

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

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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.