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A Darkness Endemic to Mississippi

Jesmyn Ward's Haunted Places

Abstract

The literature of the Southern United States has always been expression of a multilayered connection with 'place,' a complex term encompassing identity, history, and politics. Because of its distinctive history, the South's literary landscapes are often haunted by real and metaphorical ghosts: simulacra of the region's burdensome and blood-soaked legacy. A narration that acknowledges the existence of specters further complicates the representation of southern space through the polysemic, unpredictable connection with the netherworld. The traditional chronotope of the South, that of the self-supporting idyll, is forced to interact with a repressed, troubling beyond. Haunted places enable forms of counter-communication that challenge the status quo, because, as Jacques Derrida writes, addressing ghosts is also a quest for justice that goes beyond the living present. In the case of a political author like Jesmyn Ward, the commitment to justice is clearly expressed in her use of gothic tropes as a way to channel and revive the suffocated voices of the past. Ward's work questions the present and restores the dark corners of her native Mississippi's history. Through theories of literary spaces and hauntology, this essay analyzes Ward's militant poetics, and how they are grounded in the relationship between immanent and transcendental landscapes.

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Stand up, be counted with all the rest
(Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam")

In the introduction to her seminal work, *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger poetically connects African American women and their locale through a disturbing image. Based on some first-hand witnesses, it appears that slaves used to consume dirt as a means of suicide. The practice was so widespread that masters had them in muzzles in order to avoid losing their property to illness (Yaeger 2000, x). A tool like a muzzle not only prevented slaves from eating clay, it also had the effect of silencing them. In her painful description of this torture practice, given in *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison placed metaphorical emphasis on the fact that being unable to

move the tongue to speak was the worst part of having one's mouth in an iron bit. "How offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it" she writes, adding that, while the lacerations caused by the muzzle could be soothed with grease, nothing could be done to heal the tongue itself, equally insulted by metal and forced silence (Morrison 2016, 84). The compulsion to speak and the pain caused by its frustration are central in Morrison's novel. The protagonists' parable might be "not a story to pass on" (Morrison 2016, 323) but, through the ghost of *Beloved*, Sethe is finally able to articulate her otherwise "unspeakable" past (Morrison 2016, 69). The specter's role is thus fundamentally ambiguous. She is an entity that fosters and channels narration, making closure and deliverance possible. But she is also the life-draining resurgence of something too painful to put into words. Stories, Morrison suggests, have the power to redeem or to condemn. And the same goes with dirt. Ingesting clay could be a way to kill oneself and escape the hell of the plantation, but prospective slaves also ate earth to induce sickness and avoid being sold (Yaeger 2000, x). The way in which dirt (understood here also as a synecdoche for the individual's place in the world) is used causes dissolution or survival. With the latter comes the possibility of narrating, which in turn leads to the ability to liberate. Matters of life and death, soil, and narration seem to be poetically entwined. Patricia Yaeger's study threads land, story and history, exposing their invisible kinships—invisible, or better, spectral, since, as in Toni Morrison's novel, phantoms can appear (as they often do) where these three dimensions overlap. The ghost of *Beloved*, like the ghosts of all the "foundation-bearing black folks who lie beneath the earth" (Yaeger 2000, 20), acts as catalysts, conjuring that crossroad upon which the relationship between subject, place, and history is negotiated through narrative. Morrison herself declared that writing *Beloved* was "to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (Morrison 2016, xi), pointing out how the novel's narration proceeds from an experience of place rooted in spiritualism.¹

In the literature of the South, place is a complex word charged with manifold significations. A narrative that openly acknowledges the role of ghosts in the construction of a literary geography opens the latter to the unpredictable landscapes of the netherworld, adding layer upon transient layer to the intricacies of space and time. Through a methodological approach equally influenced

¹ In "Goat Bones in the Basement: A Case of Race, Gender and Haunting in Old Savannah," Tiya Miles examines how the rise of the so-called 'dark tourism' (or tourism of the macabre) has given adequate public prominence to the substantive historical relation between many southern places and slavery or racial violence. Attracted by the thrills promised by allegedly haunted places, tourists are faced with real historical horrors instead. In exhuming otherwise hidden or underrepresented aspects of history through ghost stories, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (both discussed further on in the essay) perform a similar task.

by theories of literary geographies and hauntology, I will analyze how the works of Jesmyn Ward, a contemporary black author from the South, delineate a poetics firmly grounded in the stratified relationship of Mississippi's immanent and transcendental spaces, and consequently in its history. To do so, I will at least briefly touch on each of her writings, but I am mainly going to reference Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), and one of her two National Book Award-winning novels, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). Part of my argument will be developed around the chronotopic dimension of Ward's work, in order to show how her engagement with real and metaphorical ghosts results in a critical rethinking of literary time and space. Jesmyn Ward's writing expresses a peculiar relation between (cultural) landscape and the world of the dead that is rooted in a strong political dimension, projected by the intertextual connections that her production establishes with similar literary works. Throughout the essay, I will map these links to demonstrate how Ward's voice descends from, and elaborates on, a tradition devoted to space, time, and the ghosts that inhabit these dimensions.

1. Grounding and unearthing

"*I'm telling you: there's a ghost in here*" says Ward's brother in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (Ward 2013, 8), trying to scare his sisters by convincing them that their father's house is haunted by the phantom of a previous owner who was shot and killed. The fact that Ward chooses to open her only autobiographical attempt with a ghost story is revealing of the tone of her narration at large. In this case, the fictitious entity functions as a synecdoche for the far more concrete, violent deaths of five young African Americans (including Ward's brother) in her hometown of DeLisle. But there is always some kind of specter haunting the background of the narration. In *Salvage the Bones*, it is embodied by the deep mythical structure that shapes the orphaned protagonist's understanding of her decayed surroundings, but also by the ever-present memory of a dearly missed mother, and by the impending destruction of the approaching hurricane Katrina. *Where the Line Bleeds* depicts the lives of poor working-class African Americans as they are crushed by systemic oppression enabled by the forces of capital, an eerie entity at any level, because it "does not exist in any substantial sense, yet it is capable of producing practically any kind of effect" (Fisher 2016, 64). Finally, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, it is the restless soul of a young black convict who dies trying to escape from Parchman Farm, the brutal state penitentiary in Mississippi.

This consistent involvement with ghosts both real and metaphorical can be explained by the fact that, simply put, Ward's literature is steeped in grief. Her personal story of loss often surfaces in her fiction thanks to numerous overt and subterranean connections. At least in the

case of *Men We Reaped*, she openly classifies writing as an act of mourning (Ward 2013, 8). But Ward's novels also draw their considerable amount of sacrifice and sorrow from their broader political involvement with the troubled, blood-stained history of Mississippi. This commitment is vindicated throughout her production. *Salvage the Bones*, for instance, performs a twofold political action. First of all, the novel is conceived as a way of restoring and revising the memory of Hurricane Katrina and its effects on the poor living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. "I was [...] angry at the people who blamed survivors for staying," she declared in an interview for *The Paris Review*, "I wrote about the storm because I was dissatisfied with the way it had receded from public consciousness" (Hoover 2011). Then, as the author revealed in that same interview, her use of classical Greek mythology as the deep structure of a story focusing on a dysfunctional family of working-class African Americans is a militant act directed against the ghettoization of black female authors: "I wanted [...] to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage. The stories I write are particular to my community, which means the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the savage, is essentially a universal, human one" (Hoover 2011).

As works like *Men We Reaped* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* demonstrate, Ward's political dimension is inseparable from the real-and-imagined² Mississippi that she translates on the page. Land, it seems, ceaselessly recurs in her literary imagination—and not only in a harrowing way. "I returned to Mississippi because the landscape is beautiful and special, and I am endlessly fascinated by it as I attempt to render it in my writing," she has declared (Henderson 2018), explaining how her writing is characterized by a strong geographical focus. The characters and symbols she deploys may indeed be universally meaningful because of their archetypal qualities, as she claims in the interview. Her stories, though, address a clearly defined here-and-now. Special as the Mississippi landscape might be, and although this affection is clear in the lyrical descriptions of place that abound in Ward's narrative, the author's gaze rarely sits on the surface of things, but pierces the luxuriant facade of (southern) nature to reveal "the charnel-house within," as Herman Melville has defined it.³ As she herself writes, literature is also a way to unravel the tangle of time and place for the sake of justice, a means

² My use of this compound adjective derives from Edward Soja's (and especially from *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places*). Here it indicates the dynamic convergence of "the real and the imagined, [...] consciousness and the unconscious, [...] everyday life and unending history" that takes place in the construction of the literary spaces I analyze (Soja 1996, 57).

³ I am referencing a passage from *Moby Dick's* chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale": "Nature absolutely paints like a harlot whose allures cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (Melville 2018, 157).

to understand “how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread here” (Ward 2013, 8). As a lover of Greek tragedy, Ward always puts pain and mourning at the service of a deeper understanding—her writing, like Aeschylus’s, expresses a *πάθει μάθος* (*pàthei màthos*), an understanding through suffering, that is both existential and political. “All the tragedy that had haunted my family’s life took shape in that great wolf of DeLisle, a wolf of darkness and grief,” she writes, turning the familiar space of her hometown into a ravenous predator feeding from the black community’s youth (Ward 2013, 21). The metaphor ideally elaborates on Patricia Yaeger’s sinister and poetic description of the southern soil as a mass graveyard for African Americans (Yaeger 200, 20), suggesting that place, almost as a conscious entity, is directly responsible for the taking of these lives. The analogy is less tenuous than it may appear, as clarified by *Men We Reaped*. “The land that the community park is built on [...] is designated to be used as a burial site so the graveyard can expand as we die,” Ward writes. “One day our graves will swallow up our playground. Where we live becomes where we sleep” (Ward 2013, 127).

The transfiguration of the real town of DeLisle into a literary deathscape is to be inferred right from the toponym chosen by the author. Beneath the ordinary French name of a community close to the Mississippi-Louisiana state line, Bois Sauvage, Ward hides a suggestion of the real threats posed by this place. As a literal wild wood, Bois Sauvage does not belong to the reassuring pastoral tradition of the American province. It is rather to be identified with its symbolical opposite, the dark, howling wilderness that haunted the nightmares of the first European settlers that set foot on American shores. The images of the wolf and the wilderness, inscribed into the reassuring limits of a torpid small-town dimension, create an uncanny cognitive dissonance. Spaces in Ward’s novels are fundamentally unhomely (the term that better translates Freud’s original word for ‘uncanny,’ *unheimlich*) because they bring disquiet into a supposedly safe space. As a result, “the domestic world does not coincide with itself” anymore (Fisher 2016, 10), and the idyllic, routine predictability of the chronotope that Mikhail Bakhtin associates with the home ground (1981, 225) here is broken. A state of anxiety emerges, saturating the scene with an unsettling (para)psychological atmosphere that properly belongs to gothic literary spaces (Weston 1994, 19).

Given the essentially gothic nature of Ward’s fiction, that should not come as a surprise. Her literary landscapes, like much southern gothic renditions of the spirit of place (and of the *spirits of the place*), belong to a chronotope whose temporal dimension is best described by William Faulkner’s overused quote from *Requiem for a Nun*, “the past is never dead.” A charming way to highlight the strong influence of the past over the present that is typical of southern gothic

literature (and of many examples of southern literature in general), Faulkner's statement takes on a new significance when, as in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, actual ghosts are brought into the picture. In the novel, the presence of ghosts, immaterial but factual harbingers of the past, signals a stronger rupture in temporality (and in spatiality, for time and space are indissolubly connected in a chronotopic dimension) than the one usually associated with a gothic-dynastic plot, in which the past's ability to destroy the present is usually figurative.

In this case, on the other hand, Jojo, the more compassionate and empathic of the novel's protagonists, literally learns a new way of thinking about time and space from Richie, the ghost-boy. "What else I don't know?" Jojo asks. "Too much," says the ghost, mentioning "home" and "love" among the fundamental revelations that death brings. "And time," he concludes, "you don't know shit about time" (Ward 2017, 183-184). Dealing with the undead that disrupt the illusion of a self-contained time-space "is to face the past and its many cultural irruptions in the present. In analyzing diverse images of southern necrologies, we unveil how these eerie figures record, critique, and/or invent convulsive, disruptive constructions of the south. [...] Southbound specters become holograms of an otherwise inarticulate, often distressing past" (Anderson, Hagood and Turner 2015, Introduction). Tracking and mapping (re)apparitions is, as Jacques Derrida writes, an act of responsibility directed beyond the immediacy of the living present (2006, xviii). With her narrative, Ward is ideally following the philosopher's ethical imperative of speaking of and to ghosts and thus giving them a voice in an act of justice that proceeds from the identification and localization of the dead (Derrida 2006, 9). For this reason, conjuring places and presences is always a political act in her work.

An overt example of how her political action is carried through literature is *The Fire This Time*, a collection of essays and poems that Ward edited in 2016. Like the classic by James Baldwin from which the title takes inspiration, the anthology puts the experience of contemporary black Americans at the center, and it is especially focused on institutional racist violence, as the dedication makes clear: "To Trayvon Martin and the many other black men, women, and children who have died and have been denied justice for these last four hundred years" (Ward 2016, xii). Among the contributors gathered by Ward, there is US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey. The connections between Ward and Trethewey are numerous, and encompass geography, history, ethnicity, and culture—they both are mixed-race Mississippians from the Gulf Coast (actually, they are from the same county, Harrison), and their works bear the traces of the systemic racism they experienced while growing up there. Like Ward's, Trethewey's work is a kind of cultural archeology devoted to unearthing the memory of America's racial past, and to tracking its persistence in the present. Moreover, they both share a preoccupation with ghosts

and places, as exemplified by Trethewey's contribution to *The Fire This Time*, "Theories of Time and Space," a text that could function as a poetic principle for both authors. The poem is taken from Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Native Guard*, a work dedicated to the exploration of the memorial, spectral threads that connect southern history and the author's personal story. A passage of "Theories of Time and Space" worth focusing on reads:

[...] Cross over
 the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand

 dumped on the mangrove swamp—buried
 terrain of the past. Bring only

 what you must carry—tome of memory,
 its random blank pages. (Trethewey 2006, 1; Ward 2016, 195-196)

The strata that compose the Mississippi landscape are to be excavated with poetry in order to exhume what has been artificially buried or forgotten. In the case of Trethewey, what is retrieved is both the story of her family, born out of an illegal union because of the South's anti-miscegenation laws, and the story of the titular *Native Guard*, an all-black Civil War regiment mainly consisting of former slaves. As in Ward's *Men We Reaped*, private and public sphere, memory and history collapse into one another. The southern soil becomes the symbolical palimpsest that writing investigates for traces of erasure to be brought back to life, creating a counter-narrative of the present.

The spectral dimension of Ward's (and Trethewey's) works lies precisely in the palimpsestic nature of their relationship with the here-and-now. A palimpsest results from subsequent acts of writing, effacement and rewriting. The surface of contemporary Mississippi, like the sands in "Theories of Time and Space," is composed by a narration that is artificially laid upon the history (or better, the histories) of the place. But, as Sarah Dillon writes, any new text added to the palimpsest "superimposes itself upon, and yet is still haunted by, the other texts in the palimpsest's history" (2007, 9). Like in a séance, these haunting narratives are channeled by writing, which becomes a medium for the voices of the dead so that they can be read, questioned, recorded. In this way, the submerged cultural past "is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak and to deliver its [...] message;" literature finds its reason and its agency "in restoring to the surface of the text [a] repressed and buried reality" (Jameson 2002, 3-4).

2. Haunting the chronotope

Through different theories of time and space it is then possible to conjure a different representation of reality, shaped by its spectral dimension instead of being used as an inert top layer, a means of suppressing subterranean forces. Ghosts have a role in forming both its historical and geographical structure, defining the chronotopic value of literary works such as Ward's. As far as history is concerned, fostering apparitions calls to mind Michel Foucault's famous definition of the task of the historian as "the making visible of what was previously unseen" (Foucault 1980, 65)—provided, of course, that such historian be also a psychic of some value. The mention of Foucault is also a reminder that these kinds of spectral discourses are not simply evoked in a sort of crystallized "musealization" (Westphal 2011, 14) of the past, but rather showed "in their strategic connections" (Foucault 1980, 38)—that is, in their relations to power.

This, in a way, echoes James Baldwin's admonition regarding African American history contained in *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin declares that African Americans cannot have a future unless they accept their past. "Accepting one's past—one's history—" he writes, "is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought" (Baldwin 2017, 71). Do not drown in the past he says, but also do not drown the past in invention, do not disguise its true nature as occurs in Trethewey's poem. Ward seems to follow Baldwin's words of advice when she describes *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing's* ghost boy Richie as "pulling all the weight of history behind him" (2017, 265). It is precisely in the active acceptance of the weight of history that the temporal dynamics established by a dialogue with the dead find a new balance.

As elucidated by Claudia Rankine's contribution to *The Fire This Time*, far from being only an appealing but hypothetical connection, the living relationship with ghosts evoked by Ward's writing has momentum. Rankine's essay, titled "The Condition of Black Life is one of Mourning," makes a point that is an ideal response to James Baldwin's question about how African American past should be used:

The Black Lives Matter can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives. Unlike earlier black-power movements that tried to fight or segregate for self-preservation, Black Lives Matter aligns with the dead, continues the mourning, and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us. (Rankine 2016, 150-151)

The kind of grieving evoked by Ward's literature and framed by Rankine's essay is not (or not only) a private event, but a socio-historically conscious act aimed at producing a tangible reaction. It is an example of what Judith Butler defines as a "successful" mourning, because it contemplates not only the pain of losing, but also how loss brings about recognition on a cultural and social level. History can be put to use under such circumstances because "something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties that we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are" (Butler 2004, 22). Writing like Ward does, addressing and historicizing grieving, "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order," and it does so by "theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (Butler 2004, 22). Through ghosts, the chronotopic value of works such as *Sing, Unburied, Sing* or *Men We Reaped* is thus made the vehicle of a rebalanced connection with history. But ghosts also possess an intrinsic spatial value. That is especially true when it comes to a southern black author like Ward, because for them the South is inevitably "a world encumbered with endless melancholy" (Yaeger 2000, 19). Yaeger's suggestion about slaves' bodies metaphorically and literally constituting the southern soil is mirrored by a literature devoted to the "creation of landscapes loaded with trauma unspoken, with bodies unhealed or uncared for, with racial melancholia" (Yaeger 2000, 19).⁴ Since Ward's writing is immersed in a haunted history, it is also dedicated to "fantasmatic tale[s] about a world filled with factual ghosts [...]: a material foundation for a culture that contains too many uncounted bodies" (Yaeger 2000, 19). The traditional chronotope of the Old South (that is, the white, genteel South) is that of the idyll, one in which there is "an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life" to a place (Bakhtin 1981, 225). In the case of African Americans, the assertion is turned upside down, and we are rather in the presence of a fastening-down of *death* to the literary space. Bakhtin's definition should be corrected in "life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers [died] and where one's children and their children will live."⁵

⁴ On the effects of racism on an individual and a culture's mental and physical health, see for example Robert Carter's "A Guide to the Forensic Assessment of Race-Based Traumatic Stress Reactions" (2009), or, for a more recent discussion, Brigid Kleinman and Eric Russ's "Systemic Racism Can Leave Black People Suffering from Symptoms Similar to PTSD" (2020). The grief of minoritarian (in the Deleuzian sense) ethnic groups living under the dominant white American cultural and power structures, racial melancholia, is analyzed among others by Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001), and Joseph R. Winters' *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (2016).

⁵ Bakhtin's original formulation of course was: "where the fathers and grandfathers lived" (Bakhtin 1981, 225).

Specters abound in these lands, and they actively contribute to shaping them: they not only represent a deferral in time that affects the chronological dimension, but also an eerie coexistence of presence and absence that interferes with the spatial dynamics at play in the literary landscape. Mark Fisher defines the feeling of the eerie as provoked “by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*” (2016, 61). The figure of the ghost appears exactly where these two failures overlap: it is both something that is not actually there, and something that should not be there. Here, Fisher is clearly expanding on Derrida’s concept of trace as the “absence of a presence” (1997, xvii), and the French philosopher’s theories are helpful in understanding how the recognition of the trace (that in this case coincides with the ghost) is a first step toward the construction of a different space, just like accepting the past is a move towards a new conception of history according to Baldwin.

Trace, Derrida writes, “is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living with its other, and of an inside to an outside: spacing” (1997, 70). The palimpsestic nature of space contains the possibility of a meaningful spatial exteriority, because a literary space like Ward’s would not appear without its deep involvement with the “nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present” (Derrida 1997, 71). Ward’s intention to restore the traces of the past is evident and, if we follow Derrida (and Yaeger), this also results in a different construction of space, one that counts the bodies buried beneath the earth. The traditional southern sense of place “gives an abiding identity because places associated with family, community, and history have depth” (Wilson 2006, 511). It expresses what the French philosopher calls an “ontology,” an axiomatic link between the present-being to “the stable and presentable determination of a locality” (Derrida 2006, 103). In the case of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Men We Reaped* (and, in a subtler way, also in *Salvage the Bones* and *Where the Line Bleeds*), characters and places are rather connected by a ‘hauntology,’ a spectral spatial-ontological dislocation that is reflected in how space is lived and experienced.⁶

⁶ The concept of hauntology has been used by Sonali Perera in *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* (2014), Jarrod Hayes in *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (2000), and Jen Hui Bon Hoa in “Deconstruction, Collectivity, and World Literature” (2018) among (few) others. In these works, it is chiefly mentioned in relation to the spatial dimension of identity and its absence, something that cannot uncritically be applied to Ward’s case because, as James Baldwin writes, “the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other” (2017, 71). In the context of this essay, the word is to be understood as the geographical projection of the relation that hauntology establishes with ontology—a relation grounded in apparition, repetition, and death (Derrida 2006, 10). Hauntology, or hauntology-in-place, designates a spectral connection with space that is shaped by the returning traces of the past.

As with history, this ghostly spatial interaction aims at recognition and restoration. “Truth be told, I do not want to forget / anything of my former life: the landscape’s / song of bondage” announces the soldier-narrator in Trethewey’s “Native Guard” (2006, 25). The character’s obsession to ‘keep record’ proceeds from his distrust of the official handling of memory, “that dulls the lash / for the master, sharpens it for the slave” (Trethewey 2006, 25). His will is a monument to the forgotten past.

The poem’s words echo the relationship that the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* have with their landscape (and their songs). As in “Native Guard,” the connection with space is fundamentally ambiguous, because, if characters feel emotionally tied to their places, these are also a perpetual reminder of oppression and death—“This place binds you, this place blinds you,” Ward writes (2017, 191). “Home ain’t always about a place,” says Richie. “Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats with your heart” (Ward 2017, 182-183). Richie’s distrust of places (“No opening, no heartbeat, no air”) seems to be a post-traumatic reaction to its last days as a living being, spent at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman Farm. The prison is the novel’s ominous dark place, and functions as a center of trauma for every character: here, Jojo’s beloved grandfather Pop learns about systemic racism the hardest way, and his brother Stag loses his mind. Here, Jojo’s addict white father Michael is sent, worsening his dysfunctional family’s wretchedness.⁷ That is because Parchman, in obedience to the novel’s conscious chronotopic representation, is the place where ghosts of southern space and history are conjured. The way in which Pop describes his time as a 20th-century convict is not different from the description of a working day at an antebellum plantation, making the prison a dark symbolic accretion:

From sunup to sundown we was out there in them fields, hoeing and picking and planting and pulling. A man get to a point like that, he can’t think. Just feel. Feel his stomach burn and know he want to eat. Feel his head packed full of cotton and know he want to sleep. Feel his throat close and fire run up his arms and legs, his heart beat out his chest, and know he want to run. But wasn’t no running. [...] That was our whole world: the long line. Men strung out across the fields, the trusty shooters stalking the edge, the driver on his mule, the caller yelling to the sun, throwing his working song out. (Ward 2017, 68-69, italics in the original)

In passages like these the landscape’s song of bondage about which Trethewey writes resonates loud and clear. The penitentiary is an eternal damnation, a black hole that swallows everyone who gets too close. Even the dead, unable to release their stories into the world, are still

⁷ For a recent and engaging outlook on the American prison system see the special section in *Iperstoria* 14 (winter 2019), “The USA as Penitentiary.”

prisoners: “How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? How could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once?” (Ward 2017, 186). The memory of what this place meant for poor blacks in the past needs to be restored; Parchman has to be exorcised from the metaphysical evil that surrounds it. Its song of bondage needs to be sung. Or better, it has to flow into a greater song of redemption that transcends space and time.

I would like to spend some concluding words on this elusive song, starting from the suggestion, common to both Trethewey and Ward, that it is somewhat written in the landscape, more directly connected with the elements, capable of transcending Mississippi’s spaces of violence—a suggestion that reinforces the poetic interdependence of soil, spirits, and narration stated at the beginning of the essay. Once again, orality connects individuals and their surroundings; but instead of a literal (and possibly fatal) ingestion of dirt, this connection is established by means of a song, an aural act of ‘reckoning’ with the spirit of place that is a “wrestle with the specters of race and history in America, and how those specters are haunting [black people] now,” as Ward declares in the introduction to *The Fire This Time* (2016, 8). Through these songs, stories are shared in order to create a stronger sense of community out of mourning and memory (Butler 2004, 22; Ward 2016, 10)—they foster a more conscious way of being in the world and with the world. In their drive towards a better understanding of, and an improved alliance with, time and space, these aural connections echo Fred Moten’s words when he says: “I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*” (Harney and Moten 2013, 118, italics in the original). In *Native Guard*, after the memory of the all-black regiment has been publicly erased by the many Confederate monuments erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy, their story can still be heard in “what the waves intone” (Trethewey 2006, 44). Similarly, Richie is looking for peace in a place that is also a song: “The place is the song and I’m going to be part of it,” he says (Ward 2017, 183).⁸ Ward’s prose becomes more expressionistic and allusive as the denouement conveyed by the song approaches, a stylistic strategy that suggest how the different way of looking at the fabric of things suggested by the ghost is barely understandable, just beyond the conscious mind’s grasp. The ending, though, shares some symbolic and thematic similarities with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that can help a better understanding.

Just like in Morrison’s novel, in James Baldwin’s *The Fire This Time*, or in *Men We Reaped* by Ward herself, being set free (and to be free from grief) implies sharing stories. When there are

⁸ Interestingly enough, both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Native Guard* seem to give the sea some kind of eschatological power. In Ward’s novel the Delta and the Gulf coast are openly contrasted and associated with captivity and freedom, respectively.

no more stories to tell, when the past is unearthed, transmitted, and rebalanced, the spirit is free. Both Ward's unburied and Morrison's ghost are carried away by a melody in the end: language fails this ultimate moment of release, it is "a song of mismatched, half-garbled words," pure sound from somewhere beyond (Ward 2017, 284). Richie desperately wants to be peacefully sung away from his earthly prison, but he is hitting "the wrong keys" (Ward 2017, 282) to the tune, and ideally looks for "the code, the song that [breaks] the back of words" (Morrison 2016, 308). Beloved, on the other hand, does not or cannot stop haunting the house; she needs to be forcefully exorcised. The difference between these entities can be found, through Baldwin's words, in the way they use history, and so in the way they project a future. "I need the story to go," says Richie, who never hides his role and his mission (Ward 2017, 230). Beloved's malevolent action could otherwise be explained by the mystery that surrounds her: she is the unfocused embodiment of far too many untold stories, and "nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt" (Derrida 2006, 9). It is not by chance that thirty women are needed to make her go. The grief she carries is simply too much to heal spontaneously. In the end, both spirits fade into the elements. But Ward's novel seems to hit a more positive note when she mentions that, in spite of being "just weather" (Morrison 2016, 324), her ghost has reached some kind of transcendental home. He does not haunt the place anymore, but rather partakes of its depths. Another body is swallowed by the southern soil, but this time it is not to be listed among Patricia Yaeger's 'uncounted.' Richie is successfully grieved, because we know exactly who he is and where he lies: an inheritance (with all its historical weight) is chosen, and not only gathered (Derrida 2006, 18). The unburied story is written, and with it, the stories of Pop, Jojo, and Parchman Farm—verses added to Mississippi's long dark song.

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