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## “We Ain’t Going Nowhere. We Here”: Survival and Witness in Jesmyn Ward’s Fiction and Nonfiction

*So the beginning of this was a woman  
and she had come back from burying the dead.*  
(Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*)

In 1993, when delivering her Nobel acceptance speech, Toni Morrison narrated a fable which soon turned into an intense meditation on language and how it affects our lives. “We die. That may be the meaning of life,” she declared, “But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives,” thus linking mortality and language as the two elements which drive and shape human existence. She did not neglect to note that this connection does not always configure language as a positive tool. On the contrary, she warned that the “systematic looting of language” all too often transforms it into an instrument of subjugation and violence, what she called “the policing languages of mastery,” which “do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” n. pag.), and thus must be resisted. Or, as Derrida has pointed out, “an idiom should never incline toward racism. It often does, however, and this is not altogether fortuitous: there is no racism without language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word” (292). Morrison’s work and, more broadly, African American literature have always had to deal with the intrinsic racism of language, the language of white people (a language which refuses to acknowledge Blackness as a part of humanity – Wilderson 13-17 – and Black people as subjects), and to reclaim in that language a subversive place for Black consciousness. This was and still is possible because language is “generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” n. pag.).

Even if they cannot substitute experience, then, narrative acts help travel through it, find meaning in it, and eventually imagine new and possible meanings: as Peter Boxall illustrates, “[n]arrative does not simply record reality; it produces it and thus can transform it” (51). In Morrison’s fable, “[l]anguage alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” n. pag.), thus positing word-work as the ultimate instrument human beings possess to make sense of reality – even with all its limits.

In the case of Black authors, making sense of reality means dealing with the aftermath of slavery, of segregation, of systemic racism, that is, of a history of oppression whose causes and consequences have been piling one on top of the other for centuries and which does not seem likely to end anytime soon. As everyday US news testify, Black people endure the burden of an inherited trauma which keeps being reinforced in the present and weighs on every aspect of their life, resulting in a state of constant mourning, with slavery as the “founding trauma” (LaCapra 81) of their identity. Not surprisingly, then, survival and witness are core elements of African American art, being two acts that can represent the Black condition in America from the Atlantic Slave Trade to the present day. Among the Black writers who have taken over from Morrison, Jesmyn Ward is a key figure and perhaps the one whose works better succeed in combining past and present traumas to limn the implications of the persistence of antiblackness in the US.

Drawing upon these premises, my essay analyzes Ward’s poetics as fundamentally driven and shaped by survival and witness. To do so, I will borrow from Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) the methodological metaphors of (living in) *the wake* and (performing) *wake work*, and examine to what extent they apply to Ward’s style and themes, showing how her language is indeed generative when it depicts the legacy of slavery and segregation in the South through polyphonic narration, autobiography, and supernatural elements. In particular, I will focus on the memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), on the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and on the recent article “On Witness and Repair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic” (2020).

In her study, Sharpe firstly examines the definitions of the term *wake*, to conclude that they all apply, each from a different perspective, to the Black condition:

Wakes are *processes*; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; *they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory*. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual [...]. But wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; *the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water*; the air currents behind a body in flight; *a region of disturbed flow*; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”; *finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness*. (21; emphasis added)

The wake recognizes the persistence of systemic antiblackness and urges survivors to engage in the paradox of living within a transgenerational grief while rupturing it through wake work. In this sense, the condition of being Black is an ongoing process of mourning and awakening in which bearing witness is never fully personal or communal, but a combination of the two. My use of the terms “survival” and “witness” concerns the possibility of enacting them through writing as a means of wake work, since being in the wake of slavery means being born with the burden of survival of the past generations, and reappropriating the language that bears witness to this history of subjugation may result in an effective way of working through it. If language produces reality and is the measure of existence, then “word-work” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” n. pag.) is a form of wake work that, just like Sharpe’s *aspiration*, functions as a praxis for imagining and “for keeping and putting breath back into the Black body in hostile weather”; when witnessing Black immanent and imminent death, fiction too performs a “hostile and lifesaving” (Sharpe 113) practice through which Black bodies, with their unmediated presence, insist upon their humanity and thus disrupt antiblackness. It is a political act (Li 633) akin to the call for recognition propelled by movements like Black Lives Matter under the slogan “I can’t breathe.” In Ward’s writing, the same act is performed by using personal and fictional experience as modes of survival and witness to address public issues. Since the publication of *Where the Line*

*Bleeds* (2008), Ward acknowledged the need to “figure out how to [...] look squarely at what was happening to the young Black people I knew in the South, and to write honestly about that,” so she worked to become an “Old Testament God,” writing unsparing novels; no longer protected “from death, from drug addiction, from needlessly harsh sentences in jail for doing stupid, juvenile things” (*Men* 70), her characters exist in the wake, they have become real.

### Writing as Wake Work

Ward has recently declared that her work is animated by concepts which are firmly and consciously political: “I’m always thinking about race, the legacy of the South, and the ways that Black people survive [...]. Because I’m a Black writer and because of the legacy and presence of racism and racist violence in this country, all my work engages with contemporary issues whether I like it or not” (“5 Questions” n. pag.). So far, she has explored a great deal of such contemporary issues (i.e. Hurricane Katrina, the crack epidemic, police brutality, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow) by narrating them through the eyes and stories of the Black and poor of the South, so that her fiction can be understood as, borrowing from Paul Dawson’s claims regarding the distinction between narrator and author in contemporary literature, “one mode of public discourse available to the writer alongside others” (53).

A native of DeLisle, Mississippi, a land which “feels weighted by a lot of history” (Kembrey, “Jesmyn Ward” n. pag.) and is drenched with the blood of racism, Ward has often said that her reason for becoming a writer was the death of her brother Joshua: she wanted to honor his memory by committing to something that would have meaning, which eventually led her to write about Black people from the rural South, “so that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important, as theirs” (“2011 National Book Award” n. pag.). This is what the three texts aforementioned accomplish, each in its peculiar way. The memoir *Men We Reaped* goes back and forth in time to trace the deaths of five young men in Ward’s life,

within the space of only five years: an apparently inexplicable epidemic fueled by “the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility [which] festered and turned sour and spread here” (Ward, *Men* 8). The novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is an odyssey by car among the dead and living ghosts of Mississippi, in which the elements of magical realism only make the gruesome reality more immediate and tangible. Finally, the article “On Witness and Respair” shares the grief for her husband’s death just before the COVID-19 crisis spread all over the world and the murder of George Floyd led to unprecedented protests in America and abroad.

The underlying question linking her fictional and nonfictional narratives together deals with the meaning of being Black in the US, including Ward among the activists, scholars, and artists who have been re-defining Black identity by challenging the assumptions concerning the fabric of society and culture fostered by white America, just like Morrison did when she contended that “the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [African Americans]” (*Playing in the Dark* 4). Indeed, the answers are many, though seldom reassuring (Alexander 197), to the point that Afropessimism has recently gone as far as to declare that Black people function as “the foil of Humanity. Humanity looked to me when it was unsure of itself. I let Humanity say, with a sigh of existential relief, ‘At least we are not him’” (Wilderson 13). Similarly, Poet Claudia Rankine believes that “the condition of Black life is one of mourning,”<sup>1</sup> a belief that can be traced also in the actions and policies of movements like Black Lives Matter, as she further contends:

The Black Lives Matter movement 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*. If the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement made demands that altered the course of American lives and backed up those demands with the willingness to give up your life in service of your civil

rights, with Black Lives Matter, a more internalized change is being asked for: *recognition*. (205; emphasis added)

The state of communal and continuous mourning, the struggle for recognition, the need for visibility as opposed to Blackness as absence – of color, of civil rights, of humanity<sup>2</sup> – which Rankine ascribes to Black Lives Matter, all mirror the social and psychological environment narrated by Ward. In such an environment, her characters, as their real-life counterparts, struggle not to believe they really are “worthless human being[s]” (Baldwin 16), as the white world sees them. As Ward writes towards the end of *Men We Reaped*, they live haunted by a darkness which hovers over them, mostly unacknowledged by society and, because of that, they consider themselves *savages* (249-50), a word which

has a different meaning for us. For us it means that you’re a fighter and that you’re a survivor. And that you’ll do what you need to do in order to survive. [...] The way I wanted to use that term, especially in that part [of *Men We Reaped*], is to say that we are fighters and we are resourceful. Even in the face of this, of the losses that we experience, of this entire interconnected pressure after pressure after pressure. The pressure of racism, the pressure of the history of racism, of economic inequality, of a popular culture that constantly tells you that you’re worth less. Even in the face of all that, we still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity. (Hartnell 212-13)

The idea of being a fighter, a survivor, has accompanied Ward her whole life, from the moment she was born, premature and with health problems so serious that doctors were almost sure she was going to die (Ward, *Men* 42-45), to the time when what she calls the “epidemic” (8) that hit her family and her community spared her life but left her in a constant state of grief nonetheless. Survival implies a trauma, that is, a wound of the psyche which condemns those who suffer it “to be possessed by an image or an event” (Caruth, “Trauma” 4) which “in its repetitions might carry traces of old ancient sufferings as well as unanticipated futures” (Caruth, “After” 125). In Ward’s case, it is her brother’s death, but not only. As a Black author, not only must she deal with her personal rememory,<sup>3</sup> but she must also work with the postmemory<sup>4</sup> of African Americans, two factors

which inevitably exerted a strong impact on the development of her fiction too. Within the Black community, rememory and postmemory concern an inherited shared trauma, a wound which, as contemporary race issues show (Davis 121-34), apparently never heals and entails a combination of old and new modes of survival and witness, which is what Ward's defines as being "savages."

### Living in the Wake

Ward's Mississippi is a place in which being Black means growing up faster, and often dying sooner and amid widespread indifference, as the deaths narrated in her fiction and nonfiction show: "by the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing" (Ward, *Men* 237). Another way to say it would be that "the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain" (12), as Sharpe explains in her account of Black consciousness and the struggle for being in a society in which antiblackness is endemic and institutionalized.

Sharpe's analysis of Blackness dialogues with Afropessimism through Wilderson's concept of Blackness as a locus of abjection (12) and Saidiya Hartman's depiction of the afterlife of slavery (*Lose* 6), but ultimately departs from it in that being *in the wake* and the related concept of wake work posit a way out of a condition of social death (Patterson 38). Wake work entails a peculiar form of agency, capable of rupturing and subverting through its ability to imagine new instruments to deal with the afterlife of slavery. Through these metaphors, Sharpe wishes "to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past" (13), to recognize Black immanent and imminent death and track it in the present – but not only. Her main interest concerns

tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially. [In] how we imagine ways of knowing that past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, [and] in the

ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present. (13)

Sharpe's words resonate with Ward's concept of savagery. Indeed, *Men We Reaped* shows how Ward's writing is grounded in her personal grief and on that of her community, that is, on being in the wake; therefore, it constitutes a powerful expression of that wake work which Sharpe sees as "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18; emphasis in original).

This imaginative commitment is shared by many African American artists and thinkers, as Ward's 2016 edited collection, *The Fire This Time*, displays. Here, in a society that produces Black as abjection, Ward and the other contributors assert Black existence and humanity and are aware of "how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; [it is not possible to] talk about Black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country" ("Introduction" 9). Yet, Ward chooses to have hope, the hope she sees in the words and stories which unfold *in the wake* to trouble the water (9), to bring to the surface the worth of Black bodies, of Black lives, and their ability to survive. To borrow from the opening paragraph of Fred Moten's *In the Break*: "The history of Blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness – the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that arranges every line – is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (1). That resistance, that sense of dignity and humanity which Ward wanted to convey through *Men We Reaped*, is apparent in her fiction too, as her characters helplessly play with the bad hand they have been dealt (Salam 10-11): when they try to earn a living in a hostile homeland as in *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008) or when that same homeland is about to be engulfed by Hurricane Katrina, looming over the pages of *Salvage the Bones*.

A particularly fitting example of a novel in which characters live in the wake and the narration unfolds as a wake work is *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The story revolves around thirteen-year-old, mixed-race Jojo and the road trip from the Gulf to the Delta he takes with his little sister Kayla, his crack-addicted, unloving mother Leonie, and her white friend Misty. Jojo follows

Leonie unwillingly: he would rather stay home with his grandparents, Pop and Mam, than share with her the long ride to pick up his white father who has just been released from Parchman Farm.<sup>5</sup> Ward's writing displays a strong sense of place and deals with time and memory – all Southern Gothic elements – so that the road trip to Parchman is not only a physical journey to North Mississippi but also a Faulknerian journey towards a haunting past much like *As I Lay Dying* – which Ward herself has often cited, together with *Beloved*, among her influences (Elliott, “Ghosts” n. pag.). What Sinéad Moynihan notes regarding *Salvage the Bones* is true also for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; here too, “Faulkner’s text reverberates in Ward’s through characterization, as well as through motifs (floods and storms; trees) and themes (sexuality and reproduction; maternity; rural poverty)” (552), even though Ward’s dysfunctional family bears substantial differences from Faulkner’s. In Ward’s case, this is a multiracial, mainly-Black family and, as Adrienne Greene suggests, it is “eerily fitting that instead of traveling to bury a dead family member, as is the case in Faulkner’s novel, Ward has her characters pick up Richie’s ghost, adding his voice to their tumultuous dynamic” (n. pag.). The novel “aligns with the dead” (Rankine 205) in its being populated by ghost-like characters: the dead (Richie, Given, and the chorus of Black deaths in the background), the dying (Mam on her cancer deathbed), and the un-living (Leonie with her addictions and lack of affection for her children). The living struggle under the pressure of a reality they cannot escape and in which survival is possible only when walking side by side with death.

A first element of the wake which looms over the narration is Parchman Farm. The Mississippi State Prison reminds readers of how “US incarceration rates and carceral logics directly emerging from slavery and into the present continue to be the signs that make Black bodies”; Sharpe argues that the prison “repeats the logics, architectural and otherwise, of the slave ship” (Sharpe 75), thus drawing a direct comparison between the Atlantic Slave Trade and the US prison system. A similar comparison with an un-dead past is rendered by Ward through the character of Richie, the ghost of a Black boy who served at Parchman with Pop and, once dead, could not find his way out of the prison. He is doomed to be caged in there: each time he falls asleep he wakes up in a different era, but always in that same place in the Delta, as he recalls wondering:

How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?

I was trapped [...]. Parchman had imprisoned me again. [...] I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time.  
(Ward, *Sing* 186-87)

The circularity of time and imprisonment suffered by Richie equates the condition endured by the living, Leonie in particular, whose existence is shattered and haunted by her unresolved grief over her brother Given's murder, by her unhealthy relationship with Michael, and by her drug addiction. Her character is emblematic of how white society still produces mechanisms that function to "dis/figure Black maternity" (Sharpe 75): either unable or unwilling to be a mother, she has developed an equally unhealthy relationship with her children, so that they too seem to be condemned to a non-life *in the wake* like her. Instead – and it is here that Ward goes so far as to envision some kind of hope – they have turned to each other and to their grandparents for the love and affection they need. They are fighters, and survivors.

"I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (Ward, *Sing* 1), Jojo states at the very beginning of the novel – a thought that sounds inadvertently ironic, since it refers to the fact that Pop is asking for his help to kill a goat. Eventually, death will become something even too familiar to him, and his initiation to Black adulthood will turn out to be equally marked by what he learns from the ghosts of the past (Elliott, "Ghosts" n. pag.) he meets along the way and by what he must endure from the present. He is just a boy, but old enough to be at risk of dying from being Black when a police officer stops their car and Leonie realizes that

[i]t's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. [...] But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his

pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't. [...]

I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. I shake. When I open my eyes again, Jojo's still whole. Now on his knees, the gun pointing at his head.

(Ward, *Sing* 163-64)

He survives his first time being questioned by the police (170), yet the incident affects him deeply. Having once been *in the wake* of a policeman's gun, it is difficult to dismiss the memory of it. "The image of the gun stays with me" (170), he says: "My wrists won't stop hurting. [...] It's like the cuffs cut all the way down to the bone. [...] Like my marrow could carry a bruise" (171-72). Page after page, Jojo's car ride becomes a journey towards consciousness, an awakening that increasingly centers on Black immanent and imminent death, as he listens to Richie's story or witnesses Mam's passing, when "time floods the room in a storm surge" (269).

### The Language of Repair

Once time has started flooding, it cannot be stopped. Eventually, Jojo comes to understand what Mam meant when she said that even though she was about to die, "that don't mean I won't be here, Jojo. I'll be on the other side of the door. With everybody else that's gone before. [...] Because we don't walk no straight lines. It's all happening at once. All of it. We all here at once. My mama and daddy and they mamas and daddies" (Ward, *Sing* 236). At the end of his journey, Jojo learns that there are many ghosts who, just like Richie, could not find their way "beyond the waters" and are stuck, with their own stories and deaths, on a tree near the house. Only Jojo and Kayla hear them:

They perch like birds, but look as people. They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before*

*they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe. (Sing 282-83; emphasis in original)*

These voices and the other unnatural narrators<sup>6</sup> populating the novel allow those who can hear them a kind of knowledge otherwise inaccessible, and tell readers “what *would* have been perceived by an omniscient narrator if such a perspective were possible” (206; emphasis in original). In this case, the impossible perspective has real-life implication since it performs – and in some way corresponds to – the condition of being in the wake, in all its unnatural reality. That is, these voices have crossed time and space to become the same voices heard in the streets of America and that Ward knows only too well. Among the ghosts on the tree, if readers are willing to listen, one may hear Eric Garner and George Floyd and many others begging – *I can't breathe*. The same three desperate words connect those killings with Ward's husband's death, and her assertion that “even in grief, I found myself commanded to amplify the voices of the dead that sing to me” (“On Witness and Repair” n. pag.) – a commitment to writing that surprised her in the midst of mourning – is again reminiscent of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

In other words, not only does Ward's style and themes position her within a lineage of the American literary tradition which intersects African American literature with Southern Gothic, but there is a thread which connects her fiction and nonfiction and shapes a narrative of witness exceeding the fictional world. This link between her narrative and authorial voice contributes to a powerful representation of the Black condition in the twenty-first century. Her “narrative authority,” then, “operates via a continuum between narrative voice and extrafictional voice, and establishes a dialogue with public response”; by engaging her readers in the wake, her fiction positions itself as “a public statement which circulates in the same discursive formation as its author's fictional statements” (Dawson 236). Indeed, her use of the personal is a way to bear witness, through which the author expresses what Hartman calls “the willingness to make yourself a vehicle for these other stories” (qtd. in Saunders 5). As Sharpe too argues, to include the personal in one's writing means “to connect the social forces

on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8).

In "On Witness and Respair," Ward's mourning too is both individual and collective. She recalls the words of a doctor when her husband died – "*the last sense to go is hearing. When someone is dying, they lose sight and smell and taste and touch. They even forget who they are. But in the end, they hear you*" (n. pag.; emphasis in original) – and share those same words with the protesters on the streets, with the Black people who die every day in the United States, and finally with everyone around the world who is partaking in their protest. "How revelatory that others witness our battles and stand up" (n. pag.), writes Ward, as if at last Black people are not dying in silence. The word "respair" in the title is an obsolete term which apparently meant "fresh hope, or recovery from despair," and, as a verb, "to have hope." Interestingly, in Ward's piece respair addresses a hope regained through a combination of artistic work and a sense of community encompassing both personal grief and social instances, thus involving her readers in undertaking the task of witnessing. Respair, in this context, implies an Heideggerian care through which Ward weaves together – through the act of writing – pandemic, Black protest, and her mourning. The sense of hearing is fundamental to this discourse, and it acts reciprocally among author, narrator, characters, and readers to create a shared narrative of resilience and respair. It happens when Jojo hears the ghosts on the tree and Kayla sings to them; when Ward collected from her community the pieces of memory that would compose *Men We Reaped*, and kept doing the same for her upcoming novel; when people from outside the US responded to the recent protests against police brutality by protesting them, too, a fact that caused Ward to *wake* from her grief and somehow experience "recovery from despair."

Within the landscape of trauma, so often haunted by silence, witness thus constitutes a locus of communication, for it requires not only a narration on the part of the traumatized but especially a listener (Laub 57-59), and this may well be the reason why Ward very often employs a polyphonic narrative voice – another feature she shares with Faulkner: to explore the complexity of

the relationship between teller and listener within Black history, where the borders between the two are often blurred, as well as to give voice to past and present modes of subjugation. By passing on to each other, in turn, the roles of tellers and listeners within the history of Blackness, her characters perform the subversive act of asserting their humanity in a context which denies them access to it. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the dynamics of survival and witness are rendered through three highly traumatized narrators – two living beings, Jojo and Leonie, and a ghost, Richie – and other characters – Pop and Mam – who narrate stories embedded within the main narrative. In *Men We Reaped*, the first-person narrator alternates the singular with the plural, to develop a communal voice able to do justice to a shared grief. Hence, even when it is not explicitly declared through the narrative voice, there is always a *we* (Black people) behind Ward's stories, which relates to both an oppressing *they/it* (representing systemic racism) and to a *you* that includes what we may call a reflexive readership (her community) and an external readership (non-Black people). In this way, Ward succeeds in her prime intention of bearing witness to the worth of her people, of telling those among her readers who may identify with her characters: "*you are worthy of witness*" (Ward, "I Was" n. pag.) – like Toni Morrison's novels did to her when she was young. Moreover, through a language that does not omit anything of the harshness and desolation of her characters' lives, she urges her external readership to acknowledge the need for recognition and witness claimed by Black people. Paradoxically, the more her characters fall victim to the bleakness of their existence, the better they serve the purpose of resisting the subjugation and dehumanization of Black bodies. Her writing, then, goes beyond the labels of personal, local, regional, ethnic literature: "You looked at me and at the people I love and write about – my poor, my Black; my Southern children, women, and men – and you saw yourself. You saw your grief, your love, your losses; your regrets, your joy, your hope" (Ward, "2017 National Book Award" n. pag.). Ultimately, in Ward's poetics, hope does not refer to a faith in an undefined better future, but it comes from sharing a consciousness that may "rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death" (Sharpe 22).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rankine ascribes the sentence to a friend describing what it is like being the mother of a black son (198). Likewise, Ward recalls that she cried when, pregnant with her second child, she learnt that she was “going to bear a black boy into the world,” since she immediately thought of her brother, and of the long list of loved ones who died too young: “My son had never taken a breath, and I was already mourning him” (“Raising” n. pag.).

<sup>2</sup> On blackness as “a locus of abjection” (Wilderson 12) and on how the legacy of slavery prevents black people from being considered political or even human subjects, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 64-65; Patterson 38-51; Wilderson 13-17.

<sup>3</sup> The term was coined by Morrison in *Beloved*, where Sethe explains it as follows: “Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. [...] It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place [Sweet Home] is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (43-44).

<sup>4</sup> The term, coined by Hirsch, originally referred to the memory of the Holocaust and “characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated” (22).

<sup>5</sup> The Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman Farm) is a maximum-security prison farm in the Delta region. It is the oldest prison of Mississippi and one of the most notorious in the South as regards racial violence.

<sup>6</sup> Unnatural narrators are those who could not exist in the actual world (i.e. because they violate physical or logical principles, or standard human limitations of knowledge). For studies on unnatural narratives, voices, and scenarios, see Alber et al. 114-115; 130.

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