner in building an intertextual community; yet both black authors use this format to create the black space that was poorly represented or wholly absent from Faulkner.

Ward navigates Faulknerian influence in a similar way as Gaines. Lowe considers how the Louisianan writer transcends Faulkner's legacy while employing similar literary strategies. For instance, as Lowe observes, Gaines' novel *A Gathering of Old Men* "employs fifteen narrators, which is interesting, in that Faulkner also has fifteen narrators in *As I Lay Dying*"; however, "[u]nlike *As I Lay Dying*, Gaines's novel centrally addresses the tragic racial situation of the Deep South, skillfully employing Faulkner's narrative breakthroughs in breathtaking new ways" – *Gathering* even presents Cajun characters and thus goes "beyond the biethnic South" (164-5). While several of Faulkner's novels directly concern race, *As I Lay Dying* features solely white characters – nonetheless, both Ward and Gaines turn to it for inspiration.

*As I Lay Dying* follows a family whose members are intensely alienated from each other and never overcome their psychological distance even in the wake of the mother's death. The Bundren family scarcely talks with each other, and when they do it is often in the clipped staccato vernacular that Faulkner masterfully deploys. In contrast, "the entire point of the Gaines novel is a kind of running collective dialogue, akin to public confession and communion" (166); the cast of old men each testify to the racial violence they have suffered at the hands of the white supremacists that surround their community. The narrativizing of their traumas diverges from the internal monologues of

Faulkner's characters and builds a more unified community. Lowe observes how Gaines' construction of this communal voice is particularly involved with an African-American tradition:

Bakhtin has stated that an element of response and anticipation penetrates deeply inside intensely dialogic discourse...This, of course, suggests the profoundly African pattern of call and response, which is evident on virtually every page of Gaines's novel, unlike *As I Lay Dying*, where the Bundrens are isolated in their own private worlds of grief and silence. (166)

For Gaines, the polyperspectival shifts between characters highlight both their individuality and their communal identity. Their testaments join together to create a greater narrative that supports each other's experiences, rather than distancing them into mutual obscurity.

Ward's portrayals of community in *Bleeds* and *Salvage* align much more with Gaines' community and her characters find emotional and even material support in each other. In *Bleeds*, the twins' aunt and uncle offer what little financial support they can muster for the boys and their grandmother. When Christophe is without a job, his cousin Dunny tells him "you got support, too... You got your brother, you got Ma-mee, you got all your aunts and uncles, and most important, you got me" (54). In *Salvage*, Esch tells Big Henry that her baby doesn't have a daddy, to which he responds, "'You wrong... This baby got a daddy Esch'... He reaches out his big soft hand, soft as the bottom of his feet probably, and helps me stand... 'This baby got plenty daddies'" (255). The characters of Bois Sauvage function relatively well in their insulated community – while they are not always immediately expressive with each other, they almost always communicate their inner feelings in some way. For Ward, the alienating presence comes from the outer

world, the Wolf that surrounds Bois Sauvage. This is where Chris and Joshua ineffectively search for jobs, it is where their problematic parents primarily reside, and most importantly, it is outside the confines of their familiar home. In *Salvage*, this threat is most apparent in the white family that lives across the wooded area from the Pit. Thus, the community becomes the source for interpersonal connections rather than the site of alienation.

*Sing* problematizes the concept of communal reliance built in the previous two novels. Certainly, it still exists – Pop and JoJo’s share a strong link, JoJo cares for his sister, and the entire family shares in their affection for the matriarch, Mama. Note that in Ward’s third novel, we can see a certain trend pertaining to motherhood. In *Bleed*, the direct maternal link is near absent, another character that resides outside of Bois Sauvage, and her periodic appearances create conflict and anxiety for the boys. Ma-mee provides the more traditional maternal figure, however her aging and disability contradicts the dominant conceptions of motherhood as a fertile and vivacious caregiver. In *Salvage*, we have already explored the extensive ways in which maternity is reconfigured against traditional expectations. Most relevant here is that again the direct maternal link is absent – this time through death – even though Esch’s mother is the most benevolent maternal example in the text.

Leonie represents a maternal figure who is both present and absent. Physically, she fulfills her maternal role – she is the biological mother, she (barely) provides financially, and before her addiction manifested, Jojo suggests that she was sufficiently present. Emotionally, Leonie fails to connect with her children and expresses her feelings for them in an unproductive and sometimes harmful manner. In a significant departure from past novels, Ward ventures directly into the perspective of this complicated

character; this immediately provides more possibility for sympathy with the reader than if we had stayed tethered to JoJo. Thus, this also signifies a departure from *As I Lay Dying* in the same manner as Gaines. Surely, by entering the perspective of Faulkner's Cash Bundren we may gain some liking of the character that we would not have immediately had before, but the purpose of Faulkner's polyperspectival shifts serves to underscore the extreme alienation between characters. In *As I Lay Dying*, characters like Cash and Jewel speaks very scarcely, so ventures into their psychologies are telling. Yet, at the end of the novel there is no reconciliation between the Bundren family. They each treat Addie Bundren's Odyssean funeral procession as an occasion for material gain or transaction.

The conclusion of *Sing* reinforces this subtle yet significant difference between Ward and Faulkner. In *As I Lay Dying*, the young Vardaman delivers Faulkner's memorable line: "My mother is a fish" (74). The chapter contains nothing but this singular line and exemplifies Faulkner's radical use of stream-of-consciousness narration to push ambiguity to its limits. A standard reading of line interprets Vardaman association between his mother and his fish as a stark moment of incomprehension. The child likens his dying mother to a fish that he also witnessed die earlier. In short, Vardaman is unable to understand his mother's condition. He simultaneously cannot rationally grasp his mother's absence nor recognize her humanity through this absence. Again, this reinforces the overall alienation between characters in *As I Lay Dying*.

Jojo begins in a similar position as Vardaman. As we know, he expresses his inability to understand his mother and thinks he can understand everything else better than he can her. However, by the novel's conclusion, he contradicts this and displays his newfound sympathetic capacity for her:

Sometimes, late at night, when I'm listening to Pop search the dark, and Kayla's snoring beside me, I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels. That maybe I know a little bit about why she left after Mam died, why she slapped me, why she ran. (279)

Although Jojo begins the novel believing that he “knows what death is”, the loss of his grandmother, his experience with the novel's ghosts, and his conversations with Pop reveal to him all that he does not know. This development corresponds with his new understanding of Leonie. Through others' stories of suffering, he finds a way to sympathize with Leonie's own suffering and begins to overcome the alienation he previously felt towards her. Jojo describes his mother and father as “fish-thin, slender as two gray sardines” just prior to this scene; not only does this recall Vardaman, but also Christophe and Joshua who are likened to fish at *Bleeds'* conclusion. There, the metaphor of fish represented both the hardship and potential that the twins are to face. While this may not hold true for Leonie and Michael in *Sing* – the text implies that the couple become more absent than ever before – the more important note is that Jojo has been able to find sympathy for his neglectful mother. Whereas Gaines' St. Raphael members and Ward's other Bois Sauvage families already feel aligned through their community, Jojo demonstrates how even when alienation is present, the power of telling stories can overcome and unite.

### **3.3. Differentiating from Faulkner: Ward and Morrison**

A return to the Morrison/Ward comparison further highlights how all these authors approach constructions of community (Gaines and Faulkner included). Unlike the other authors, Morrison's novels do not share any intertextual setting. Nonetheless, her

texts converse with each other. Further, her writing also grapples with Faulknerian influence; unlike Ward and Gaines though, Morrison has rejected his influence in the past. At the 1985 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, she stated, “I’m not sure that he had any effect on my work”; her remarks at the time coincide with her writing of *Beloved* (See Morrison, *Conversations*, esp. 25). Whether self-consciously or not, *Beloved* engages with a Faulknerian intertext and in a similar fashion as Gaines and Ward.

Like *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Morrison’s *Beloved* explores the concept of community through a departure from pure alienation and an adoption of gothic style. As Philip Goldstein notes in “Black Feminism and the Canon”, the text features “multiple narrators, tormented lovers, dominating figures, spiritual exorcisms, and haunted houses” (134). Earlier, we discussed how Ward’s use of multiperspectivity opens up possibilities for sympathy in characters that might otherwise have been excluded from such. This strategy coincides with her ambition to create moving narratives that represent stories she sees as marginalized or untold, despite the wealth of statistical information surrounding the lives that her characters reflect. In comparing *Beloved* to Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!*, Goldstein identifies the same ambition in the two works within their own use of polyperspectival narration: “the multiple narratives of both novels imply that the artistic imagination recreates the living reality of the dead past more profoundly than factual or providential histories do” (134). While most of Ward’s characters occupy the present, consider how the ghost Richie receives direct attention from the reader through the text’s multiperspectivity.

Goldstein demonstrates how community in *Beloved* operates differently than in *Absalom! Absalom!* In Faulkner’s blood-stained tragedy, patriarchy and racism drive the

Sutpen's to destroy each other. In *Beloved*, community is also shown to harbor antagonisms; community members resent Baby Suggs for being able to provide a banquet, they turn their heads at the return of the Schoolteacher as he approaches 124, and consequently they ostracize Sethe for killing her child. Although *Beloved's* community is not always supportive, it eventually comes together at the end. In some instances, it is self-serving; some of the townswomen assist in the exorcism of Beloved in the hopes that they themselves will not be haunted. At a more personal level, however, Paul D represents the ability of a community to uplift itself. At the novel's close, Paul D tells Sethe that "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (335). Here, the two texts differ and Morrison departs from Faulkner; while "Sutpen and his family succumb to the South's plantation system, whose ideals move them to destroy each other, Sethe and her family and community resist its effects and establish positive relationships" (Goldstein, 138). This leads Goldstein to claim that Morrison "depicts a more profound horror and a more positive community", and I am inclined to agree.

At the same time that *Beloved* links with a Faulknerian intertext, Morrison also – and very consciously – engages an African-American literary and historical tradition. While the polyerspectival narrative recalls Faulkner, it also parallels the dialogic oral tradition of call and response in the same way that Ward's own use of multiple narrators aligns with both the modernist writer and Ernest Gaines. Morrison's haunted character Beloved speaks to a gothic tradition yet also allows the text to indirectly represent the "sixty million or more" of the Middle Passage, to whom the novel is dedicated. Likewise, Ward's use of magical realism in *Sing* relies on specifically African-American cultural elements. As Marcus Tribbet notes, both Mam and Pop's "belief system is akin to animism", with both being able to see the spirit within all natural things (24); Mam

follows in a line of healing women who double as midwives when needed, relying on the power of natural remedies, and Pop tells Jojo “There’s a spirit in everything,” he tells Jojo. “In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals . . . you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance” (*Sing*, 73).

Thus, the analysis of Faulkner’s texts alongside black authors like Morrison, Gaines, and Ward must also and always be cautious of not identifying the white modernist as a master-text – not only would this association carry obvious racist and sexist implications, but it would also be flat out untrue and inaccurate. Instead, as John Duvall notes in his essay “*Song of Solomon*, Narrative Identity, and the Faulknerian Intertext”, reading these authors together and in “one context is to hear a critical dialogue that can be taken as an African-American reclamation of canonical modernism” and as such our “purpose is not a discussion of Faulkner’s influence on Morrison but rather to suggest how reading Morrison reshapes the way one reads Faulkner” (90, 91). Indeed, Duvall’s framing of this inquiry reflects Morrison’s own critical project as set forth in *Playing in the Dark*:

My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginer; from the serving to the served. (90)

So, despite the term “influence” appearing regularly throughout the paper, I hope it has been evident that my project here is concentrated on how these authors differentiate themselves from one another and “reshape” our interpretation of each’s work – including Faulkner.

Morrison provides a locus for analyzing the intersections different directions across authors. Duvall’s chapter on *Song of Solomon* presents the text as a pivotal

instance where “she reclaims Faulkner in ways that question the male-centered world of the hunt and that refuses the gambit of tragedy” (97). Whereas Faulkner’s short stories like “The Bear” and “Delta Autumn” celebrates the hunt and laments the receding wilderness of the modern world, Morrison parallels the hunt of a bobcat with Guitar’s attempted assassination of Milkman. As Duvall shows, this hostile betrayal allows Milkman to understand and thus repudiate the patriarchal Seven Days society to which Guitar belongs.

Milkman’s second epiphany arrives through a deeper recognition of his black history represented by his identifying with the song of Solomon and his redemption concludes with literally searching for his black ancestor’s remains. Thus, *Song of Solomon* refuses to characterize its black community in a totally unified manner; Milkman’s middle-class status aligns him with dominant white culture at the expense of the lower-class portion of the black community, while the lower-class reacts violently to Milkman as seen through Guitar and the Shalimar locals who threaten him. Authenticity resides in a black history, which has been erased by white supremacist culture, and offers reconciliation out of a potentially tragic cycle.

*Song of Solomon*’s portrayal of racial politics contrasts significantly with the overall supportiveness of *Bois Sauvage*. Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* further displays how double consciousness also infects lower-class black communities. The term “double consciousness” holds a lot of history, beginning with W.E.B. DuBois; here, I primarily use it to highlight the tension between a socially dominant ideology and one’s personal construction of self, specifically within a racial discourse. The young Pecola Breedlove faces bullying and neglect from other blacks in her community. She is labeled as ugly due to her dark skin and resultingly she believes “her blackness is static and dread” (49).

Pecola's desire for blue eyes reflects this self-loathing and her yearning for whiteness. Towards the text's conclusion, she speaks as if she has achieved her blue eyes; notably, her internal narration takes the form of dialogue and expresses psychological conflict concerning Pecola's rape by her father, Cholly. Thus, Morrison's dialogic narration literally creates a double consciousness. Pecola's double consciousness is upheld by her community's ostracizing actions toward her. Claudia, the central narrator, closes the novel by reflecting on how their society treated Pecola as a scapegoat for their own insecurities: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. All of our beauty, which was her first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (205). *The Bluest Eye* constructs a community which forsakes black authenticity and self-love; while *Song of Solomon* provides a possible route towards redemption, significantly the answer lies in a history that is outside of the community.

Finally, Ward differentiates herself from Faulkner and Morrison's own competing characterizations of interracial identity. In *Go Down, Moses*, Ike McCaslin reacts to Roth Edmond's miscegenation negatively (the text parallels it with Roth's killing of a doe), and Old McCaslin's incestuous rape of his black daughter is the original sin that destines the family to tragedy. Broadly speaking, Faulkner's treatment of miscegenation typically turns toward tragedy; *Light in August*'s Joe Christmas is the ultimate example. For Morrison, Milkman's interracial identity causes him to align with whiteness, his double consciousness leaning toward the dominant culture. The text presents his internal struggle to reclaim a black identity through an understanding of his "true" history. Thus, learning of the song of Solomon represents the epiphany for him that allows him to totally embrace his authentic history. Like *Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye* also constructs interraciality

as a tension, again through the lens of double consciousness. Pecola hates her blackness and desires whiteness – her double consciousness acts as a type of psychological interraciality. Similar to Faulkner, Morrison portrays this condition as ultimately tragic; unlike Faulkner, this tragedy finds an escape route in *Solomon*. For both, however, interracial identity creates a problem that can only be overcome through choosing one side of the binary.

*Sing* rejects a binary reading of interraciality. Like Faulkner and Morrison, she includes the social trappings of racial history; Michael's father clearly represents the white supremacy's violent resistance to what it seen as miscegenation. Furthermore, Jojo's attitude toward his white father is filled with disdain; as he grows older, he begins to "realize how Michael noticed and didn't notice, how sometimes he saw me and then, whole days and weeks, he didn't" and even describes Michael as "an animal on the other end of the telephone behind a fortress of concrete and bars" (10, 30). Once again, though, Leonie's perspective complicates any straightforward readings. Whereas Jojo questions Michael's ability to see him, Leonie finds that "he saw me... Saw past skin the color of unskimmed coffee, eyes black, lips the color of plums, and saw me... Saw the walking wound I was and came to be my balm" (54). Contrasted with Jojo's characterization of Michael, Leonie mirrors his words: "[Pop]'s looking at me like he looks at one of his animals when something's wrong with it" (39). Importantly, Leonie feels her only true companion is Michael and feels alienation from everyone else in her family; by the novel's conclusion, she knows that Michael "can bear me... Will bear me" and shares in her desire to "move forward" from the dread of their current condition (273, 275). Indeed, Jojo's mixed identity and Leonie's interracial relationship do not reflect a problem to be solved but rather illuminate the broader systemic racism that affects the

family. Thus, Ward's presentation of interraciality eludes dichotomization and resides in ambiguity through her localization of story and her application of polyperspectival narrative.

Jesmyn Ward's writing invites comparison to other great authors while testifying to her singularity. Stylistically, she engages polyperspectival narrative strategies which Faulkner radically developed. Ward salvages Faulknerian narratives in a similar fashion to Gaines, naturally employing vernacular to breathe life into the dialogues that create a collective testament to a black Southern experience. Her indebtedness to Morrison reflects her commitment to bear witness to the margins and refuse to look away, to reclaim a voice amongst a traditionally white and male canon. Ward's literary discourse with these writers creates a space for her to differentiate herself and present a new voice that is her own. As she continues to publish, these points of divergence will continue to establish a discrete style that is markedly "Wardian." *Sing, Unburied, Sing* concisely illustrates a present haunted by the past and a reality conditioned by a history of racial oppression.

## CHAPTER 4: CONTEMPORARY CONVERSATIONS WITH WARD'S PEERS

### 4.1. Coalescing a Collective Voice

The final chapter of my project aims to connect Ward to a contemporary literary discourse. The urge for this originated in my reading of her anthology *The Fire This Time*. The collection features several of Ward's artistic peers and was created in response to the increasing number of victims of police brutality in the United States. In the introduction, Ward confirms what we have already witnessed in her fiction, "how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; we cannot talk about black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country" (9). Ward's texts respond to historic racism through illustrating its immaterial impression on the present. Now, we shall turn to see how her contemporaries answer in their own way. The anthology's title references James Baldwin's influential *The Fire Next Time* (1963); thus, Ward connects her and her peers' efforts to a tradition of black political consciousness while simultaneously recognizing a need for urgency that mirrors the social context of the sixties.

The three authors that I will presently discuss connect to Ward in some immediately obvious ways; for instance, all three grew up in the South. Natasha Trethewey, whose poetry appears in the anthology, shares Ward's proclivity toward Southern Gothic style and grew up in Gulfport, Mississippi – a twenty-minute drive from Ward's hometown of De Lisle. Tayari Jones, a Georgian novelist, appears on the cover of the Bloomsbury edition of *Men We Reaped*, her review quoted at the top left. Similar to Ward, Jones' novel, *Leaving Atlanta*, features polyperspectival narration across three children. Finally, Randall Kenan's novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, engages Southern Gothic tropes in a similar fashion as Ward. While these surface level connections are important,

this chapter will seek to examine the textual similarities – and, of course, differences – between each author and Ward.

Like our comparative analyses of Ward and past writers, we must approach these current connections with critical caution. Recognizing thematic and stylistic similarities between these authors should not suggest any kind of reduction of their works; I am not here to find out what it means to be a writer of color in the South or how to write a contemporary black Southern Gothic. Instead, as Ward noted in the introduction to *The Fire This Time*, there seems to be a common realization amongst many of these writers concerning the relationship between the past and present. These authors approach writing about this condition with strikingly similar techniques; I argue that these decisions are not merely coincidental but rather conscientious.

Ward also concludes in her anthology introduction that all the included works reveal “a certain exhaustion... We’re tired of having to figure out how to talk to our kids and teach them that America sees them as less, and that she just might kill them” (9). Considering Faulkner’s conception of the “endurance” of black Americans, this recognition of exhaustion cuts against the problematic and essentialist description and indicates a black subjectivity for whom enduring is simply not enough. Thus, despite these authors’ focus on the past/present relationship, their works are inherently forward looking. For Ward, this contemporary literature gives “the words that I might use to push past the fear and exhaustion and speak to my daughter, my nieces and nephews... This work helps me to believe that this is worthwhile work, and that our troubling the water is worthy”. Thus, these works present endurance not solely in a reality of pure inevitable tragedy driven by an inescapable history, but instead an endurance that optimistically looks forward to future possibility and change.

## 4.2. Kenan's Black Queerness and Southern Gothic

Published in 1989, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* is set in the fictional town of Tim's Creek in North Carolina. Kenan's debut novel primarily focalizes around Horace Cross, a black teenager who struggles to assert his gay identity in a religiously conservative community. While Kenan invokes many of the Southern Gothic tropes we have discussed, the queer identity of his protagonist marks a significant difference from all of the previous texts. Thus, through these stylistic strategies, the text creates a space not only for modern black existence but queer subjectivity as well.

Kenan's engagement with the Southern Gothic genre aligns closely with Ward's style. *A Visitation* employs polyperspectival narration through the characters Horace, his cousin Jimmy, and his grandfather Ezekial. The text further creates a dialogic by writing certain sections of the narrative in the style of a screenplay. This radically shifts the reader between extended interior monologue to bare character dialogue. Horace's narrative displays other gothic tropes, such as his tormented romance with the actor Everett and his experience with supernatural hauntings. Christian ideology drives the dying elderly characters and the doubtful minister Jimmy to reject Horace's homosexuality, thus echoing the perversion of Catholicism often seen in American gothic narratives, reaching all the way back to Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Horace's desire to transform into a bird recalls Milkman's attempt to fly like his ancestor Shalimar in *Song of Solomon*. The metaphor of flying carries deep mythic weight in African-American historical and literary symbolism, and typically signifies liberation (See Gilentz). *Solomon's* use of flying is particularly relevant since Milkman's liberation is not of an economic or material kind; rather, his liberation involves identity. Likewise, Horace struggles to liberate himself from the social expectations that severely

marginalize his gay identity. Thus, by invoking a mythology that concerns black history Horace seeks to escape the reality rooted in that same history.

Indeed, Horace's older relatives are the primary persecutors of his identity, despite being the people responsible for his political freedom. They berate him at the smallest departures from conservative conceptions of masculinity – like when he comes home with pierced ears – and openly resent his interracial friendships. The community's divide between the traditional class of elderly blacks and the younger, less racially conscious group is summarized by Ezekial:

What has happened to us?...Once, oh once, this beautiful, strong, defiant, glorious group could wrestle the world down, unshackle themselves, part seas, walk on water, rise on the winds. What happened? Why are we now sick and dying? All the sons and daughters groomed to lead seem to have fled...How, Lord? How? The war is not over. (188)

The framing language of racial political liberation as a “war” suggests the dichotomized logic of the older community members. That the “sons and “daughters” have “fled” reflects either their inability to recognize such logic as accurate or their flat-out rejection of it. Horace seems to fall somewhere in the middle. He demonstrates an ability to consciously read racial history as significant in the present; he describes a play that has been showing locally as a “melodramatic romanticizing of Southern American history” with “many of the historical facts... just plain wrong” (213). The play occasions Horace to reveal to the reader his social awareness as well,

Ironically, the thing that kept the crowds coming back...was [the playwright's] concession to his family's slave-owning past. He had tried to create a picture of domestic bliss for the house slaves and of jolly camaraderie for the field workers.

Despite the interjection of a speech here or there that reflected the reality of the hard life of the slaves, the blacks were mainly there for buffoonery and hijinks that brought laughs and chuckles from the audience...

Thus, Horace's desire to fly from his community does not arise from an ignorance of racial history, but rather a need to liberate himself from a society that rejects his identity. Whereas Pecola Breedlove's marginalization occurred because she was too black, Horace is not black enough for his community. Like Pecola, Horace begins to feel a self-loathing for his identity. The demon that torments Horace morphs into a doppelganger of himself – another nod to the Gothic trope of the double. When the real Horace shoots the demon Horace, the latter is described as, “his eyes full of horror, but in recognition too, as if to say: You meant it, didn't you? You actually hate me?” (235) Later, we learn that Horace actually shot himself, fulfilling the self-loathing that the doppelganger represented.

Kenan's novel depicts a community that is at odds with itself, despite a shared history of oppression. This internal conflict distances Tims Creek from Ward's Bois Sauvage. The communities are also different along class lines – Tims Creek is a middle-class community, unlike the poverty stricken Bois Sauvage. The main difference, however, is in Horace himself. None of Ward's characters identify as homosexual. My observation should not be interpreted as a mandate or accusation; Kenan's novel illustrates how intersectional identities further complicate life for young black Americans.

Examining the differences between Kenan's character and Ward's underscores their similarities: all are young and black. Like Ward's fictions, one might feel tempted to classify *A Visitation* as a coming-of-age novel – except Horace dies before coming of age. Does this despairing reality not haunt all of Ward's novels as well? *Sing* directly

confronts the reader with such through the ghosts of Richie and Given and recasts the threat of premature death on Jojo through the police officer scene. *Salvage* silently presents the same simply through its context of Katrina and the young lives lost in the disaster. *Bleeds* also includes this reality through context, especially when read alongside *Reaped* which explicitly attests to the plague of young black death. As we continue on to Tayari Jones' *Leaving Atlanta*, this threat of violence toward black children will again reappear alongside another community dealing with internal conflict.

#### **4.3. Viewing through the Vulnerable: Jones' *Leaving Atlanta***

Following the polyperspectival trend, the 2002 novel by Tayari Jones presents three different narrators – all of them young, black children that attend Oglethorpe Elementary School. Set in the context of the 1980s Atlanta child murders, *Leaving Atlanta* explores race, class, and violence through a child perspective. Similar to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ward's fiction, children receive total narrative primacy. This focalization in youth across Jones, Kenan and Ward perhaps suggests something about their status as contemporary black writers, not because the writers are in any way "immature," but rather because they are newcomers to the African-American novelistic tradition. By centering narration in a child, the authors are able to interrogate postmodern American racial codes through the defamiliarizing lens of children – again, like Kenan's, Jones' characters do not fit the traditional age criteria for coming-of-age novels, the narrators are in fifth grade. Also, like Horace, not every child in *Leaving Atlanta* survives long enough to come of age.

In Jones's novel, all of the children struggle with the mandates of their parents, who themselves vary in class and ideology, while trying to navigate identity in the most

hostile social setting of all: middle school. Rodney Green's father presents a conservative, middle-class black father who shows no hesitation in beating his child in public, while Octavia Fuller's single mother is much younger and more liberal yet is still trying to instill values to her daughter who struggles with realizing her underprivileged economic status. In some respects, these class differences afford *Leaving Atlanta* a greater range than Ward's setting; the densely populated Atlanta contains greater economic disparities than Bois Sauvage.

*Leaving Atlanta* begins from the perspective of Tasha Baxter as she acclimates to fifth grade society. Her narrative also introduces the other two characters to which the narration later shifts, Rodney Green and Octavia Fuller. Tasha nearly befriends the latter until realizing that doing so will cause her to be ostracized along with Octavia, who is bullied – like Pecola – for her dark skin: “Octavia was black – *black as night*... That's why kids called her the Watusi, because she looked like a black African” (48). She describes Rodney as “the weirdest kid in her class, maybe the whole school even” (44). Tasha's family is lower-middle class as evidenced by their expenses – her treasured winter coat is “a pretty pink one with genuine rabbit fur around the hood and sleeves” (33) – and although her parents at first separate, they rejoin as fear of the child murders spreads. Notably, the text introduces the child murders through Monica Kaufman, the first African-American and first female Atlanta news anchor, whom the Baxter family watch on television. Kaufman's presence is significant, as she represents a highly visible future possibility for the novel's black children while simultaneously communicating to them a reality of death and violence that surrounds them.

In Rodney's perspective, we find a young boy who is bullied in school despite his higher economic class. Rodney offers a medium for the reader to view the class identity

conflict in a more overt manner than Tasha's narrative. His narrative begins with his mother telling him that he will need to eat breakfast at the school cafeteria that day and that he "should be the *most* welcome because [his] family pays the taxes that make the breakfast possible" (88). The relationship between class and materialism is reaffirmed; whereas Tasha took pride in her fur coat, Rodney is resentful that his sister's school project "bears the label of her [his mother's] only Italian pumps" (88). His father tells him "never trust a man without a decent edge-up", which causes Rodney to hunch his shoulders and "hide the two nappy trails of hair" on his neck in embarrassment (127). Despite Rodney's presumed advantage of coming from a higher economic class than his peers, his grades are routinely below-average. His inability to concentrate and communicate stems from a low self-esteem, believing that "since your words are almost invariably misinterpreted, you avoid speech in general" (87).

Rodney's lack of confidence, and thus his disinterest in school, arises from his strict and abusive father. Rodney's father, before beating him in front of the class, angrily tells him that "the crowd ain't going to be there for you when it matters...When you have to make something of yourself, you stand alone" (137). However, drastic individuality that the father tries to instill into his son does not translate; Rodney notes that he "has never been part of a crowd". His father, blinded by the idea of success with which he desires his son to conform, fails to see Rodney as a real person. Rodney is abducted by the police immediately after, suggesting that violence and paternal neglect are linked in ways that are not as obvious as physical absence.

The final narrative belongs to Octavia Fuller, the other outcast at Oglethorpe. She routinely faces bullying from her classmates and sits alone during lunch. The only person who did not pick on her, Rodney, has now been taken. Despite the social and financial

obstacles before Octavia, she displays a high level of maturity. She often reads through adult condescension and resents when her mother lies to her grandmother on the phone. Octavia's mother works a graveyard shift at a factory and leaves Octavia alone during the night – an especially concerning situation during the child murders crimes. Octavia's father lives out-of-town, and has another family built around his employment at a college. While she shows a resilience to her classmates' name-calling, Octavia is clearly uncomfortable with acknowledging her economic positionality. When her favorite teacher tells her that “when you're poor you don't always have a choice”, Octavia internally denies that she's poor:

I wanted to snatch my arms away and tell her that me and my mama are not poor.

We don't stay in the projects. We stay across the street from the projects. (238)

Octavia's mother shows her child respect and talks to her like an adult, contrasting with Tasha and Rodney's parents. Their underprivileged status does not prevent them from having fun with each other, as when they go to Red Lobster to celebrate Octavia's first period and get a free cake by saying it's her birthday. However, her mom decides to send her to live with her father for safety and opportunity. Despite Octavia's ascension to a higher economic class via living with her father, leaving behind her mother and her home deeply hurts her; she ends the novel with “I'll be missing my mama for the rest of my life” (255). Thus, the inability to protect Octavia due to her mother's financial restraints scars her. Her situation contrasts with Tasha's, whose father returns home to protect her.

How does Jones' use of polyperspectivity benefit the text? By maintaining the dialogic, she bears witness to and amplifies multiple voices which in turn gives representation to a multitude of potential readers. The setting of elementary school gives presence to a variety of family and class backgrounds which are all under the threat of

violence. Jones' narration of child psychology creates a space to defamiliarize the social reality that the kids live in, as do we. The narrative decision is effective in a twofold manner: often, the children are confused at how the adult's act; as older readers, we are able to fill in the gaps and understand these decisions, yet we still sympathize with the children's confusion. This defamiliarizing strategy of the text illuminates its critiques of the culture. Relatedly, the child-perspective nearly guarantees a reader's sympathy. As *Sing's* Leonie demonstrates, reader sympathy is paramount to effectively communicating social problems. Considering that Mr. Green's physical abuse of Rodney was legal during the novel's setting (corporal punishment of children became illegal in 1989), sympathy for a child's perspective should not be totally taken for granted. In this way, child-narrated texts reflect a new possibility for intersectional representation; Jones, Kenan, and Ward represent marginalities through differing identities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and even age.

#### **4.4. Southern Sisters: Trethewey's Gothic Poetry**

Turning to Natasha Trethewey, we find Ward's closest contemporary literary counterpart. Besides their geographical proximity, their writings stunningly converse through thematic and stylistic similarities. This dialogic virtuosity is further bolstered when considering that one primarily writes fiction and the other poetry. Their differing genre occupations suggest a broader phenomenon occurring across contemporary literature. Not only do these authors identify similar problems in the world, but they also construct their artistic responses within the same stylistic structures. This is not mere coincidence; the parallels across Ward, Jones, Kenan, and Trethewey indicate that certain artistic modes are conducive to effectively addressing systemic racism through writing.

The following section on Trethewey will discuss poems from her collection *Native Guard*, while quotations will derive from her anthology *Monument*, which contains poems from the former. Both titles gain significance upon analyzing her poetry, as Trethewey writes history through her descriptions of the present.

Like Ward, Trethewey writes blackness through Southern Gothic tropes and successfully does so at the highest level, twice operating as the U.S Poet Laureate shortly after receiving a Pulitzer Prize. Likewise, Trethewey illustrates how the past haunts the present; history constitutes a cultural memory which transmits the cultural trauma of oppression down through generations. While Katrina and systemic violence are the cultural traumas that reoccur across Ward's fiction, Trethewey typically represents the legacy of slavery through her poems. The two infuse their writing with these traumas by inscribing them into their textual landscapes.

Descriptions of the Southern landscape define an important facet of Trethewey's writing. The inclination to encapsulate physical reality within words reflects Trethewey's preoccupation with memory. The figure of the monument in Trethewey's poetry includes the traditional granite or marble definition of the word, but it also expands to the physical landscape that the poem embodies and represents. In this way, the poem itself becomes a monument. Past memory and physical presence converge in a single representation that signifies across the duality.

The first poem of *Native Guard*, "Theories of Time and Space", sets the ground for landscape as monument. Notably, this poem is also included in Ward's *The Fire This Time* anthology. As the title suggests, Trethewey oscillates between the conceptual and the concrete, implicating landscape within this dichotomy. The first stanza reads, "You can get there from here, though / there's no going home". Adverbs of place like "here"

and “there” present location as abstraction; what is being indicated is not a specific place but the idea of a place. These adverbs refer to something physical, however the very act of reference signifies the nonfinite. Quickly, however, the speaker gives us direction: “head south on Mississippi 49, one- / by-one mile markers ticking off / another minute of your life” and “Cross over / the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand / dumped on the mangrove swamp – buried / terrain of the past”. Both of these quotes illustrate how the poem questions the binary of physical/abstract; the metrics of miles are juxtaposed with the generalities of time, “life” and “the past”. The second quotation merges “natural reality” and “human phenomenon” to create something that eludes understanding.

“Elegy for the Native Guards” explicitly links monument and impartial history. An epigraph quotes Allen Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead”, a poem that explores similar themes as Trethewey’s poetry – death, memory, history. As the title makes clear, however, Tate’s poem glorifies the Confederacy and creates a romantic image of the rebel soldiers. In “Elegy for the Native Guards”, Trethewey exposes the erasure through which Confederate nostalgia – and thus Southern cultural memory – whitewashes the history of the Civil War. By beginning with the first-person plural (“We leave Gulfport at noon”), the poem implicates a community that the speaker exists within; necessarily, this community exists within a wider culture informed by American history. The “we” persists throughout the poem and bears witness to “a weathered monument to some of the dead” and other “tokens of history long buried”. For the most part, the speaker’s presence only occurs through the description of the Ship Island landscape; however, in one instance the poem leaves the indicative for the interrogative when considering the titular Native Guards, “2nd Regiment, Union men, black phalanx. / What is monument to their legacy?” Following this, the poem dives back into physical descriptions until finally

ending with an invocation of the supreme abstract, “God’s deliberate eye”. While the third person plural of the social “we” guides us through the poem, “eye” reveals the displaced “I” in the poem, the singular that reached out through the interrogative mood. The elegy for a lost history is written by this individual and in opposition against the social amnesia of a racist history.

“Pilgrimage” continues the tour through Southern monuments and landscape while introducing another metaphor, the grave. Immediately, Vicksburg is described as “a graveyard / for skeletons of sunken riverboats” and later, “This whole city is a grave”. This graveyard contains monument and history, as the “dead stand up in stone, white / marble, on Confederate Avenue”; intangible death and past are physically represented through the physical landscape and literally inscribed into it through street names. The pilgrimage occurs in this graveyard of monuments, where “the living come to mingle / with the dead” and “relive / their dying”; ritual merges the past and present through its repetition, eerily signified by the “reliving” of cultural memories. Yet this communal memory becomes personal to the speaker, who closes the poem telling us, “In my dream, / the ghost of history lies down beside me, / rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm”. Cultural history haunts personal memory, just like the supernatural specters in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*, and threaten its descendants.

Like all the other authors, Trethewey also includes child-perspective in her poetry where a young narrator defamiliarizes the transmission of U.S. history to highlight the manifestation of systemic racism within a central institution, the school classroom. “Southern History” depicts the very moment where a lost history is left untold and silenced. Trethewey chooses the sonnet form, rhyming in the Petrarchan style. The speaker recounts an experience from a high school history class where their textbook

claims “*The slaves were clothed, fed, / and better off under a master’s care*” (author’s emphasis). This is a history that silences the narratives of the “Native Guard” that Trethewey so often records in her poems; instead, it presents “a lie / that my teacher guarded”. Curiously, however, the line and poem conclude with, “Silent, so did I”. At this moment, the young Trethewey remains silent and does not challenge the fraudulent history – perhaps she does not have the educational wherewithal, the rhetorical confidence, or the emotional capacity to do so in the middle of her senior classroom – she can hardly be blamed. Yet does not this final line, by reflecting inward, indicate some sort of guilt within the speaker? Perhaps this moment, along with others, sparks the inspiration for Trethewey’s poetics of history. Her other poems reflect Trethewey responding to this cultural memory of lies and silencing – by granting voice to those lost stories, she gives herself a voice as well.

For Trethewey, monuments not only define the Southern landscape but also reflect and perpetuate the ideologically fragmented history that they commemorate. The poet must uncover and recover the lost history that a racist culture intentionally forgets. Thus, she is concerned with cultural memory and by extension, individual memory. Ward’s inspiration to “say” reflects a similar artistic ambition. While her fiction does not substantially venture into historical narrative, her stories are transfused with the same Southern History familiar to Trethewey. This present absence occupies the landscape for both authors and haunts the living population despite their constant forgetting.

For each author, we find discourses with Ward’s texts. While these conversations vary in degrees of magnitude, they all resonate with each other. Amidst these parallels, Kenan, Jones, Trethewey, and Ward nonetheless illustrate their own distinct worlds. Kenan represents queer black subjectivity in the rural South, questioning the

conservatism of an old guard. Jones depicts class difference through the youthful yet not naïve eyes of black children whose elementary school lives are in danger from a palpable threat. Trethewey finds the past and present as vehicles of each other while never comprising on the humanity of a single character, linking personal trauma to cultural history. Ward breathes literary life into the marginal existence of Southern black children trying to find hope below the poverty line. While each text faces the question of what it means to be black in modern America, they dually grapple with other questions of identity pertaining to class, sexuality, and gender. Their dialogic texts create an intersectional literature that finds resonance through their similarities and their differences.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have been cautious not to classify any of these texts as exclusively “novels about race” or “novels about blackness”; such reductions do a great disgrace to the works and the authors. Nonetheless, the trace of race runs through them all – just as it always has, throughout all of American literature. In Terry McMillan’s introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction*, he characterizes Trey Ellis as believing “that all contemporary African-American artists now create art where race is not the only source of conflict” (309). Not only do the contemporary works discussed in the last chapter attest to this, but so do Morrison’s and Gaines’ texts as well. Conflict becomes intersectional, involving the plurality of identities that each character holds. Trey Ellis himself describes the black author in his essay, “The New Black Aesthetic”, as “produc[ing] supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be” (237). Certainly, our writers fit these criteria, with each revising old notions of blackness and recreating black authorship through innovative style and narrative structure.

However, Trey Ellis goes even further with his diagnoses of black authorship in his essay, ironically toward an essentialist attitude that he initially refuted:

Neither are the new black artists shocked by the persistence of racism as were those of the Harlem Renaissance, nor are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages. (239-40)

Here, our panel of authors seems to differ. Consider again Ward’s reference to James Baldwin by titling her anthology *The Fire This Time*. Clearly, all these authors recognize

a reason to still be “preoccupied” with the persistence of racism. In fact, Ward and her contemporaries seem dedicated to insuring that everyone remains preoccupied with race rather than relegating it to a cultural unconscious. One cannot underestimate the effect that modern police brutality has had on these authors – even in Jones’ work, which predates the Black Lives Matter movement, the children express distrust and disdain toward the white police officers assigned to protect them from the Atlanta murderer. Black suffering and police brutality are nothing new; however, their amplification through recent media and activist developments reflects a heightened consciousness about American racism that rejects Ellis’ hypothesis.

Ward is set to continue upon her thematic trend with her future publications. Intriguingly, her new novel will take place in the historic South, following a character subjugated to the slave trade (See Maher). In an interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates, she voices a concern that her novel will parrot Coates’ recent book, *The Waterdancer*, thinking, “Oh, my God, what if Ta-Nehisi is telling the same story?” Coates dismissed her worries and brought up Colton Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, another magical realist novel that illustrates the Southern institution of slavery. Thus, three successful fiction authors all choose to explore the same history in a short period of time.

If we consider Ward’s engagement with the Faulknerian attitude toward history, where past is deeply inscribed in the present, then these authorial decisions seem almost consequential. Trethewey already has directly presented historical accounts of oppressed black persons while operating on the same concept of the past. Yet, how does an exclusive move to the past affect a commentary on the present? One inevitably will write the present into the past; yet relying on such a strategy seems disingenuous to the lost lives that the author attempts to commemorate. It is arguable that she simply chose the

past as a setting without much intent, yet the authorial self-awareness that Ward has repeatedly demonstrated makes such an indiscriminate decision seems unlikely. Let us briefly return to Toni Morrison for possible clarity.

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison argues that black culture is at risk of losing its sense of self. Traditionally, music provided a medium for identity and cultural history – however, she discounts it as a currently viable option since “that music is no longer exclusively ours; we don’t have exclusive rights to it ...Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere.” (198) Instead, Morrison believes that,

...the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before... We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago.

Does not the collective move toward historical narratives among these authors reflect this search for an ancestor? She adds two possible criteria, perhaps more like preferences, to potential works that could answer the call. First, the author must “make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken”; echoing Gaines’ proclivity to dialogue, Ward certainly displays a mastery of translating daily speech into a literary format, with character’s words sounding realistic rather than contrived.

Secondly, Morrison finds that the author must grapple with “the presence of an ancestor; it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor” (200). Morrison demonstrates her own dedication to this philosophy through both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*; one text illustrates the historical reality of an “ancestor” type oppressed by slavery, the other features a man

searching for a lost history and finding it in the ancestral figure of Shalimar. While the nature of Ward's next novel seems set to directly confront ancestral figures, she has already begun an exploration with both *Salvage* and *Sing*. In the former, identifying an ancestral figure occurs through "salvaging" the canonical history thrust upon the individual and asserting an individuality through differentiation. Faulkner represents a source of influence from which Ward differentiates herself in her fiction. With *Sing*, the ancestor actively haunts the descendant who must face the reality of a present absence to understand their own position in the world. Thus, Ward successfully contributes to a cultural testimony in the manner outlined by Morrison, another literary ancestor. As she turns toward history in her next novel, her mission to "say" and bear witness to those silenced will extend to the lost voices of the past, thus introducing more ghosts into the Wardian oeuvre.

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