

A Martial Meteorology: Carceral Ecology in the US South of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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*The real solution to the environmental crisis is the
decolonization of the black race.*

—Nathan Hare, “Black Ecology”

Black matters are spatial matters.

—Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*

I. Introduction

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” (Ward, *Salvage* 262). 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” (Block). In her depiction of the wind as fighter jets, Ward 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.

Ward’s characterization of the environment as weapon—“wind [that] sounded like fighter jets”—invites a closer look. Moving beyond traditional understandings of weather as an act of God, Ward imagines a martial meteorology that contains elements of the human. And rightfully so. 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 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 over-looked connection. This 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. 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 maintain a carceral state of control. In the end, Ward offers a counternarrative to a white Anthropocene, one that is attuned to the epoch's entanglement with race.

II. The Rise of Carceral Ecology

We are now living in a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene—a name coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen during an earth systems conference in 2000 to mark the shift

from the Holocene. Anthropocene was chosen to encapsulate the rapid expansion of human populations, the increasing exploitation of nonhuman animals and natural resources, and the subsequent pervasive pollution at both local and global levels that have irreversibly transformed the planet. Yet discussions involving the climate crisis overwhelmingly hinge upon the categorization of human beings as a singular human species. However scientifically apt, such grouping instills Anthropocene scholarship with a troubling universality. “Climate change poses for us,” historian Dipesh Chakrabarty explains, “a question of human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe” (Chakrabarty 222). The homogenizing category of human as species, of course, does not account for the heterogeneity within the *anthropos*—the different experiences, relations, and pasts that constitute humanity. Some have never been granted access to the political distinction human while others are still being exploited by the capitalistic processes that have contributed to the climate crisis. And as Crutzen makes explicit, the effects of the Anthropocene have been caused by “only 25% of the world population” (Crutzen 23). To group human beings as one species thus eschews western responsibility for the crisis and obscures the consequences that remain grossly disproportionate.

The myth of a universal Anthropocene allows scholars to fantasize a post racial world by either ignoring the issue of race altogether or reductively falling back onto claims that matter is deracialized.¹ In doing so, white theory and politics continues to be determined by their positioning of the black body as both expendable and disposable. In “Living in the

¹ See Leong, Diana. “The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler’s Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms.” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-35. Karera, Axelle. “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics.” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 32-56.

Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos,” 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.” Rather than dismantling the nature/culture binary, Crutzen and Schwägerl reinforce it by characterizing nature as something malleable to human interests. Recent geoengineering proposals, large-scale methods of climate manipulation or intervention, once again reveal the danger in the implicit commonality of pronouns like “we” and nouns like “human.” While scientists like Crutzen push climate modification projects, Jairus Grove points out that they remain 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. These projects are a technological replication of the very exploitation of nature that created today’s global power imbalance.

This power imbalance is made legible in the details of Crutzen and Schwägerl’s “New Global Ethos”:

...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)

The scientists’ overture is steeped in the very human exceptionalism and colonial rhetoric that helped push us into the Anthropocene epoch. The label “Age of Man,” as well as the depiction of humans as “stewards of the Earth” not only position human above nonhuman but also imply a

biologically determined and hierarchal ordering of life that forms the foundation of bias and oppression. Under the guise of environmentalism, science once again designates colonial projects as necessary. Other countries must follow the “American Way of Life,” something that is described as having “immense power,” “intellect,” and “creativity.” Recalling the manifest destiny of the nineteenth century, “citizens of the West” are recast as pioneers. In this context, western geoengineering could easily become a way for Euro-American countries to manipulate the environment in order to retain their status as world powers and ensure their survival and economic profit at the loss of others. Here environmental injustice is valorized as an ecological ethic in which western nation states masquerade as benevolent protectors when they actually cause the 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 modern colonialism and dominance. Indeed, the technology that made today’s geoengineering possible comes both 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 no longer merely metaphor. It is our reality. A declassified 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,” researchers write, “the president’s advisory committee on weather control explicitly recognized the military potential of weather-modification...[and] that it could become a more important weapon than the atom bomb....The damage caused by storms is indeed horrendous. For instance, a tropical storm has an energy equal to 10,000 one-megaton

hydrogen bombs” (Air Force 3, 18). And Project Popeye conducted in 1966 reportedly “extended the monsoon season in order to increase the amount of mud on the Ho Chi Minh trail” in order to reduce “enemy movement.” “Positive results” led to “continued operations from 1967-1972” (Air Force 28). Other experiments conducted by the 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. We would do well to remember, moreover, that the atom bomb was derived from extracting uranium in the Congo. Taken from the Earth’s crust, uranium is the environment made weapon. As such, the military’s acknowledgement 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 control.

This scientific and military research further illustrates the way in which weather can function as a weapon with no traceable source. The report’s special emphasis on environmental manipulation as a method to create docile bodies and control movement attaches a carceral dimension to meteorological tactics. We must thus reassess the way we think about the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and the carceral in the Anthropocene. The carceral is typically identified in terms of unnatural, human created material and immaterial social structures, such as social policies, prisons, bars, cages, plantations, etc. However, the martial

meteorology of the twenty-first century urges us to consider 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. This process culminates in a carceral ecology. Following Foucault's historical rendering of punishment and discipline from spectacle to carceral, readily visible and violent displays of environmental power, like the atom bomb, give way to less visible, insidious national and global mechanisms, such as pollution, diminished land space, and the disregard of international law, which refuses to recognize climate migrants.

By focusing on world making and unmaking, I show how 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. "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). At its core, then, carceral ecology is a production of reality, manifested in a second nature, that enforces the biopolitical agenda of the carceral state. It is my contention that these operations are predicated on a secondary understanding of climate—what Christina Sharpe calls an "antiblackness" as "pervasive as climate" where "Black death" is a "predictive" and "normative" part of not only the social and economic fabric of the US, but the world as well. In this way, carceral ecology works to uphold a white supremacist system. In turning now to Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, we can sift through different evolutions of carceral ecology—from its toxic presence in the

communities of the US South, to its early stages on the plantation, and then, finally, with the worldly arena of the Anthropocene.

III. Post-Katrina Decay

Ward's earlier novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), is based upon her experience of Katrina and the Mississippi town where she was raised, introduces readers to the fictional community Bois Sauvage which is also the setting for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). In many ways, the novel serves as a prequel to the post-Katrina world of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as it follows young Esch and her family in the days leading up to and directly following Hurricane Katrina. Ward's Bois Sauvage offers a counter-narrative to a white Anthropocene, one that is attuned to Sharpe's climate of anti-blackness that amplifies the environmental consequences felt by her characters. The opening pages of the narrative emphasize the town's historical connection to slavery as they prepare for the hurricane. "It's summer," Esch states, "and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou" (Ward, *Salvage* 3). Esch's description of the architectural transformation of slave galley to guesthouse gestures to the still very much present history of slavery. While the house's exterior may have changed, the internal structure holding the home together remains the same. The hurricane helps to reveal this past, traveling the path of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, moving from the Caribbean to the Gulf Coast. The Mississippi Valley's central location during the slave trade thus becomes repurposed in the Anthropocene.

Ward's martial meteorology surfaces in her juxtaposition of the family's distrust of the local police alongside the media. "If anything hit us this summer," Manny argues, "it's going to blow down a few branches. News don't know what they talking about." He concludes sharply: "Every time somebody in Bois Sauvage get arrested, they always get the story wrong." Just as the media manipulates narratives of black arrests which often include incidents of police brutality, Manny distrusts a weather forecast that would require him and his family to leave their home, embodying carceral ecology. Manny's words foreground the connection between racial violence and weather. "That's journalists. Weatherman's a *scientist*," Esche's brother Randall replies (Ward, *Salvage* 6). Esche's emphasis on the weatherman as scientist—a discourse seemingly based on fact—indirectly invokes a transition from the scientific racism and hierarchal taxonomies of humans during slavery to twenty-first century martial meteorology. As we have seen, this harnessing of nature hinges on a kind of racial profiling or othering. It is also a defining feature of the accounts given by Katrina survivors, a defining feature that would be proved when Katrina's survivors recalled their experiences.

When we return to a post-Katrina Bois Sauvage in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, death and decay abound. The novel opens with young Jojo attempting to help his grandfather slaughter a goat. The "dirt is black and muddy" (Ward 9). There is a strong stench—"like a faceful of pig shit"—Jojo explains, "It smells like foragers, dead and rotting out in the thick woods, when the only sign of them is the buzzards rising and settling and circling. It stinks like possums or armadillos smashed half flat on the road, rotting in asphalt and heat" (Ward 14). The goat's body is everted, guts, organs, blood all brought to the surface. "I pull," Jojo says, "Slime and smell everywhere, something musty and sharp, like a man who ain't took a bath in some days. The skin peels off like a banana" (Ward 13). At many points in the novel, human characters are even turned inside-

out, gutted, or sliced into pieces. A man and his girlfriend are lynched in the woods by a white mob, the man “missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals (Ward 287). The woman missing her teeth. A prisoner is dismembered: “Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him” (Ward 384).

At other times, this physical reversal is merely imagined, a figurative desire to disassociate from a body capable of feeling pain. “I would throw up all of it,” Jojo’s mother, Leonie cries, “All of it: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs and all, bones and muscle, until all that was left was skin. And then maybe that could turn inside out, and I wouldn’t be nothing no more” (Ward 314). And finally, there is cancer, “came and left and returned, steady as the rising and sinking of the marsh water in the bayou, whispering “*We eat, we eat*” (Ward 46, 69). Ward’s ubiquitous decay and death are rooted in ecology, both literally and figuratively. It is in the dirt, the nonhuman and human, the woods, as well as the water. It is also the rhetoric through which dying is expressed. This is a racism and pain felt by the earth, a deeply rooted entanglement. An atmosphere in which it is hard to breathe. Upon our return to Bois Sauvage, the convergence of race and ecology saturate the community with a pervasive toxicity that is simultaneously haunting and tangible. This is the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the carceral ecology of the Anthropocene within the American South: the systemic dismantling of home and body.

The distinct environmental decay of the US South, particularly the Gulf Coast, an area known for pollution, racist dumping practices, and oil spills is prevalent within the novel and positions Ward within a growing group of contemporary southern writers who are repurposing the gothic so commonly found in southern literature as a way to discuss the impact of the climate

crisis on the American South.² However, Ward is also careful to show how ecology and race are mutually constituting issues that leave her characters in a state of flux, forcing them into a continuous motion—always searching but never able to find home. “Growing up 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....I see it in Pop, how he got leaner and leaner with age, the tendons in him standing out, harder and more rigid every year.” Leonie’s temporality reads like a form of genetic mutation that is the product of a contaminated environment. The animals are not just aging but becoming perversions of their original selves. She continues, “But since Mama got sick, I learned pain can do that too. Can eat a person until there’s nothing more but bone and skin and a thin layer of blood left. How it can eat your insides and swell you in wrong ways: Mama’s feet look like water balloons set to burst under the cover” (Ward 76). Again, we see an expression of doubling, the way the harm done to the earth disfigures the bodies of those who live on it. There is also the heat and humidity. Mama’s body is swelling, her feet “like water balloons set to burst,” likely caused by a heat edema that is the product of disease and increasing temperatures. Climate here is deadly like cancer.

Afterwards, we are told the story of Leonie’s brother, Given. Despite warnings from his family, Given decides to take part in a hunting trip with his fellow white football players in an area of the woods known as the Kill. A bet is made with Leonie’s boyfriend’s cousin that Given “could kill a buck with a bow before the boy could take one down with a rifle” (Ward 80). Given wins and is shot by the cousin directly afterwards. “[he] came to Big Joseph in the middle of the

² Jeff Vandermeer, Janisse Ray, Linda Hogan, and Margaret Atwood, to name a few. In addition, twentieth century writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright take up carceral ecology in prescient way.

day,” Leonie states, “the cousin sobering up, 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 81). And the Uncle: “*You fucking idiot....This ain’t the old days.* And then his cousin had put his arms up and mumbled: He was supposed to lose, Pa.” The racism responsible for Given’s murder is figured in terms of poison and rot, the stench that permeates the polluted Bois Sauvage throughout the novel.

The hunting trip not only recalls the “man hunters” from the 1927 Okeechobee Flood, but also the way in which a climate of anti-blackness and subsequent black death has been used to perpetuate white supremacy, both socially and economically.³ In the background of the men talking, Leonie says, “the buck lay on his side, one arrow in his neck, another in his stomach, all of him cold and hard as my brother. Their blood congealing” (Ward 82). This juxtaposition works against universalizing notions of a white Anthropocene, placing Given’s body alongside that of the buck, to emphasize the intersectional nature of oppression and death experienced by the other, whether nonhuman or human, that is shown through the use of the pronoun “their.” In Bois Sauvage, the woods are an expression of the carceral where to be a black man is to be endangered—to be hunted.

³ During the Okeechobee Hurricane in 1928, white men armed with rifles, referred to as “man hunters,” forcibly gathered up black victims and made them clear debris and dispose of dead bodies. See Robert Mykle’s *Killer ‘Cane: The Deadly Hurricane of 1928*. The racial dimensions of the 1928 Mississippi Flood are also examined in Susan Scott Parish’s *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*.

IV. Carceral Ecology of the Plantation

Many scholars and activists, including Angela Davis, Dennis Childs, Patrick Alexander, and Colin Dayan, to name only a few, have rightly mapped the transition of the early plantation into the modern prison system, a system through which American capitalism still continues to profit from the abuse and exploitation of black bodies.⁴ “For the African and those of African descent,” Childs explains, “the modern prison did not begin with Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, the Walnut Street Jail, or the Auburn System, but with the coffles, barracoons, slave ships, and slave ‘pens’ of the Middle Passage” (Childs 29). In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Ward fictionalizes this transformation through her depiction of Mississippi’s Parchman Prison.

As one of the first prisons to use convict labor, today’s prison industrial complex can be sourced back to Parchman and the US South. Many prisoners were leased out to work at coal mines, saw mills, railroads, cotton fields, and to build levees. The Parchman property itself resembled that of an antebellum plantation, including a “Victorian-style mansion at Front Camp” for the superintendent who ran Parchman “like a slave master” and segregated camps for the men where they mostly slept on dirt floors (Oshinsky 626). The prisoners were forced to work long hours in which they were physically abused, refused medical attention, and underfed. Running parallel to the main plot in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is the story Leonie’s father (Riv) tells of his time at Parchman during the 1940’s and a twelve-year-old boy, Richie, who is there for stealing food to feed his siblings.

In the novel, Parchman is spatially configured in a way that maximizes control and surveillance at the same time it leaves prisoners exposed to the harsh weather of the Mississippi

⁴ Others include Ruthie Gilmore and Dylan Rodriguez.

Delta. Here the carceral extends beyond the walls of the prison into the natural world. Rather than bars and chains, the property is meant to use the environmental elements as a means through which to punish, discipline, and manage prisoner bodies for capitalistic enterprise. The Delta's climate is important here. "It's different up there," Riv notes, "The heat. Ain't no water to catch the wind and cool you of, so the heat settles and bakes. Like a wet oven. Soon enough my hands thickened up and my feet crusted and bled" (Ward 41). Riv's distinction between regional climates is indicative of how the weather in the US South was necessary for growing certain crops, like cotton. Yet Riv also physically changes in response to the weather. His hands and feet harden, even thicken, undergoing a bodily mutation engendered by the weather as if being painfully remade to work the plantation.

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 upon 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 emphasis on trees here—oaks, cypress, magnolia—tangled and thick signal terror due to the hunting and lynching of African American men in the woods. As we saw in the last section, men throughout the novel have been tracked down, killed, and dismembered in those Mississippi woods. The trees, then, ontologically create a carceral 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. This kind of carceral ecology gestures to the geoengineering projects of the Anthropocene and the way that the environment and weather

function as untraceable yet primary sources of power that are solidified by an immaterial climate of racism. Like the convict labor on the Parchman property, this environmental manipulation allows global powers to profit from the exploitation of marginalized people and land.

Through the story of Richie, Ward shows how the environment can become a source of brutality that toxifies and overwhelms the body. According to Riv, “was one of them days the sun bear down on you so hard feel like it’s twisting you inside out, all you do is burn. One of them heavy days. Was a day like that the boy drop his hoe” (Ward 185). After the work day finishes, 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.” Riv depicts Richie as “yelling like a drowning dog” as he is beaten, his back “full of blood...[and] seven gashes laid open like filleted fish” (Ward 188). As Riv attempts to attend to Richie’s wounds with bandages and ointment, Richie is reduced to a paralyzing traumatic state:

“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. Out there in the fields all day, my head hurt. I can’t stop shaking.” (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). Like the ocean, the soil is ubiquitous, functioning as a painful and terrorizing element of containment. His nightmares position the dirt as a pictorial symbol of his trauma of not only being beaten into the ground but having to endure fieldwork as well.

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). The real and dreamed suffocation experienced by Richie also prefaces the still ongoing issue of African Americans being smothered through police brutality, Africans drowning during immigration attempts across the Mediterranean, or Haitians trying to get to Florida, in which elemental asphyxiation is made a paradigm for black trauma.⁵ In each of these incidents, however, the environment acts an accessory to carceral power and abuse, whether heat, water, or dirt.

Later, after Richie attempts to escape Parchman, Riv finds and kills him in the woods to protect him from being savagely murdered by the white mob following closely behind. Although Riv tries to prevent it from happening, Richie’s lifeless body is mauled by hunting dogs. Afterwards, like Given, he is left a spirit in a state of flux who obsessively searches for home. Through his spiritual attachment to the space of Parchman prison, Richie illustrates how the carceral ecology of the property does not exist in a successive linear temporality, but rather as a “complex collection of structures, of layers” that “crumble” as he finds himself in a multitude of historical moments (Rovelli 4).

For Richie, time exists as a collection of events and processes that unfold before him in this liminal state.⁶ “I spent so many turns of the earth at the new Parchman,” Richie says, “I watched chain men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks....when I slept and woke, I was in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth....I slept and woke to the Parchman again, to men who wore their hair long and braided to their

⁵ Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: Blackness and Being* offers a rich, detailed analysis of asphyxiation.

⁶ This comes from Carlo Rovelli’s *The Order of Time* in which he draws from physics and quantum gravity to demonstrate the illusion of past, present, and future.

scalps, who sat for hours in small windowless rooms staring at big black boxes.” Richie’s dreams again serve as reverberations of a collective racial trauma of displacement. He moves from the building of Parchman, to the birth of modern enslavement, then to the colonial genocide of the Natives, and eventually, ends up in present day with African American men watching television in their cells. Richie concludes, “I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time” (Ward 284). Richie’s illustration of non-normative time, as well as his own ghostly presence in the lives of the children, positions the collective trauma of enslavement and the carceral as a spectral haunting of the present, something that is always already there, perhaps only in a different form, resembling that of the processual nature of the Anthropocene.

V. The World as Aquarium

As the family makes their way back from Parchman Prison, a police car appears behind them and flashes its lights. They pull over and the officer comes to the window. “Where ya’ll going?” he asks. “Home,” Leonie answers, “To the coast.” When asked where they were coming from, she tells him Parchman. “I know it’s a mistake as soon as I say it,” she says. “The handcuffs are on me before the *n* is silent” (Ward 245-46). The officer orders everyone out of the car. Frightened, Jojo reaches into the gris girs bag given to him before the trip by his grandfather. The bag contains a tooth, feather, and a note. “But then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me,” Jojo explains. And Leonie: “It’s easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer...But he’s a baby, nothing but a fat-kneed bowlegged toddler.” (Ward 247-48). The man “yanks at Jojo’s pocket...and looks within it before shoving it back in Jojo’s face like it’s a rotten banana peel... ‘Boy had a damn rock in his pocket’” (Ward 251). The officer’s choice reflects the way African American children routinely have their ages dismissed by law

enforcement and are criminalized based upon their skin. It is what Wallace Best has called the fear of black bodies in motion where movement is a “signifier of something, scripted and coded” that “spells danger to the white power structure” (Best).

Afterwards, Leonie falls asleep in the car while Michael drives. Like Richie’s nightmares of soil, the police violence the family experienced becomes the focus of her dream, reframed in ecological terms:

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)

The vehicle’s rolled down windows engender an influx of salty air that reproduces for Leonie the humid atmosphere of the southern Gulf as she reimagines the trauma of the police stop, a violence predicated on blackness, as being stranded on a vast stretch of ocean. Materialized as another method of state-sanctioned racialized death, the water forcefully threatens to overwhelm the body in an act of suffocation that silences as it kills. Just below, Leonie sees a dangerous array of marine life—“fish bigger than men,” manta rays, and “sharks jostling” the raft. These images recall the many enslaved thrown overboard during the Middle Passage and the sharks that were said to follow the ships.

This is a history that is part of Leonie’s own family lineage, of a grandmother who was “kidnapped and sold.” A woman who learned that “bad things happened” on those ships” (Ward 108). “The sea is history,” as Derek Walcott has said. “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 fully

submerged in water, Leonie sacrifices herself in order to push family members up toward the air in a plea for more time, knowing that the sea and its ecology will ultimately finish what human hands did not. They are sinking into an environment that is designed to consume them.

“Our world,” Ward tells us, “is an aquarium” (Ward 406). The aquarium, or “ocean on a table,” as it was originally called, is a microcosm of an aquatic ecology, a bite-sized way for humans to practice the management of life. An opportunity to play God with nature. A large-scale rendering of the aquarium, Leonie’s dream of drowning points to a world that is being flooded by carceral ecology. It recalls the sinking towns along the Gulf Coast. In Isle de Jean Charles, marshland canals cut by the oil and gas industry have resulted in “190,000 square miles of [Native] land, an area the size of Rhode Island” (Dermansky). Leonie’s dream is also akin to contemporary images of African refugees drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean as they attempt to escape the economic impact of climate change. The raft, then, becomes an entangled site of memory and trauma that sits upon an ocean of layered history. It embodies a temporal verisimilitude in the way that it leads us all directions. As Richie puts it, “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). Both the raft and the family sink into those aquatic layers. The overlapping synonymous images—— sea; road, car; raft, swimming; suffocation, ecology; threat——produce a kind of historical becoming-with, a constellation of moments where the environment and its many assemblages are metonymically associated with racism, control, and oppression.

VI. Conclusion

Nearing the end of the novel, Michael recalls 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 considered one of the largest environmental disasters in history. Afterwards, “I actually cried,” Michael confesses. He tells Jojo “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.” Michael’s depiction of the oil spill’s aftermath reads like the post-Katrina decay of Bois Sauvage where a pervasive toxicity rots bodies and even everts them at times. His emphasis on dolphin pods, in particular, invokes the familial. These were aquatic communities of nonhumans. Here the violence of the climate crisis is made legible in the flesh of animals that are “sick with legions” and “oil-burnt.”

Ward’s use of the dolphin pods subverts the myth of a universal Anthropocene by revealing the anthropocentrism of the climate crisis. The injuries and deaths experienced by nonhumans from the oil spill show that the impact of the climate crisis is not limited to the *anthropos*. The violence committed against certain humans and nonhumans alike demonstrates that the figure of the human is a social construct. In this way, Chakrabarty’s earlier statement—that “human collectivity” now exists through a “shared sense of catastrophe”—recycles the problematic rhetoric of Enlightenment thinking (Chakrabarty 22). Ironically burgeoning at the same time that slavery was being instituted in the New World, the Enlightenment restricted its central concepts of universality, freedom, and rationality to the white male Enlightenment subject. The human collective of the Anthropocene, then, is based upon an understanding of universal freedom or, perhaps, universal catastrophe, that is rooted in racism and speciesism. In other words, survival for the privileged few.

The spill also illustrates the creative capacity of carceral ecology to produce a second nature that functions as a form of gaslighting, altering reality as we perceive it. “Some scientists for BP,” Michael explains, “said this didn’t have anything to do with the oil, that sometimes this is what happens to animals: they die for unexpected reasons. Sometimes a lot of them. Sometimes all at once.” In response, Jojo thinks, “the way he looked at me that night told me he wasn’t just thinking about any humans; he was thinking about me. I wonder if Michael thought that yesterday, when he saw that gun, saw that cop push me down so I bowed to the dirt” (Ward 343). Michael’s concern expresses the connection between the racial oppression of the Old South and climate change from which this essay began. In the same way that BP scientists can assert that the loss of marine life had nothing to do with the oil, government officials are quick to blame the actions of the victims of police violence. This criminalization process, too, is a residual of the Enlightenment. Bureaucratic power and science thus work in tandem to naturalize abuse that is the product of social bias and economic interest.

By reading southern writers like Jesmyn Ward and examining how the carceral has and continues to be entangled in the culture and landscape of the US South opens up new ways of thinking about our current climate crisis. On the one hand, Ward offers a counternarrative to a white Anthropocene that recognizes the epoch’s processual nature and its relationship to the many afterlives of slavery. On the other hand, however, we see that sociopolitical theories like the carceral are limited by anthropocentrism. By prioritizing the human as sole actor and producer, that is, we miss the way that the environment itself can function as an actor of the carceral, as well as how nature may be acted upon to enforce a carceral state. Understanding carceral ecology in its entirety, of course, is larger than the scope of this paper. It would rely on a

future of smaller studies in which scholars continue to investigate the complex relationship of the carceral and the environment. This essay has hopefully served as one.

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