

6-A Martial Meteorology: Carceral Ecology in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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*The southern landscape — the trees, the silence, the liquid heat,
and the fact that one always seems to be traveling a great distance —
seems designed for violence, seems, almost, to demand it.*
James Baldwin

Abstract.

During a discussion of her novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, on National Public Radio (NPR), Jesmyn Ward recalls her experience of Hurricane Katrina: “I sat on the porch, barefoot and shaking. The sky turned orange and the wind sounded like fighter jets. *So that’s what my mother meant*: I understood then how that hurricane, that Camille, had unmade the world, tree by water by house by person.” The “weight of history in the South of slavery and Jim Crow makes it hard to bear up,” she continues. The future is full of worry, “about climate change and more devastating storms like Katrina and Harvey.” In Ward’s depiction of the wind as fighter jets, she imbues the violent elements of the hurricane with a martial quality that demonstrates how weather and, in particular, storms, hold the capacity to unmake the world. Her words reveal the fungible nature of *oikos*, or home, and a methodological process of undoing—waters that uproot trees that uproot houses that displace persons. And the details of the aftermath left unsaid—the racism laid bare by the storm, those attempts at unmaking, human by human. Yet it is the history of the US South, of slavery and Jim Crow, that Ward uses as the preface to her concern about a future full of storms wrought by climate change. In doing so, she foregrounds the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene by placing the carceral in conversation with the environment. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also explores this much overlooked connection. By examining *Sing, Unburied, Sing*’s spectral twinning of racial and ecological violence, this essay traces what I call *carceral ecology*. Crafted from Ward’s imagining of a martial meteorology, carceral ecology transforms climatic phenomena like heat, rain, and storms into tools of western power. The novel thus unearths a southern history in which environmental design and manipulation have been used to maintain a carceral state of control. Looking to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, allows us to sift through the different evolutions of carceral ecology—from its toxic presence in the communities of the US South, to its early stages on the plantation, and ending, finally, with the worldly arena of the Anthropocene.

Ward’s characterization of the environment as weapon—“wind [that] sounded like fighter jets”—invites a closer look. Here she moves beyond

traditional understandings of weather as natural by imagining what I call a *martial meteorology*—weather that contains militant elements of the human. Indeed, Katrina has been labelled an unnatural disaster, the product of a climate crisis created by anthropogenic disturbance and racist environmental practices. Hurricanes are now more frequent and intense with stronger winds and more precipitation. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, a less readily visible attack on marginalized communities in the form of environmental toxification, is especially apt here. In Ward's home, DeLisle, Mississippi, nearly 2,000 lawsuits have been filed by residents against the DuPont chemical plant alone for medical issues caused by pollution; nature made sick by a biopolitical agenda.

Yet in her interview with NPR, it is the history of the US South, of slavery and Jim Crow, that Ward uses to preface her concern about a future full of storms wrought by climate change. In doing so, she foregrounds the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene by placing the carceral in conversation with the environment. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also explores this much over-looked connection. The novel follows Leonie, an African American mother, and her children, Jojo and Michaela, as they travel from their Gulf Coast home to Parchman Prison where they intend to pick up their white father. The aftermath of Katrina haunts the narrative's background, like so many of the novel's ghosts. Looking to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s spectral twinning of racial and ecological violence, this essay traces what I term *carceral ecology*. Building from martial meteorology, carceral ecology transforms climatic phenomena like heat, rain, and storms into tools that reconfigure our surroundings to benefit western powers. The novel thus unearths a southern history in which environmental design and manipulation have been used to maintain a carceral state of control through an *elemental antiblackness*. To that end, Ward's turn toward the Black South extends beyond the conceptual to our own lived realities by offering a counternarrative to a white Anthropocene, one that suggests there may be much to learn from the often-forgotten Mississippi Delta.

The Rise of Carceral Ecology

Although it remains an unofficial and, at times, contested classification, it has been said that we are now living in a new geological epoch—the

Anthropocene—a name coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer during an earth systems conference in 2000 to mark the shift from the Holocene. Anthropocene was chosen to encapsulate an irreversibly transformed planet due to the rapid expansion of human populations, increasing exploitation of nonhuman animals and natural resources, and subsequent pervasive pollution at both local and global levels.¹ Yet discussions involving the climate crisis often hinge upon the categorization of human beings as a singular human species—beings joined together by a “shared sense of catastrophe” (Chakrabarty 222).² As scholars like Diana Leong, Katheryn Yusoff, and Axelle Karera have argued, such grouping, however biologically apt, instills Anthropocene scholarship with a troubling universality that is reminiscent of liberal humanism. The homogenizing category of human, that is, does not account for the heterogeneity within the *anthropos*—the different experiences, relations, and pasts that have contributed to the climate crisis. Furthermore, as Crutzen makes explicit, the effects of the Anthropocene have been caused by “only 25% of the world population” (Crutzen 23). “Even when critics acknowledge that intra-species inequalities are central to our current ecological crisis,” Karera states, “that uneven extraction and distribution of resources in the service of capitalism are the conditions for ecological damages...Anthropocene thinking has generally been unable to yield a sustained critique of the racist origins of global warming, capable, in turn, of exposing the limits of its desire to rethink...the concept of the ‘human’” (Karera 38). To be sure, the myth of a universal Anthropocene has allowed scholars to fantasize a post-racial or, perhaps more accurately, a post-humanist world by either ignoring the issue of race altogether or reductively falling back onto claims that matter is deracialized. Such thinking eschews western responsibility for the crisis and obscures the consequences that remain grossly disproportionate.

This “language of species life” also makes possible new forms of neo-colonialism disguised as projects of global relief and aid (Yusoff 14). In “Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos,” for example, Crutzen and fellow scientist Christian Schwägerl state that the “long-held barriers between nature and culture are breaking down. It is no longer us against ‘Nature.’ Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be.” They continue:

...teaching students that we are living in the Anthropocene, the Age of Man, could be of great help. Rather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name change would stress the enormity of humanity's responsibility as stewards of the Earth. It would highlight the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future...the awareness of living in the Age of men could inject some desperately needed optimism into our societies....With our countries striving worldwide to attain the "American Way of Life," citizens of the West should redefine it—and pioneer a modest, renewable, mindful, and less material lifestyle....We also need to develop geoengineering capabilities in order to be prepared for the worst-case scenarios. (Crutzen and Schwägel)

Rather than dismantle the barriers between nature and culture, Crutzen and Schwägel instead reinforce the divide by defining nature as something malleable to human interests, a kind of modeling clay that can be bent to anthropocentric will. Their use of the pronoun "we" and noun "human" implies a universal humanity with a common stake in the crisis at the same time they position western global powers, specifically the US, as the apotheosis of culture and civilization via environmental initiatives. The justification of neo-colonial projects under the guise of environmentalism returns humanity to the very frameworks of manifest destiny and liberal humanism that pushed us into the Anthropocene and created its uneven consequences. The US is once more a "pioneer" that must teach other nation-states to follow an "American Way of Life"—derived from the "immense power of our intellect [and] creativity." To that end, western scientists engaged in such geoengineering projects offer a way for Euro-American countries to manipulate the environment to retain their status as world powers, ensuring their survival and economic profit at the potential loss of others. As Jairus Groves has pointed out, western scientists have remained unmoved by "claims that artificial cooling will likely cause droughts and famines in the tropics and subtropical zones of the global south" (Grove 38). The fossil fuel industry, too, has put forth proposals that would benefit companies, as well as threaten biodiversity and food security. Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it bluntly: "Given that the Anthropos in Anthropocene turns out to be our old friend the (imperialist) white male, my mantra has become, it's not the Anthropocene, it's the white supremacy scene" (Mirzoeff 123). Environmental ethics become another

form of injustice where Euro-American nations masquerade as benevolent protectors when they are the source of destruction.

Scientific and political performances like that of Crutzen and Schwägerl mask the reality that western powers are not only aware of their responsibility in perpetuating the current climate crisis but that they also use these mounting ecological disturbances as another violent apparatus of neo-colonialism. Indeed, the technology that made today's geoengineering projects possible comes from military research and experiments concerned with manipulating weather and the environment as a tactic of warfare during the mid-twentieth century. Ward's imagining of a martial meteorology is not merely metaphor. It is our reality. A declassified American document, entitled "Weather as a Force Multiplier: Owning the Weather in 2025," for example, outlines "a strategy for the use of a future weather-modification system to achieve military objectives" (Air Force 2). In 1957, during the Vietnam War, the report describes the formation of a president's committee on weather control in response to the "explicit recogn[ition] [of] the military potential of weather-modification"—a tactic that could "become a more important weapon than the atom bomb." "The damage caused by the storms," researchers continue, "is indeed horrendous...a tropical storm has an energy equal to 10,000 one-megaton hydrogen bombs" (Air Force 3, 18). These were not just projections. In 1966, Project Popeye reportedly "extended the monsoon season in order to increase the amount of mud on the Ho Chi Minh trail" to reduce "enemy movement." "Positive results" led to "continued operations from 1967-1972" (Air Force 28). Other experiments conducted by the US military include cloud modification, increased precipitation, and even the "seeding of severe storms and hurricanes" (Air Force 5).

The critical significance of this history of weather manipulation is twofold. First, the conception of these experiments (1950's), temporally aligns with what is referred to as the Great Acceleration or the beginning of the transition from the Holocene epoch to the Anthropocene, with many scientists arguing that the actual date should be that of the first atom bomb test in 1945.³ The atom bomb was derived from extracting uranium in the Congo. As a metal taken from the Earth's crust, uranium is the environment made modern weapon. The military's acknowledgement, then, of weather intervention as the logical transition

from the atom bomb suggests that geoengineering—or what could easily turn into martial meteorology—is the colonial project of the Anthropocene. Although military manipulation of the weather is currently illegal, geoengineering projects potentially offer a legal avenue for western nations to intervene environmentally as a means of oppression and economic exploitation.

The special emphasis of the report, “Weather as a Force Multiplier,” on environmental manipulation to surveil, create docile bodies, and control movement also attaches a carceral dimension to meteorology. The carceral is typically identified in terms of unnatural, human created material and immaterial social structures, such as social policies, prisons, schools, and hospitals. However, the martial meteorology of the twenty-first century urges us to consider the how the surrounding natural environment may be designed or altered, as well as how climatic phenomena like heat, rain, and even storms may be harnessed as a method of force and control. More specifically, carceral ecology reframes Michel Foucault’s historical rendering of punishment and discipline from spectacle of death to carceral in an environmental context, whereby readily visible and violent displays of environmental power, like the atom bomb, give way to less visible, insidious national and global mechanisms, such as diminished land space, dispossession, and the disregard of climate refugees by international law. In this way, the process through which the spatial interior of the prison is configured in order to maximize discipline and surveillance is the same process by which western powers can manipulate the topography or climate of an area to serve their geopolitical interests. As such, the traditional carceral subject, a state’s own population, may now be better understood as a kind of training ground for government projects directed against a new carceral subject made up of foreign people and lands.

Power relations are thus produced and performed differently in the Anthropocene. “We must cease once and for all,” Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, “to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’ In fact, *power produces; it produces reality*; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 187, emphasis mine). Unlike Rob Nixon’s slow violence, carceral ecology is not a method of shifting toxic waste or pollution to targeted communities. It is processual

in nature, continually engaging in processes of modification meant to produce a new environment and a new lived reality. As contemporary afropessimist scholars, such as Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Frank Wilderson have argued, it is not exclusion but rather *inclusion* into a constructed and maintained sociopolitical and legal framework that is foundational to operations of normalized antiblack violence committed against people and communities. Carceral ecology is an aesthetic practice that serves as a material extension to structural and systemic racism whereby nature—land, fauna, waterways—is used as modeling clay, transformed into an enforcer of global political agendas that are undergirded by racial violence and white supremacy.⁴ Western powers, in other words, as Jesmyn Ward would have it, are building “racism...into the very bones” of our world (Ward, *The Atlantic*). In this, carceral ecology is part of what Christina Sharpe has called a “total climate” of antiblackness (Sharpe 169).

Although carceral ecology extends beyond US national borders, its organizing schema can be sourced back to the plantation. In this essay, however, I trace only the American genealogy of carceral ecology and its origin in the antebellum South. Southern plantocracies were not only an originary source of modern biopower, but racialized constructions of ecology as well. As Britt Rusert has shown, the plantation system doubled as an ecological practice that attempted to maintain a healthy congruity between human and nonhuman bodies. “Experts directed planters to keep the entire architecture of the plantation,” Rusert explains, “including the ‘culture of soil, building, draining, ditching, and manure making,’ as organized as possible.” “The plantation,” she continues, “was figured as a kind of biopolitical institution of health management early on, as planters sought to keep an entire ecology of slaves, crops, animals, and environmental factors in a salubrious order” (Rusert 30). Plantation maintenance attended to enslaved people, animals, and crops, as well as the construction and upkeep of structures meant to guide, shape, and contain the environment. The draining ditches, for example, gathered and directed the flow of water and crops were seeded in organized rows to maximize harvest size. In addition, the surrounding woods were cut and cleared in a way that held the enslaved in a state of hypervisibility while at the same time forming a natural enclosure around the property. The environment, as I discuss in more detail later, was also converted into weapon. Louis Hughes, a formerly

enslaved man, for example, recalls many instances in his narrative of being tortured by a switch, fashioned from plantation peach trees, that “cracked the flesh so that blood oozed out” (Hughes 89). “The land was not merely a backdrop to slavery,” historian Walter Johnson explains, “the land was the thing itself, the determining parameter of...conditions as a slave” (Johnson 221).

Saidiya Hartman once called the plantation “the belly of the world” (Hartman 1). Indeed, our world is most often articulated in feminine terms—mother earth, Gaia—a derivative of early colonialism that perceived already occupied lands as virgin and collapsed nonwhites within civilizations’ categorical opposition: nature. For its part, ecology comes from the Greek root *oikos*, meaning home or dwelling which the Greeks readily associated with woman’s interior, her womb. In many ways, earth is both our home and womb, an enclosed dwelling that provides sustenance while protecting humans from the deadly atmosphere outside of our planet. What of Hartman’s words, though? On the one hand, enslaved women were doubly objectified and violated as both sources of labor and producers of laborers. Yet if we take seriously the plantation as the origin and microcosm for the global expression of carceral ecology—another variation of the modern “plantation logics” of Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing’s Plantationocene or what Hartman has called the afterlife of slavery—what else can we learn from it as a womb-like space, a dwelling?⁵ For one, our world—house and shelter—instead becomes a place of confinement, a prison. The once protective and sacred interior of the household is remade into violent containment. The house, Elaine Scarry notes, is

The simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body. It keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self, preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. (Scarry 38)

Scarry goes on to illustrate the way the house has been historically associated not just with violence, but with torture. In a torture house, “called ‘guest rooms’ in Greece and ‘safe houses’ in the Philippines,” the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms. In this context, she writes, the room

both in its structure and content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact that civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed.... the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process of externalizing the way in which the person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, *the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible made painful, made the direct cause of the pain.* (Scarry 41, emphasis mine)

The white supremacist violence of the antebellum South and of plantation ecology was similarly a practice of defamiliarizing the familiar where the surrounding natural world—home/womb— and its structures were converted into weapon. In this environment, for instance, trees are no longer trees but rather devices of racial terror. Carceral ecology follows this process of unmaking and remaking the world through environmental displays of violence. As Lee Ann Fujii has argued, while contexts differ in many ways—politically, culturally, temporally—displays of violence “make the imaginary real by giving it materiality, visibility, and three-dimensional form. When actors put violence on display, they are bringing to life ideas about how the world should be and more specifically, how it should be ordered—who should have power and who should be included” (Fujii 2). Turning now to Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I continue to sift through the different evolutions of carceral ecology, from its early stages on the plantation, to its toxic presence in communities of the US South, and finally, the worldly arena of the Anthropocene.

II. The Modern Plantation: Mississippi’s Parchman

Prison

The US prison industrial complex of today can be considered a reverberation of Mississippi's Parchman Prison. Parchman, often referred to as Parchman Farm, was purchased by the Mississippi state legislature in 1904. The land was cleared and drained for the cultivation of cotton on its several thousand acres, as well as crops and livestock to feed prisoners and guards. It was one of the first prisons to use convict labor or, more accurately, to re-enslave African Americans for agricultural work. Prisoners were leased out to labor at coal mines, saw-mills, railroads, cotton fields, and to build levees. The Parchman property itself resembled that of an antebellum plantation. The superintendent, who ran the prison like a "slave master," lived in a "Victorian-style mansion" at the "Front Camp" while the men stayed in segregated camps and slept on dirt floors (Oshinsky 626). The convicts were forced to work long hours in which they were physically abused, refused medical attention, and underfed. The story of Riv, Leonie's father, and his time at Parchman during the 1940's runs parallel to the main plot of the novel. As the narrative progresses, Riv slowly recalls the torture and killing of Richie, a twelve-year-old boy imprisoned for stealing food to feed his siblings.

The landscape of Ward's Parchman has been manipulated to create a carceral space. As Riv puts it, "Parchman the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls...Wasn't no brick; wasn't no stone" (Ward 39). Without walls, Parchman depends on a panoptic environmental design to keep men in their designated places and working. Surrounding the plantation, he explains, is a "great dark green tangle: oaks reaching low and wide, vines tangled around trunks...poison sumac and swamp tupelo and cypress and magnolia growing up around us in a circular wall" (Ward 379). The trees—oaks, cypress, magnolia, tangled and thick—not only form a natural enclosure around the prison but are a manifestation of racial terror. Throughout the novel, men have been tracked down, killed, and dismembered in those Mississippi woods. The trees, then, create an ontological barrier around the farm, as well as an epistemic, deep-rooted fear meant to overshadow the possibility of freedom (escaping into the wilderness) with violent death.

Parchman is spatially configured in a way that maximizes surveillance and control at the same time those cleared spaces of hypervisibility leave prisoners exposed to the harsh weather of the Mississippi Delta. "It's different up there," Riv notes, "The heat. Ain't no water to catch the wind and cool you off, so the heat settles and bakes. Like a wet oven. Soon enough my hands thickened up and my feet crusted and bled" (Ward 41). Here the carceral extends beyond the walls of the prison into the natural world. Instead of bars and chains, Parchman uses environmental elements to manage prisoner bodies. Riv's hands and feet harden and thicken, undergoing a physical transformation where his body is remade by the weather. His injuries, moreover, prevent him from escaping. "Runaway slaves often referred to the condition of their feet as an index of their vulnerability," Johnson explains. "The remaking of space as discipline began with the abrasion of bare feet." During the antebellum period, plantation owners would "wear all the skin off" the feet of the enslaved they feared would run away" (Johnson 219). These wounds, moreover, are both physical and psychic. "I understood that when I was on that line," Riv states, "I had to not think about it. I ain't think about Papa or Stag or the sergeant...or the dogs...I forgot it all and bent and stood and bent and stood" (Ward 40). Carceral ecology forces Riv into a disorienting process of worldly undoing in which the environment around him is disassembled and reassembled as weapon. At Parchman, it is the natural world that tortures and executes, "collapsing in on the human center to crush it alive" (Scarry 45). Riv's pain is thus a simultaneous disintegration of body and spirit, rendering him one of Foucault's docile bodies— »mastered and pliable...ready at all times, turning silently in the automatism of habit" (Foucault 135).

As well, Richie's story demonstrates how the weaponized environment can become deadly. "Was one of them days the sun bear down on you so hard like it's twisting you inside out, all you do is burn," Riv recalls, "One of them heavy days. Was a day like that the boy drop his hoe" (Ward 185). In response, Richie is taken by the sergeant and positioned "spread-eagle on the ground in the dirt with his hands and legs tied to them posts." "When that whip cracked in the air and came down his back," Riv continues, "he sounded like a puppy. Yelped so loud. And that's what he kept doing, over and over" (Ward 115). Afterwards, "when they untied him, his back was full of blood, them seven gashes open like filleted fish" (Ward 116). As Riv attempts to attend to Richie's wounds

with bandages and ointment, Richie is reduced to a traumatic state of paralysis:

“It’s too much dirt,” Richie said. His teeth was chattering, so his words came out in stutters. “It’s everywhere. In the fields. Not just my back, Riv. It’s in my mouth so I can’t taste nothing and in my ears so I can’t hardly hear and in my nose, all in my nose and throat, so I can’t hardly breathe....I dream about it. Dream I’m eating it with a big long silver spoon. Dream that when I swallow, it go down the wrong hole, to my lungs.” (Ward 197)

Riv’s description of Richie as “drowning,” his back like a “filleted” fish, coupled with Richie’s later assertion that his pulse felt as “fluttery as a jellyfish” in his chest and that the dirt “parted like a wave,” creates an inversion of the collective trauma of the Middle Passage in which Richie is asphyxiating not on water, but on southern soil (Ward 210). Richie’s nightmares position the dirt as an elemental origin of his trauma where his body is not just overwhelmed and filled with soil but beaten into the ground. Prisoner bodies are thus used to cultivate Parchman land while also forcefully made into a material part of the landscape. The name of the prison, Parchman, attests to this elemental torture with the word “parch” meaning “to dry by exposure to intense heat,” “the action of the sun, fever, thirst, etc. to dry to extremity...to deprive of water; to scorch,” and “to shrivel up with heat” (*OED*). “Sometimes I wonder who that parched man was,” Jojo thinks, dying for water...Wonder what that man said before he died of a cracked throat” (Ward 62-63). Heat is turned into an element of antiblackness and an accessory to the carceral that, as we will see, plays a central role in the narrative and our own world.

The Carceral Community: Bois Sauvage

Ward’s Bois Sauvage is located along the southern Gulf Coast, an area that has been the target of racist dumping practices, factory pollution, and oil spills. As Leonie’s friend Al puts it, “They shouldn’t even call that a gulf since it’s the color of ditch water,” it’s not “real water” (Ward 139). Al’s comment points to the way that contamination has toxified the surrounding environment, transforming water, an element necessary to

human survival, from its natural state to an uncanny representation that kills instead of nourishes. "Growing up out here in the country taught me things," Leonie explains, "Taught me that after the first fat flush of life, time eats away at things: it rusts machinery, it matures animals to become hairless and featherless, and it withers plants." "But since Mama got sick," she continues, "I learned pain can do that, too. Can eat a person until there's nothing but bone and skin and a thin layer of blood left. How it can eat your insides and swell you in the wrong ways" (Ward 48). Leonie describes something more than aging. Like the waters of the Gulf, the living beings of Bois Sauvage are made perversions of their original selves. And it is not only the pollution of the community that disfigures the bodies of residents—literally eating them inside out—but the psychic pain of knowing and enduring. Ward conveys that pain—produced by the racial violence of environmental decay—through an elemental vocabulary. When Maman undergoes chemotherapy, for example, Jojo states that "the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the sun and the air do water oaks" (Ward 6). Leonie's sadness is depicted in similar terms: "just dry air and hard red clay where grass won't grow" (Ward 125). Jojo's chest, too, feels "hollow" like a "ditch dusty dry" (Ward 139). In this way, Parchman's weaponized heat, a dryness that kills, spills over into the town. Carceral ecology thus doubly manifests in the novel: occurring in the lived realities of the characters and taken up by Ward to demonstrate the relationship between the elements and racial trauma.

Ward emphasizes the intergenerational nature of this elemental trauma through the narratives of Pop's brother, Stag, and his son, Given. After being beaten by a group of military officers at the bar, Stag returns to the home he shared with Pop. He isn't there long before more white men arrive to arrest Stag for assault and Pop for harboring a fugitive. "They tied both of us and took us up the road," Pop tells Jojo. "You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is going to Parchman" (Ward 22). Because Stag went to a white bar and violated the community's supposedly natural order of things, an unspoken racial ecology bound by "the law of God and man," both he and Pop are legally punished. At the prison, the brothers are separated and placed in two different camps. We are never told of Stag's time at Parchman but the man who returns has been reduced to a ghostly shadow of himself. Stag "walked upright like

Pop,” Jojo states, “Had the same nose Pop had. But everything else about him was nothing like Pop, was like Pop had been wrung out like a wet rag and then dried up in the wrong shape....I’d asked Mam once what was wrong with him, why he always smelled like a [road killed] armadillo, and she had frowned and said: *He sick in the head, Jojo*” (Ward 18). Jojo’s perception of Stag is depicted in sensory terms. Although he looks like his uncle, standing upright with the same facial features, there is a difference about Stag that transcends language. Parchman’s violent legacy has remade Stag into a docile body, turning him from wet rag, a malleable material, to a shell of a human being, dried and hardened by the Delta’s carceral climate into something not fully recognizable.

Stag’s internal decay is further illustrated by Jojo’s comparison of his scent to a dead armadillo. Throughout the narrative, armadillos are continually grouped with roadkill, linking Stag’s smell to rot and death. In the novel’s opening scene, for instance, Jojo likens the stench of goat slaughter to “armadillos smashed half flat on the road, rotting in the asphalt and heat.” At first this conflation with the animal may seem to merely emphasize the dehumanization that undergirds racial violence. Yet Ward’s use of the armadillo, among other common Mississippi fauna, further indexes a human and racial dimension to the decay of Bois Sauvage that is endemic to the southern region and globally scalable. At the same time, the elemental—heat—is once more positioned as a driving force, a form of de-assembly that is internal (psychic) and outward (bodily). Indeed, Jojo again returns to the road killed armadillo when he describes the non-linear chronology of Pop’s story about Richie and Parchman as “circling...like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals...armadillos...or hit deer bloating and turning sour in the Mississippi heat” (Ward 230). Richie and Stag, both victims of Parchman, are reduced to dead animals along the highway, a synecdoche for the black body obliterated. As their bodies sour in the Delta heat, moving through stages of decomposition, they also show the processual nature of violence through elements harnessed by white supremacy.

Like Stag, Given does not listen when Pop tries to tell him about the community. “*They look at you and see difference, son,*” Pop explains, “*Don’t matter what you see. It’s about what they do*” (Ward 50, emphasis in original). Despite Pop’s warning, Given accepts an invitation to go

hunting with his white friends. The area where the men hunt is known as The Kill, a name that explicitly warns what takes place there and defines the natural world as deadly. As we have seen, the novel's wooded areas are dangerous places if you are a black man. It wasn't long ago, in fact, when a young couple was lynched in the forest by a large mob with "torches and lanterns that lit up the night to dawn." The next morning, the two were found hanged and dismembered, "the ground all around the roots of the tree...smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too" (Ward 176). Heat once more takes on a dual nature. The element is an expression of anger—to be heated in anger or intensity of feeling—recast as racist signifier. It was the torches, after all, that communicated to the rest of the town the murder taking place in the woods that night. Heat is also a literal rendering of the phrase *packing heat* whereby heat is no longer metaphor but an actual weapon that, in its use to burn the bodies, extends beyond killing to a device of antiblack terror and a practice of total annihilation. The novel's epigraph even attests to this, wishing "coals of fire" to be "heaped upon the head / of all whose gospel is the whip and *flame*" (quoted in Ward 5, emphasis mine).

Even without this history, readers still know what is going to happen to Given in those Mississippi woods. And so it is with a nauseating sense of dread that we follow the young teen as he agrees to a bet between himself and the other boys while hunting. "He had bet Michael's cousin," Leonie tells us, "that he could kill a buck with a bow before the boy could take one down with a rifle" (Ward 50). Given purchases a "fancy hunting bow and arrow" and spends hours in the backyard practicing in the prior weeks. On the day of the hunt, Leonie recalls Given's fate through the perspective of Michael so that the story moves temporally backwards, beginning with the men's reactions shortly after they have returned home from The Kill. What happened to Given is thus initially not directly stated but rather framed through the symbol of the house—what Scarry has called a "miniaturization of the world, of civilization"—positioning the Delta as microcosm for our broader reality (Scarry 38). According to Michael, when the cousin arrived home, there was "a look on his face like he smelled something bad, something like a rat dead on poison driven inside the walls by the winter cold, and the uncle saying: *He shot the nigger. This fucking hothead shot the nigger for beating him*" (Ward 51, emphasis in original). All of the components of the trip—the woods, the gun, the friends, the deer—are undone, de-objectified, and given

power. What seemed like average, quotidian parts of boys hunting have actually been weapons against Given. The structure of the world remade into something deadly. Pop's warning is therefore literalized: "*Don't matter what you see. It's about what they do*" (Ward 50). There are no woods, no gun, no deer, and no friends in a world molded by white supremacy, only structures that dictate power relations. In his refusal to see a second nature, Given, like Stag, evokes a blackness that is unruly, even rebellious.⁶ The perception of black disobedience once more violates what has been perversely remade into the natural order of things— "the law of God and man" (Ward 22). Michael's cousin, *hotheaded* with racist aggression, puts it concisely: "He was supposed to lose, Pa" (Ward 51).

The figure of the rat reinforces these violent relations of power in their eating of nourishment that is actually poisoned bait. In search of warmth, the rodent moves toward the heat, an element of lethal proportions in the narrative. Inside the home's interior, what should be a womb-like source of comfort and protection, the animal dies and decomposes. In *Bois Sauvage*, racial terror not only leaves a scent, but is a poison laced into the very structure of the environment. Considered a pest animal, the rodent is associated with notions of excess, dirt, and abjectness. In this, the rat initially seems to serve as a metonym for young black men, who, in their deaths, are perceived as an abstracted, generic, and undying whole rather than as individuals.⁷ However, as Joshua Bennett has argued, rats are also figures of insurgency, those who are clever, adaptable, and refuse to be "held down or hemmed in by the limits of human expectation" (Bennett 49). Through Given's comparison to the rat, then, Ward also positions blackness as being full of "infinite transgressive potential" (Bennett 48). The rat thus subtly foreshadows the novel's interest in not just black futurity, but the potential that lies in the futurity of the Black South.

IV. The Anthropocene: A Drowning World

Derek Walcott once wrote that the "sea is history." Such pairings, as Ian Baucom has shown, appear in several works on the Black Atlantic. Walcott's poem, for example, is an allusion to Jamaican poet Kamau Brathwaite's line—"the unity is submarine"—in his work *Sun Poem*. And Martinican writer Édouard Glissant would use both Brathwaite and

Walcott's words as the epigraphs to his now canonical *Poetics of Relation* in which he demonstrates the interconnectedness of the formerly enslaved and their descendants through this aquatic history. For these writers, the Atlantic Ocean, labeled a "zone of death" and a "collective gravesite" by Sowande' Mustakeem, not only figures as a site where the bodies of murdered black persons exist as kin, memorial, and archive, but it is also the literal and figurative element responsible for both separating and "link[ing] histories of people" (Mustakeem 302, Baucom 319). Similarly, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Pop tells of "white ghosts" who kidnapped and sold his great-grandmother, forcing her into the "death march to the coast." "She learned that bad things happened on that ship," he recalls, "that her skin grew around chains....That she was made into animal under the hot, bright sky" (Ward 68-69). Along the fields of Parchman, men are still trapped by that heat—"like a fishing net," Pop states, "Us caught and struggling" (Ward 68). Ward thereby links what Glissant has characterized as the triple abyss of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—the belly of the slave ship, the depths of the sea, and the plantation—to their modern reverberations from Parchman Prison, to the Bois Sauvage community, and now, as part of the climate crisis.⁸

What of those waters, then, full of so many ghosts? What of those waters, that history now returned, lapping at vast shores in a threat to rise up, to take the land in their angry maw? In 2022, scientists warned that sea levels along the US coastline will rise an additional foot over the next thirty years. Flooding will be ten times worse than it is today. As it is, Louisiana already loses a "football field's worth of land" every hour and a half. "We harnessed it, regularized it, shackled it," the Army Corps of Engineers once said of the levees and flood walls that would break during Hurricane Katrina, killing and stranding thousands (Kolbert). Today engineers are at work on projects of controlled flooding meant to curb the consequences of the climate crisis in certain areas, despite the possibility of negative outcomes in others. "Our world: an aquarium," Leonie states. The aquarium, or ocean on a table, as it was originally called, was perhaps a prescient imagining of our future as governments now attempt to rearrange a drowning world. Yet if the Atlantic's past, accumulated in generations of the Black South, has taught us anything, it is that water, like the Delta's heat, too, holds the capacity to be another form of elemental antiblackness, to carry with it the agenda of a

white supremacist world.

When Jojo is nearly killed by a white police officer during a traffic stop, Ward's descriptions start to blend into a combination of the two elements as the novel's elemental focus turns from heat to water. The air is suddenly "shallow as a muddy puddle" with "clouds like great gray waves"—"everything is hot and wet in the car" (Ward 154). "I can feel water running down my ribs, my back," Jojo says once the cop leaves, and I "think about the gun....I think it would have been hot to touch. So hot it would have burned my fingerprints off" (Ward 160-161). Jojo perceives the carceral as a weaponized heat, the same heat that bore down on his great-great grandmother and trapped his father, "like a fishing net," at Parchman Prison. It is a heat capable of burning fingerprints, an annihilation of identity. In contrast, terror is depicted as a familial and visceral knowledge, a kinship bound up in and expressed through the ocean's salty waters running down the boy's back.

After the family has left the scene, Leonie experiences a similar kind of flooding as she sleeps:

Michael's rolled all the windows down. I've been dreaming for hours, it feels like, dreaming of being marooned on a deflating raft in the middle of the endless reach of the Gulf of Mexico, far out where the fish are bigger than men. I'm not alone in the raft because Jojo and Michaela and Michael are with me and we are elbow to elbow. But the raft must have a hole in it, because it deflates. We are all sinking, and there are manta rays gliding beneath us and sharks jostling us. (Ward 195)

In her nightmare, Leonie reimagines the trauma of the police stop in ecological terms. She is stranded on a vast stretch of ocean, the surrounding waters transformed into another weapon of antiblackness, threatening to overwhelm the body in an act of suffocation that silences as it kills. Sharks, the marine life of the Middle Passage, actively try to capsize the raft, bestial devices of terror. "I am trying to keep everyone above water," Leonie continues, "even as I struggle to stay afloat. I sink below the waves and push Jojo upward so he can stay above the waves and breathe, but then Michaela sinks and I push her up, and Michael sinks so I shove him up to the air as I sink and struggle" (Ward 195).

Now drowning, Leonie sacrifices herself to push family members up toward the air in a plea for more time, knowing the sea will ultimately finish what human hands did not. They are sinking into the abyss, into an environment designed to consume them.

Ward's vignette submerges the family in oceanic layers of history, an entangled site of memory and trauma. At the same time, the image of the raft further illustrates, as Glissant and Baucom would have it, the tautological nature of the Black Atlantic. The raft represents a violent past while also evoking haunting images from our own present day of African refugees drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean—often as Europeans watched—in an attempt to escape the war-torn, socioeconomic impact of the climate crisis. Texts “haunted by the specter of the Atlantic and the ghosts of trans-Atlantic slavery,” Baucom argues, challenge our understanding of historical time by establishing time as something non-linear and without distinct periods. In this sense, there is no past, present, or future. Rather, for Baucom, following Glissant, time is sedimentary, accumulating “unevenly in the body, in architecture, in law, in language, in rituals, customs, ceremonies,” and, as with Ward's vignette, “in images” (Baucom 322). Leonie's large-scale rendering of the aquarium once more reorients the Black Atlantic to the here and now. Through layers of seemingly unrelated images— road/sea, car/raft, heat/water—Ward demonstrates that “the past is not in fact history, not yet done with, not yet worn out.” “What has begun,” Baucom states, “does not end” for “what-has-been is, cannot be undone, cannot cease to alter all the future-presents that flow out of it » (Baucom 330). Richie puts it concisely: “Parchman [is] past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness [shows] that time [is] a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?” (Ward 279).

The southern yet worldly connection is further illustrated as Michael discusses his time on the Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf, where he was working when the oil rig exploded in 2010. The Deepwater oil spill is one of the largest environmental disasters to date. Afterwards, “I actually cried,” Michael confesses to Jojo, “for you and your sister.” He continues to tell the boy, “How the dolphins were dying off, how whole pods of them washed up on the beaches in Florida, in Louisiana, in Alabama and Mississippi: oil-burnt, sick with lesions, hollowed out from the insides.”

Environmental exploitation and capitalistic greed are made legible on the dolphins' bodies through lesions from burns that, like the novel's humans, hollow the animals "out from the insides." *"Some scientists for BP said this didn't have nothing to do with the oil,"* Michael continues, *"that sometimes this is what happens to animals: they die for unexpected reasons."* (Ward 210, emphasis in original). *"And when the scientists said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals,"* he concludes. As Jojo reads Michael's facial expressions and body language, he perceptively understands that Michael is "thinking about me. I wonder if Michael thought about that yesterday, when he saw that gun, saw that cop push me down." Immediately following, Michael shifts to Given's story: "My family ain't always did right. Was one of my dumbass cousins that killed your uncle Given....Some people think it was a hunting accident" (Ward 211). Ward draws from the southern Gulf Coast to interweave the carceral with that of global capitalism. Michael's cousin, as well as the police officer and scientists, reenact a legacy of liberal humanism where death was legitimized through processes of dehumanization or animalization and white (human) lives were positioned above all others in a hierarchized understanding of life. The acronym N.H.I—"no humans involved"—once used by the Los Angeles police to refer to young black men bears warning once again in Anthropocene thinking.⁹

Indeed, climate change is currently responsible for around 5 million deaths annually with The World Health Organization estimating that between 2030 and 2050, that total will increase by approximately 250,000 deaths.¹⁰ Nevertheless, American conservatives, such as former President Donald Trump, have labeled the climate crisis a hoax intended to prevent "boost[s] [in] oil production in the United States" (Metzger). Others have accused those concerned of being "hell-bent on curtailing high living standards," "American prosperity," and wanting to "liquid[ate] the American way of life altogether" (Collomb 26). These arguments, much like Crutzen and Schwägel's push for a world-wide adoption of the "American Way of Life," seek to protect (white) national and economic interests that were built on and continue to be maintained through antiblack violence and black death. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* thus warns of a world made lethal through carceral ecology and exacerbated by Euro-American capital's racialized exploitation of the climate crisis.

V. Sea of Love: Conclusion

As the novel concludes, the narrative itself floods with water. The room where Mama lies dying smells of “salt: ocean and blood” (Ward 228). Her fingernails turn to “seashells, salt-pitted and yellow” (Ward 217). When Richie opens his mouth, he “hear[s] the rushing of waves” (Ward 224). Water, however, is no longer a wholly violent threat. Rather, Ward subverts carceral ecology’s elemental antiblackness by reclaiming water as a symbol of black love, kinship, and futurity. “I hope I fed you enough,” Mama tells Jojo, “So you can carry it with you like a camel....Pull that water up when you need it” (Ward 218). Water, like the gris gris bag given to Jojo by Pop, here serves as a source of nourishment. Similarly, as Mama passes over, Given provides comfort by telling her that he has “come with the boat” so that she, unlike so many before, may complete the return migration home to ensure that her soul rests peacefully (Ward 249).¹¹ And it is water that allows Michaela to soothe the ghosts still bound to the Mississippi woods with her singing. It is “like she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie’s womb,” Jojo explains, “the sound of all water, and now she sings it. *Home*, they say” (Ward 262, emphasis in original). “*Mer* was,” Derek Walcott writes, “both sea and mother in our Antillean patois” (Walcott 14, emphasis in original).

Ward’s novel ends, then, not only with the family’s reclamation of the Delta’s elements, but with hope in black kinship— a denouement that echoes her own decision to, as Donna Haraway would have it, *stay with the trouble*, and raise her children in Mississippi. Indeed, “Even as the South remains troubled by its past,” Ward explains,

there are people who are fighting so it can find its way to a healthier future, never forgetting the lessons of its long brutal history, ever present, ever instructive. We stand at the edge of a gulf, looking out on a surging, endless expanse of time and violence, constant and immense, and like water, it wishes to swallow us. We resist. We dredge new beaches, build seawalls, fortify the shore and hold fast to each other, even as storm after storm pushes down on us. We learn how to bear the rain, the wind, the inexorable waves. We fear its power, respect its reach, but we learn how to navigate it, because we must. We draw sustenance from it. We dream of a day when we will not feel

the need to throw our children into its maw to shock them into learning how to swim. We stand. We build. (Ward, *Time*)

Ward's statement, like *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, leaves us with a sense of restorative hope, one that is, despite everything, derived from the waters of her southern home. In this, perhaps another understanding of weather is also apt, one that the Black South—held together not by topographical borders but by familial roots—may teach us, of *weathering* as an act of survival, of coming through the storm, salvaging, and rebuilding. Of relation in the Anthropocene. After all, it may be as William Faulkner once said, "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi."

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[1](#) See Lucy E. Edwards, "What is the Anthropocene?" *Eos, Earth, and Space Science News*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2015, pp. 6-7.

[2](#) Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 essay in *Critical Inquiry*, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" drew wide criticism for its universal understanding of humans as a singular species. See Ben Dibley, "Nature is Us: The Anthropocene and Species-Being." *Transformations*, vol. 21, 2012 and Ursula K. Heise, "Comparative Literature and the Environmental Humanities" in *Futures of Comparative Literature*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Routledge, 2017.

[3](#) See Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Cornelia Ludwig, et al. "The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration." *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, 81-98.

[4](#) For a more detailed discussion of violence as an aesthetic practice, see Lee Ann Fujii, *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display*, page 2.

[5](#) See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities*, v. 6, 2015, pp. 159-155, and Greg Mitman "Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing." *Edge Effects*, 2019. <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>

[6](#) Stag's name also emphasizes this characterization in its connection to the racist slur buck, "historically used to refer to unruly Black men" (Ko 86). See Aph Ko, *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft: A Guide to Getting Out* (2019).

[7](#) See Bénédicte Boisseron, "Jesmyn Ward's Dog Bite: Mississippi Love and Death Stories," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*.

[8](#) In "Land and Pessimistic Futures in Contemporary African American Literature" (2020), Kirsten Dillender makes a similar temporal argument drawing from Christina

Sharpe's work, *In the Wake: Blackness and Being*. See p. 136.

[9](#) See Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved": An Open Letter to my Colleagues." *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1994, page 1.

[10](#) See Qui Zhao, Yuming Guo, Tingting Ye, Antonio Gasparrini, Shilu Tong, Ala Overcenco, et al. "Global regional, and national burden of mortality associated with non-optimal ambient temperatures from 2000-2019: at three-stage modelling study." *The Lancet: Planetary Health*, vol. 5, no. 7, 2021, pp. e415-e425.

[11](#) In *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Stephanie E. Ball recalls a scene witnessed by Charles Ball, a formerly enslaved man in South Carolina: "Remembering an African-born slave's funerary ritual...the man 'decorated the grave of his departed with a miniature canoi, about a foot long, and a little paddle, with which he said it would cross the ocean to his own country'—a return migration" (Smallwood 286-287).