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TESE DE DOUTORAMENTO

AN ARCHEOLOGY OF SILENCED VOICES: SPECTRALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

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PROGRAMA DE DOUTORAMENTO EN ESTUDOS INGLESES AVANZADOS: LINGÜÍSTICA, LITERATURA E CULTURA

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

To the "sixty million and more"
At the bottom of the ocean
Underground
Behind bars

Black Lives Matter

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[…] When I think of this now,
I see how the past holds us captive,
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye

— NATASHA TRETHEWAY, "Enlightenment"

[…] Bless the laborers
whose faces we do not see —like the girl
my grandmother was, walking the rails home:

bless us that we remember.

— NATASHA TRETHEWAY, "Invocation, 1926"

Tamén os oes ti cando dormes dentro de min?
Tamén desenroscan as súas voces das árbores
e veñen murmurarche aquilo que vén do envés da vida?

Tamén os oes ti tentando desprenderse da folla do amieiro na que quedaron
… ese limbo natal precioso e descomunal coma a fraxilidade da existencia?

Tamén che falan arrastrando a lingua pola néboa
ou nun terrón que se esfarela co leve peso da noite e do pasado?

Tamén che falan do inefable coa claridade total
do que non se comprende?

Tamén os entendes ti cando te arrolan no meu ventre
e formas parte deles anque deles non quede nada?

Amada polos espectros
tamén te oen eles cando espatexas no medio e medio do agro
conmocionada polo pasto polo saltón e polo marco que linda co ceo…

Eu creo que tamén os escoitas enfeitizada
esperando que che toque nacer
para ver
a súa invisible presenza
diáfana e inmortal
si
coma a materia da verdade
que só pode continuarse en ti.

— OLGA NOVO, "Canción de berce intrauterina"

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ABSTRACT

Since the so-called "spectral turn" of the 1990s, the ghost was placed at the forefront of critical debates and artistic manifestations. Adopting the field of spectrality studies, this dissertation seeks to account for the ubiquity of the ghost in contemporary African American fiction. This research is premised on the fact that, in the corpus selected, two complementary dimensions of spectrality, with their concomitant functions, can be ascertained. I argue that, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) the Africanist dimension of spectrality is foregrounded while the psycho-social one occupies a secondary place. In these contexts the ghost appears first and foremost as a marker of cultural identity that is mobilized to problematize the progressive loss of cultural bonds in the process of assimilation into the white hegemonic society, and to unveil the anxiety such process of integration in the white supremacist social and political structures entails for the Black subject. Here, the spectral exchange is outlined as a space for gaining a cultural awareness upon which to reclaim the (diasporic) African American cultural identity as a locus of resistance in the face of racial oppression. Conversely, in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), "Tell Me, Tell Me" (1992), and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" (2018); and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), the psycho-social dimension takes precedence over the Africanist dimension. The spectral scenes and ghosts in these texts denote a repressed individual trauma of intrinsic collective significance in the context of American racial dynamics. The spectral here functions as a catalyst of the subject's confrontation with its own material self as inscribed in the coordinates of the African American community and the nation. In collective terms, this appears as a confrontation with history hinged on the disclosure of the mechanisms of perpetuation of racial oppression in the age of colorblindness. Ultimately, the revisionist character of the specter will transform it into a space of resistance that allows for the articulation of a social critique and the re-inscription of erased subjects and their (hi)stories in the national American narrative.

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RESUMO

As pantasmas, aparicións ou espectros cativaron a imaxinación humana dende a orixe dos tempos. Durante a meirande parte do século XIX os debates arredor dos fantasmas foron de carácter ontolóxico e buscaban probar ou negar a existencia dos mesmos. Porén, o interese que se comezou a mostrar cara a esta figura no eido da psicanálise dende comezos do século XX marcará un devir espectral que culminará co denominado *spectral turn* (xiro espectral) na década de 1990. Con este termo, que tenta dar conta da ubicuidade da pantasma nas esferas teórica, crítica e artística de fins de século, postulará o espectro como unha metáfora conceptual que dará lugar a un paradigma analítico propio a través do cal se tratarán cuestións de carácter ético-social. Así, sentaranse as bases para o xurdimento dos chamados estudos da espectralidade, un campo de estudo de carácter interdisciplinario no que converxen as teorías de trauma e memoria con representacións de identidade e procesos de revisión histórica. As obras seminais *Ghostly Matters* (1997) de Avery Gordon e *Cultural Haunting* (1998) de Kathleen Brogan postularán a materialidade histórica do fantasma e a importancia das condicións de violencia social para a súa xénese. Esta aproximación teórica é de especial relevancia para interrogar a produción literaria afroamericana contemporánea en canto á omnipresenza do espectral que se pode advertir nela. Así, a crítica Joanne Chassot proporá un modelo espectrográfico para a literatura da diáspora africana na que se establecen as funcións principais da pantasma en relación á revisión e re-escritura histórica, á expresión traumática e á conexión diaspórica. Cunha maior énfase na transmisión interxeracional e colectiva, bota man de conceptos como o de "trauma cultural" acuñado por Ron Eyerman que veñen a complementar unha perspectiva sociolóxica do fenómeno espectral.

Esta tese propón a distinción de dúas dimensións complementarias do obxecto espectral: unha de carácter africanista —isto é, o fantasma aparece como resto das culturas africanas que foron importadas e crioulizadas durante o período do comercio transatlántico de escravos e da escravitude nos Estados Unidos e noutras sociedades da diáspora africana nas Américas— e outra de carácter psico-social, a través da cal os espectros figuran como símbolos dun trauma individual ou colectivo sen resolver. A este respecto manteño que no corpus de obras seleccionadas para a análise se poden diferenciar dúas tendencias: por unha banda, en *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) de Paule Marshall e *Mama Day* (1988) de Gloria Naylor a dimensión Africanista prima sobre a psico-social. As pasaxes espectrais de *Praisesong* e os elementos espectrais delineados en *Mama Day* configuran o fantasma como unha presenza profundamente influenciada por unha concepción do tempo e do máis alá con orixe na filosofía tradicional africana que se espallou polo sur dos Estados Unidos e polo Caribe. Nestes contextos a pantasma aparece principalmente como un marcador de identidade cultural que se mobiliza co fin de problematizar a perda progresiva dos lazos culturais no proceso de asimilación a sociedade branca hexemónica e de mostrar a ansiedade que este proceso de integración nunhas estruturas sociais e políticas dominadas polo supremacía branca supón para o suxeito negro. Aquí, o intercambio co espectral aparece como unha maneira de gañar unha conciencia cultural que permitirá reclamar a identidade cultural afroamericana e diaspórica como un lugar de resistencia perante a opresión racial. Por outra banda, o resto das

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obras analizadas réxense pola afirmación inversa: na novela *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) de Randall Kenan, así como en dous dos seus relatos breves, "Tell Me, Tell Me," (1992) e "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" (2018), e na novela *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) de Jesmyn Ward a dimensión pisco-social prima sobre a dimensión africanista. As escenas espectrais e as pantasmas que aparecen nestes textos sinalan un trauma individual reprimido que ten unha proxección colectiva na comunidade afroamericana. Neste senso, a espectralidade aparece como vehículo de confrontación histórica que orbita ao redor da perpetuación da opresión racial nunha era supostamente pos-racial, a chamada *age of colorblindness*. Porén, estas dúas tendencias converxen na transcendencia da metáfora espectral unicamente como sinónimo de desposesión e na re-definición da mesma como unha ferramenta de emancipación a través da cal se pode articular unha crítica social e levar a cabo un proceso de re-inscrición dos suxeitos que foron borrados e das súas historias na narrativa nacional dos Estados Unidos.

O obxectivo principal desta tese é ofrecer unha análise literaria pormenorizada dos diferentes usos da espectralidade nas obras mencionadas anteriormente que explique a ubicuidade do espectral na literatura afroamericana contemporánea. Máis alá disto, a tese busca contribuír á expansión do campo dos estudos da espectralidade desenvolvendo ideas que polo momento se atopan nun estado embrionario, tales como a dobre valencia do fantasma en relación á marxinación e á resistencia, ou o posicionamento social dos suxeitos que funcionan como testemuñas do espectral. Estes adquiren unha importancia renovada no contexto dos debates raciais que están tendo lugar nos Estados Unidos na actualidade, así como na emerxencia de correntes filosóficas contemporáneas tales como o Afropesimismo. Introdúcense, ademais, conceptos novos, nomeadamente *structural spectrality* (espectralidade estrutural) ou *implied spectrality* (espectralidade implícita), cos que se tenta dar conta das posibles expansións figurativas do fantasma nestas obras que poidan ser desenvolvidas no futuro a través doutras narrativas. Alén da teorización sobre o espectro, unha segunda esfera de acción contemplada neste traballo é a social. É por iso que a discusión crítica das formas de espectralidade na literatura busca, en última instancia, reflexionar sobre as condicións de precariedade que rodean o colectivo afroamericano, desvelar as políticas que as producen e xerar conciencia sobre o permanente risco das vidas negras, todos eles aspectos que son articulados socialmente a través do movemento *Black Lives Matter*. Tendo en consideración que esta é unha reflexión feita no contexto da literatura, tamén se busca efectuar unha revisión da tradición literaria estadounidense na súa totalidade a través dun proceso de inscrición de voces negras, especialmente daquelas que foron obxecto dunha dobre marxinación debido ás opresións interseccionais de raza, xénero e identidade sexual, e outorgándolles así o lugar que merecen nas súas comunidades e no canon literario dos Estados Unidos. Co fin de acadar estes obxectivos empregaranse os métodos e procedementos propios da análise textual. Dado que o exame inmanente das instancias espectrais se desenvolverá no seo dos estudos da espectralidade, utilizarase o aparato crítico dos mesmos cunha especial énfase nas teorías do trauma, da memoria e da raza. Así mesmo, tendo en consideración a materialidade da pantasma, consideraranse tratados históricos producidos na actualidade e animados por un forte espírito revisionista.

Esta tese está formada por tres capítulos: un inicial de natureza teórica ao que seguen dous de carácter empírico. O primeiro pretende amosar unha concepción ampla do espectro en termos críticos e culturais sobre a que se sustentará a subsecuente interrogación crítica dos textos que conforman o corpus levada a cabo no segundo e terceiro capítulo. Así, no primeiro capítulo, trázanse os antecedentes teóricos e literarios da pantasma afroamericana que domina a ficción contemporánea. En Occidente, a teorización sistemática do fantasma comezou coas investigacións psicanalíticas primeiro de Sigmund Freud e logo de Nicolas Abraham e Maria Torok que acuñaron os conceptos *crypt* (cripta) e *phantom* (pantasma) para designar os mecanismos de transmisión interxeracional do trauma. Máis tarde, estas indagacións sobre o fantasma estenderanse ao campo da filosofía co traballo do pensador deconstrutivista Jacques Derrida e a súa teoría da *hauntology*. O tratamento que el fai do espectral e as características que lle adscribe serán revisadas por voces subalternas dentro das emerxentes nacións poscoloniais, que funcionan como unha contestación ás premisas básicas sobre as que se construíu o pensamento occidental tradicionalmente. De xeito progresivo, a ubicuidade da pantasma en diversos contextos e retóricas converxerá no anteriormente mencionado xiro espectral da década de 1990, momento no que o fantasma pasa a ser concibido coma unha metáfora conceptual. Neste punto as pescudas sobre as condicións que producen visitacións espectrais levadas a cabo por Gordon e Brogan acentuarán unha concepción materialista da pantasma como un elemento asociado a contextos dunha violencia, a miúdo inconclusa, que será fundamental para futuras discusións. No ámbito literario, a configuración do espectral estivo tradicionalmente asociada ás narrativas góticas orixinadas na segunda metade do século XVIII nas Illas Británicas. A importación deste xénero á nova nación dos Estados Unidos a comezos do século XIX transformarao nun complexo modelo de representación onde as convencións propias do xénero se porán ao servizo dun comentario social e psicolóxico. Nestas novas latitudes o Gótico convértese nunha ferramenta chave para articular a presenza dun Outro racializado e subxugado e tamén para tratar de maneira velada os pecados capitais dun novo país fundado sobre o xenocidio indíxena e a escravitude dos negros. A maleabilidade e adaptabilidade propias da tradición gótica non só levarán o xénero a converterse nunha peza central da literatura estadounidense, senón que será en si mesmo obxecto dunha transformación subversiva a través da cal as convencións que noutrora tiñan gobernado a representación do Outro como monstro serán apropiadas para desmantelar as grandes narrativas sobre as que se sustenta a identidade nacional. A violencia e a morte que asediaron historicamente a comunidade negra nos Estados Unidos configuran a pantasma como un vehículo a través do cal se pode explorar a identidade cultural desta minoría forxada na encrucillada do trauma e da memoria colectivos. Estas converxencias son tratadas de maneira sublime na novela *Beloved* (1987) de Toni Morrison que deu lugar a gran parte das teorizacións do espectral no contexto afroamericano que hoxe coñecemos e a cuxa análise se lle dedica a parte final deste capítulo inicial. A través dun breve comentario desta obra búscase ilustrar a dimensión africanista e psico-social da espectralidade así como a perspectiva individual e colectiva, a representación da escravitude como trauma fundacional e a importancia do contexto de publicación e recepción para o recoñecemento do valor

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contemporáneo das problemáticas ás que a narrativa lles dá voz, todos eles elementos que se tratarán en maior profundidade nos seguintes capítulos.

O segundo capítulo céntrase na primeira parte da hipótese de partida segundo a cal a dimensión africanista se antepón á psico-social e a espectralidade aparece en relación ao proceso de asimilación branca e á reclamación dunha identidade cultural diaspórica. Precedido por unha pequena introdución na que se fai unha breve contextualización socio-histórica e cultural do colectivo afroamericano na primeira metade do século XX e se establece o percorrido do debate africanista, analízase en primeiro lugar o tratamento do espectral na obra de Paule Marshall *Praisesong for the Widow*. Aquí sinalaranse tres pasaxes espectrais que teñen lugar durante a viaxe literal e metafórica que a protagonista, Avey Johnson, fai cara a diáspora. Cada unha destas pasaxes está dominada por unha figura espectral —a súa tía avoa Aunt Cuney, o seu marido Jerome Johnson e un grupo de espíritos ancestrais— a través das cales se articula a posición social de Avey e se mostra o dilema do avance social afroamericano sustentado nun proceso de asimilación na sociedade branca, segregada e profundamente racista, en detrimento da identidade cultural negra. En última instancia, o contacto espectral dramatizará a transición de Avey dende unha posición de alienación a unha de reclamación de si mesma en termos culturais. Esta reclamación faise a través da focalización do corpo da muller racializada como un lugar histórico de opresión que desvela a experiencia feminina e se converte nun elemento fundamental no renacemento simbólico da protagonista. En segundo lugar, este capítulo presenta a análise de *Mama Day* de Gloria Naylor, unha novela moi próxima a *Praisesong* a nivel temático. Os tres elementos espectrais delineados nesta obra afondan na natureza multi-prismática do fenómeno espectral. O diálogo espectral que estrutura a novela ofrece unha perspectiva interpretativa para a fundación do que se denomina *aural haunting*, isto é, un modelo de manifestación espectral que se leva a cabo de maneira auditiva, no canto de visual. Este modelo descríbese en maior profundidade a través do segundo elemento analizado, as voces espectrais dos membros da familia Day soterrados na illa de Willow Springs, que narran as traxedias familiares. A presenza ubicua da antepasada escrava Sapphira Wade, a súa emancipación e o poder que exerce sobre os seus descendentes e o resto da comunidade convértena no terceiro elemento espectral, un que vén a completar o trazado dunha epistemoloxía alternativa na crioulización de sistemas culturais de orixe africana que queda representada na figura da *conjurer* (feiticeira). Este modelo postúlase como alternativa ás demandas asimilacionistas da sociedade hexemónica e como vía principal para crear unha identidade híbrida baseada na actualización da memoria histórica e na súa instrumentalización como ferramenta de resistencia no contexto contemporáneo.

O terceiro capítulo céntrase na segundo parte da hipótese de partida que mantén a dominancia da dimensión psico-social do espectral sobre a africanista. Nel ofrécese, en primeiro lugar, unha introdución na que se postula a conexión entre o recente rexurdimento do espectral e os problemas, tanto internos coma externos, aos que se tivo que enfrontar a comunidade afroamericana nas últimas décadas, así como as súas estratexias de liberación. Na primeira sección deste derradeiro capítulo trátanse a novela de Randall Kenan *A Visitation of Spirits* e dous dos seus relatos breves “Tell Me, Tell Me” e “Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard*

and Promises". Na novela o espectral aparece en relación á represión individual que se produce pola condena da homosexualidade que ten lugar dentro da propia comunidade negra e que o seu protagonista, Horace Cross, sofre en primeira persoa, mais tamén á represión colectiva que figura asociada ao pasado de opresión sufrido polo colectivo afroamericano. Estas cuestións trátanse a través dunha serie de escenas espectrais ancoradas a diferentes lugares de grande relevancia simbólica —a igrexa, a escola e o teatro— que mostran a complexa situación na que se atopa Horace, atrapado na encrucillada da súa identidade racial e sexual. A novela explora, ademais, as orixes e custos da chamada *respectability politics* (política de respectabilidade) a través dun cambio na direccionalidade do espectral polo cal Horace pasa de ser un obxecto pasivo, vítima de visións espectrais, a ocupar unha posición proactiva converténdose nun axente espectral após o seu tráxico suicidio. Por outra banda, os relatos breves ofrecen unha revisión histórica que revela os actos de resistencia dos escravos, as represalias e a virulenta violencia que caracterizou o Sur dos Estados Unidos durante o período do *Jim Crow*. As escenas espectrais que teñen lugar nestas narrativas difiren en canto á posición subxectiva das súas testemuñas e, así, ilustran a falta de responsabilidade histórica por parte da comunidade branca dominante e o proceso de reclamación histórica levado a cabo pola comunidade negra. Deste xeito, "Tell Me, Tell Me" mostra a Ida, a viúva branca dun adiñeirado xuíz, como epítome dunha culpa reprimida e ignorada, mentres que "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" propón a Randall, un homosexual negro que retorna ao Sur, como principal axente da *(g)hospitality.* A sección final deste terceiro capítulo está dedicada á discusión crítica da novela *Sing, Unburied, Sing* de Jesmyn Ward que presenta un caso máis tradicional de espectralidade, próximo ao modelo espectrográfico proposto por Chassot. Os dous primeiros obxectos espectrais analizados —Richie, o fantasma dun rapaz prisioneiro en Parchman Farm durante o *Jim Crow*, e Given, o dun mozo asasinado polos seus amigos brancos no Mississippi actual— representan as atrocidades históricas que se cometeron en contra da poboación negra nos Estados Unidos e como estas se reiteran con impunidade ao abeiro do sistema xurídico-criminal. A xustaposición destes obxectos espectrais e das súas principais testemuñas, Jojo (un rapaz de trece anos), Kayla (a súa irmá pequena) e Leonie (a súa nai adicta), sitúa a perpetuación da violencia racial e do racismo estrutural como clave na presente mobilización do espectral. Esta realidade está apoiada polo tratamento do terceiro obxecto espectral, un grupo de espíritos anónimos que pertencen a diferentes períodos históricos e que vagan polo mundo dos vivos buscando clausura. Ademais disto, Ward crea unha teoría espectral que está en parte influenciada pola dimensión africanista considerada previamente. Así, o terceiro capítulo conclúe cun breve comentario das reverberacións espectrais que se poden atopar en *Let Us Descend* (2023), a novela máis recente da autora, cuxa relevancia para esta análise reside no feito de que vén a completar en certo modo o modelo de espectralidade que a autora propón en *Sing.*

A análise crítica levada a cabo nos capítulos precedentes é revisada nun derradeiro apartado dedicado ás conclusións. Neste trazaranse, en primeiro lugar, os puntos de converxencia entre os diferentes textos analizados, especialmente no relativo á concepción do espectral como catalizador da memoria individual e colectiva, a posición subxectiva das testemuñas no que respecta a cuestións de xénero e identidade sexual, a primacía do elemento

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interxeracional, o tratamento do espazo e os usos da temporalidade interna e externa no contexto da chamada *temporality of Blackness* equivalente a un estado de crise perpetua. Esta discusión conxunta reforzará a premisa sobre a que esta investigación se erixiu mostrando a mobilización espectral coma unha intervención social que busca espertar un debate social sobre a conmemoración histórica e a difícil situación actual da comunidade negra nos Estados Unidos. Dado que esta se realiza no seo da literatura, proponse así unha revisión do canon literario do país a través da inclusión de voces negras disidentes. Após esta discusión de resultados, o capítulo das conclusións rematará cunha breve consideración de posibles liñas de investigacións futuras coas que testar a presente hipótese e aplicala nun corpus máis amplo da que se podería chamar ficción neoespectral no eido da literatura afroamericana, e noutras literaturas poscoloniais dentro e fóra dos Estados Unidos. Intimamente relacionado con isto, tamén se suxire a expansión da dimensión figurativa da metáfora espectral en contextos como o da prisión, o que sería un paso máis no presente proxecto de rescatar voces silenciadas.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Black America has been almost spiritual. Striving to survive the death that is racism. Living through death like spirits. Forging a soulful history. A history of souls.
— Ibram X. Kendi

CONTEXTUALIZATION

In her October 22, 2018 *New York Times* essay "The Ghost Story Persists in American Literature. Why?," Parul Sehgal defines contemporary American literature as "positive ectoplasmatic" and refers to myriad pages published each year in which the Gothic trope *par excellence* refuses to yield to the skepticism of our days, the absolute hegemony of the material of our late-capitalist stage. Moreover, Seghal's article pinpoints the centrality of the past in this mobilization of the spectral: she defines contemporary ghosts against the Victorian tradition of haunted houses, monstrous villains and damsels in distress where the pervasive presence of the heinous Other served the purpose of creating cautionary tales, to survey a kind of literature where the ghost is no longer the enforcer of a conservative status quo, but a protester of such norms. However, the past does not only emerge in her scrutiny as the coordinates of a tradition against which the literature of the twenty-first century seeks to define itself; it is the very substance of which these specters are made, their haunting stemming from a "past clamoring for redress" (Sehgal). The same year of Sehgal's essay, Joanne Chassot's seminal *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory and Identity* was published. This epitomizes a critical *re*-turn to the spectral that denotes its reverberations across the artistic and the academic spheres. Such currency of the topic is evidenced by the sheer number of papers and monographs engaged with the theoretical and critical potentialities of the spectral and its attendant resurrection and revision of the past. It is true that the ghost has historically enthralled artists and other intellectuals: the first formal studies of the spectral, developed in the nineteenth century, orbited around an ontological debate: to prove or refute the existence of such phenomena. With the advancement of the twentieth century, however, there was a shift of focus whereby the specter began to acquire a metaphorical complexity that has since then determined its theoretical course. This would reach an apex in the 1990s with the so-called spectral turn, a term that accounts for the ubiquity of the ghost in cultural manifestations of different kinds, as well as in a body of social, political and philosophical theory and criticism. Through this new approach, the specter becomes a conceptual metaphor, and its liminal nature turns into the chief avenue to address the convergence of the past and the present, the social configurations of the self and

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the Other, as well as the political constitution of citizenship in opposition to the marginality of those civilly dead.

However, the past—that which, like the ghost, cannot be buried and resists forgetting—seems to be the paradoxical ruling force of our era. As illustrated throughout this dissertation, this marks the existence of an underlying crisis. As Sehgal claims, ghosts "emerge from their own time" and, in the American case, African American literature has been at the forefront with works raging from critical discussions on the revival of horror aesthetics, to the rise of speculative fiction, and the ever-present theorization of the legacies of slavery. The intimate connection between Blackness and ghostly matters is rooted at the core of a transhistorical racial oppression that has determined the physical subjection of the racialized body through slavery, lynchings, police brutality and incarceration, and its social domination through structural racism. These mechanisms of subjugation have posited Black existence in the threshold between a precarious life and imminent death, thus making it disposable and perpetually spectral. In this context, this piece of research makes Seghal's question its own and it attempts to provide an answer to the omnipresence of the ghost in contemporary African American literature. Thus, the focus of this dissertation is the discussion of different forms of literary spectrality through the adoption of spectrality studies as a theoretical framework in its own right. In this manner, my research continues the project of the critic Kathleen Brogan whose work, together with that of Avery Gordon's, was foundational for the field. If Brogan's *Cultural Haunting* (1998) stems from the search for an answer to the proliferation of specters in ethnic literatures during the 1980s, my study interrogates the upholding of this tendency in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it attempts to offer a project of continuation and expansion: continuist because it re-reads some of the novels through which these authors developed their theories and studies them under a reformulated rubric of African American spectrality; expansionist because it locates these traditional works along later novels from the same tradition and because it plants the seeds for a prospective pan-ethnical survey of minority literatures in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

HYPOTHESIS AND OBJECTIVES

The premise that structures the analysis carried out in these chapters postulates two dimensions inherent to the spectral object: an Africanist one, whereby the ghost and derived spirit world can be read in light of an African remnant present in Afro-syncretic belief systems and practices of African American or other diasporic societies' vernacular forms; and a psycho-social one, whereby the specter appears as epitome of unresolved individual and cultural trauma. It is important to understand that these are two *complementary* dimensions of the same phenomenon and by no means posited as mutually exclusive, for trauma, especially the founding trauma derived from the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, is integral to the creole cultural formations of the transplanted Africans and their descendants in the New World. Taking this distinction and clarification as a basis, I argue that, within the corpus selected, two main functions of the spectral can be ascertained regarding the dimension of the spectral that takes precedence. In the novels studied in the second chapter, *Praisesong for the*

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Widow (1983) by Paule Marshall and *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor, the Africanist dimension is foregrounded while the psycho-social one occupies a secondary place. The spectral passages of *Praisesong* and the spectral elements delineated in *Mama Day* configure the ghost as a presence deeply influenced by an African understanding of time and the afterlife that finds multiple ritual outlets in both the insular South of the United States and the Caribbean. In these contexts the ghost appears first and foremost as a marker of cultural identity that is mobilized to problematize the progressive loss of cultural bonds in the process of assimilation into the hegemonic white society and to unveil the anxiety such process of integration in the white supremacist social and political structures entails for the Black subject. Here, the spectral exchange is outlined as a space for gaining a cultural awareness upon which to reclaim the (diasporic) African American cultural identity as a locus of resistance in the face of racial oppression. For the novels and stories analyzed in the third chapter, the inverse claim applies: in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), "Tell Me, Tell Me" (1992) and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" (2018); and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), the psycho-social dimension takes precedence over the Africanist dimension. The spectral scenes and ghosts in these texts denote a repressed individual trauma of intrinsic collective significance in the context of American racial dynamics. The spectral here functions as a catalyst for the subject's confrontation with their own material self as inscribed in the coordinates of the African American community and the nation. In collective terms, this appears as a confrontation with history hinged on the disclosure of the mechanisms of perpetuation of racial oppression in the age of colorblindness. These two tendencies converge on the transcendence of the spectral as metaphor for dispossession as well as in its re-definition as an emancipatory tool for the articulation of a social critique and the re-inscription of erased subjects and their (hi)stories in the American national narrative.

The main objective of this dissertation is to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of the different uses of spectrality and haunting in the aforementioned works of fiction that accounts for the recurrence of spectrality in contemporary African American literature. By doing so, the research carried out through these pages also pursues a number of secondary objectives ascribed to two interrelated spheres. In the first place, it seeks to contribute to the expansion of the field of spectrality studies by elaborating on existing ideas that are in an embryonic stage, such as the dual valence of the spectral as associated to marginalization and resistance, which acquires a renewed significance in the context of contemporary racial and cultural debates or in philosophical currents such as Afropessimism, or the positioning of the subject position of the witness of spectral apparitions. In addition to this, I introduce new concepts, such as those of structural or implied spectrality, that attempt to capture figurative expansions of the ghost in these narratives and are intended for future development. Hershini Young argues that "Theorizing the ghost is part of the complex process of mourning necessary to deal with the violence and injury that characterize the (social) black body" (40). My study develops precisely at this juncture and, thus, the second sphere of action I consider is the socio-historical. The critical discussion of literary spectrality ultimately seeks to reflect upon the precarious condition of Blackness, to bring to light the policies that have enforced it

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and to raise awareness about the systematic endangerment of Black life that have been articulated socially through the Black Lives Matter movement. Such meditation, inasmuch as it takes place through literature, also aims to effect a revision of the American literary tradition in its totality by inscribing Black voices, especially those that have been an object of dual marginalization due to intersecting oppressions of race, gender and sexual identity, within it and by granting them the place they deserve in their communities and in the American literary canon.

METHODOLOGY

With the purpose of attaining these primary and secondary objectives, I will employ the tools and methods proper to literary analysis, namely close reading. The immanent critical examination will rely on the theoretical apparatus of spectrality studies, which is discussed at length in the first chapter. Inaugurated in the decade of the 1990s, coinciding with the aforementioned spectral turn, this critical approach is characterized by its interdisciplinarity. For the purpose of this study I will be focusing on the areas of trauma, memory and history. The intrinsic analysis of spectral objects, their characterization as well as the discussion of their status as conceptual metaphors will be founded on the basic concepts that theoreticians of the field have adopted from the psychoanalytical tradition, especially the work of Sigmund Freud regarding the uncanny, as well as that of his Hungarian successors Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theorization of "the crypt" and "the phantom" in connection to intergenerational transmissions. Closely connected to these elaborations, trauma theories as developed in the context of the project of decolonizing trauma studies, alongside studies on collective memory will offer a productive insight for the scrutiny of spectrality in the narratives under analysis. In this regard concepts such as "cultural trauma" coined by Ron Eyerman, which brings to the psychological substratum the forces of social constructivism and collectivity, will be outlined as a fundamental notion in the understanding of spectral working. In turn, this sociological dimension will rely on theories of social death, as enunciated by Orlando Patterson, or Brogan's "cultural mourning," that have been adopted in the field. These will be supplemented with adjacent critical socio-historical surveys. The understanding of the spectral phenomenon must necessarily be a materialistic one and, thus, contemporary revisionist historical accounts will be fundamental in the process of seeking an answer to the question that drives this research: the recurrence of the spectral in our days. In addition to the fully consolidated sources of the field, this dissertation adopts a proactive stance regarding the process of theoretical advancement, introducing for this purpose a number of concepts that address the specificities of the texts under analysis. This terminology, which ranges from the naming of *spectral passages* to *structural* and *implied* spectrality, is properly justified and defined whenever in usage and, although created *ad hoc,* it holds the potential of future expansion and consolidation.

OUTLINE

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The dissertation is composed of three different chapters, the first of them of a theoretical nature while the second and the third are empirical. Thus, chapter one seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the spectral phenomenon in critical and cultural terms that will lay the basis for the subsequent critical interrogation. The second and third chapters engage with the literary analysis of the corpus of texts selected for study. These are followed by the conclusions section that details the points of convergence, as well as the major differences, among the narratives analyzed and signals prospective avenues of research. The first chapter begins by tracing the theoretical and literary antecedents to the spectrality central to so much contemporary African American fiction. In the West, the systematic theorization of the ghost began with the aforementioned psychoanalytical studies and was later expanded to philosophy through the work of deconstructivist thinker Jacques Derrida. His theory of *hauntology* and the characteristics he ascribes to the spectral would be revised by racialized voices emerging from decolonized nations, at the margins of Western thought. Progressively, the ubiquity of the ghost in varied contexts and rhetorics will converge in the spectral turn of the 1990s, where the ghost is defined as a conceptual metaphor with its attendant analytical paradigm. At this point, theorizations of conditions of general haunting and cultural haunting put forward by Avery Gordon and Kathleen Brogan stressed a materialist understanding of the ghost as attached to contexts of unresolved violence that would be crucial for future elaborations. In the literary sphere, the configuration of the spectral was traditionally associated to Gothic narratives that originated in the second half of the eighteenth century in the British Isles. The importation of this tradition to the emerging nation of the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century would transform it into a nuanced and complex model of representation where the genre's conventions were put to the service of a social and psychological commentary. In these new coordinates the Gothic became a main tool through which to articulate the presence of the subjugated racial Other and to obliquely engage with the capital sins of a new country founded on indigenous removal and slave labor. The malleability and adaptability of the Gothic tradition would not only transform the genre into one of the central pieces of the American literary tradition, but it would lend itself to a process of subversive transformation whereby the conventions that once ruled the portrait of the monstrous Other were appropriated by the oppressed to dismantle the nation's master narratives. The history of racial oppression that has defined the Black community in the United States with death as an imminent peril turns the ghost into a vehicle through which to explore cultural identity at the interstices of trauma and memory in its collective dimension. These convergences find a masterfully wrought treatment in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a work whose analysis occupies the final section of this initial chapter. Due to the vast literature concerning spectrality in this work, the examination provided here must necessarily be understood, not as a comprehensive discussion of the function of the spectral (to which I would have little to add), but, rather, as a brief comment that seeks to introduce the central parameters that will guide the exhaustive analysis of the subsequent works. As such I succinctly illustrate the Africanist and psycho-social dimensions of spectrality as well as the individual and collective perspectives, the workings of the founding trauma of the slave trade

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and slavery, and the importance of the socio-historical context of publication and reception for the realization of the currency imbedded in the problematics that the narrative voices.

The subsequent chapters are structured analogously: an introduction that reinstates the initial hypothesis along the socio-historical context is followed by the critical discussion of the literary texts with their concomitant concluding remarks. The second chapter is concerned with the testing of the first part of my hypothesis whereby the Africanist dimension takes precedence over the psycho-social dimension and spectrality appears in connection to white assimilation and reclamation of a cultural (diasporic) identity. Preceded by an introduction where I briefly tackle the historical and intellectual context of Black America in the first half of the twentieth century and the broader contours of the Africanist debate, the cultural remnants and their critical resonances, I first analyze Paule Marshall's treatment of the spectral in *Praisesong for the Widow* through what I call three spectral passages that develop alongside the protagonist Avey Johnson's physical and spiritual journey. Each of these passages is dominated by a spectral figure—namely Aunt Cuney, the husband Jerome Johnson and a host of unnamed ancestral spirits—through which the narrative articulates Avey's social position in regard to white values of class and renders the conundrum of African American social advancement through assimilation in the profoundly racist and segregated society of mid-century America to the detriment of African American cultural identity. Her spectral exchange will ultimately dramatize the transition from Avey's alienation to a reclamation of the self along cultural lines. Such reclamation is enacted through a foregrounding of the racialized female body as a locus of historical oppression that unveils women's experience and turns it into a fundamental element of the protagonist's rebirth. This is followed by an examination of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day,* a novel quite similar to *Praisesong* in thematic terms. The three spectral constituents delineated here further advance the multi-layered nature of the spectral phenomenon. The spectral dialogue that structures the narrative in its entirety provides the interpretative lens for a model of aural haunting, which is further developed through the second spectral element: the ghostly voices of the deceased members of the Day family. Together with the reading of the pervasive presence of the ancestor slave woman Sapphira Wade as the third spectral object, this novel draws the contours of an epistemological paradigm based on the creolization of Afro-syncretic belief systems, especially through the figure of the conjurer. Such model works as an alternative to the assimilationist demands of the hegemonic society and as the main means to create a hybrid identity based on the actualization of historical memory and its instrumentalization as a tool of resistance in the contemporary context that is advanced through the character of Cocoa.

The third chapter focuses, in turn, on the exploration of the second part of the initial hypothesis that posits the primacy of the psycho-social dimension of the spectral over the Africanist one. It opens with a look at the connection between a more recent resurgence of the spectral with the challenges that have affected the African American community at an internal and external level and their strategies of liberation. The first section revolves around Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* and his two short stories "Tell Me, Tell Me" and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises.*" The novel posits the spectral in relation to

individual repression, regarding the intra-community condemnation of the homosexuality of its protagonist, Horace Cross, and collective repression, as associated to the racial oppression suffered by the Black community. These are developed through a number of spectral scenes anchored in different loci of great symbolic significance—the church, the school and the theater—that reflect on Horace's predicament at the intersection of Blackness and homosexuality. Alongside this, the novel explores the origins and costs of respectability politics through the change in a directionality of haunting that transforms Horace as haunted object into an active agent of haunting after his tragic suicide. The two short stories offer, in turn, a historical revision that reveals the acts of resistance of the enslaved and their retaliation, as well as the rampant violence of the Jim Crow South. The spectral scenes rendered in both narratives differ on the subject position of their witnesses and illustrate the converse experiences of white accountability—or lack thereof—and Black historical reclamation. As such, "Tell Me, Tell Me" deals with Ida, the accommodated white widow of a judge, as the epitome of unacknowledged repressed guilt, whereas "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" places Randall, a Black homosexual returning to the South, as an agent of (g)hospitality. The final section of this third chapter is devoted to the discussion of Jesmyn Ward's critically acclaimed *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a novel that presents a more traditional frame of haunting, proximate to the spectrographical model proposed by Chassot. The first two spectral objects analyzed—Richie, the ghost of a young prisoner in Parchman Farm during Jim Crow and that of Given, an African American youth killed by his white companions in present-day Mississippi—embody the historical atrocities committed against the Black population in the United States. The juxtaposition of these spectral objects and their main witnesses, Jojo (a thirteen-year-old boy) and Leonie (his drug-addicted mother) respectively, posits the perpetuation of anti-Black violence and structural racism at the core of the mobilization of the spectral. This reality is underpinned by a last spectral element, a group of anonymous wandering spirits that belong to different historical periods, and that remain in the realm of the living in search of closure. In addition to this, Ward crafts a theory of haunting which is partly influenced by the Africanist dimensions previously considered. The chapter concludes with a brief comment on the spectral reverberations found in Ward's latest novel *Let Us Descend*, published when the writing of this dissertation was in its final stages. Its relevance for the present research resides in the fact that it completes the Wardian model of haunting as proposed in *Sing.*

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1. TOWARD A THEORY OF SPECTRALITY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

"Spectrality is […] what makes the present waver"— Fredric Jameson

"Haunting is an encounter in which you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities, of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of ourselves and our society"— Avery Gordon

1.1 THE SPECTRAL: INTRODUCTION AND ANTECEDENTS

Monsters, mythological creatures and the supernatural in general have always captivated the human beings' imagination. From the Norse mythology to the Navajo *chindi*—evil and dooming spirits of the dead—passing through the Chinese cosmology of specters and the Yoruba's ties with the deadland—the dwelling place of the ancestors—ghosts and their multiple iterations have been a common element of cultures across the vastness of centuries and the immensity of the world's geography, reaching a quasi-universal category; a supernatural phenomenon that has endured religious transformation, scientific advance and the age of materialism and skepticism. So, from where does this fascination emanate, how has the ghosts' powerful hold been sustained? This introductory chapter will try to answer these questions by positing that the meaning and understanding of specters has been in a constant evolution, one deeply rooted in the socio-historical context, the epistemological environment and the dominant ideology of a culture or nation. Beginning with a discussion of the development of the spectral along cultural and literary lines, the focus of this study is African American literature. Following the publication of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in 1987, revenants of the past have plagued Black fiction in the United States and this introductory chapter seeks to examine the cultural and theoretical context in which this phenomenon emerged and developed.

1.1.1. The Social Development of the Ghost: A Cultural History

Ghosts, the dead and spectral language more generally are part of our everyday life: they populate the books we read and the films we watch; increasingly widespread festivities open the door to the reunion between the realm of life and death; and the very metaphors with which we construct our daily reality rely on them. This dissertation does not intend to provide a taxonomy of spectral elements, or to discuss the differentiating features that characterize each of these creatures. Instead, it puts forward an understanding of the spectral phenomenon in a broad sense. These figures, which have been referred to as phantoms, apparitions, spirits,

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specters, revenants, haints, shades or even wraiths, present a multitude of nuances that reflect the multiple perspectives from which they have been apprehended. The underlying thread that runs through them all is that they are entities that resist classification, creatures that exceed meaning and do not easily accommodate to the fixed categories of rationalist epistemology. And in spite of it all, or perhaps because of it—"in so far as they remain undefined, unaccountable, unpredictable […] they offer an alternative to the plenitude of information that presses in on us" (Belsey 137)—they persist, be it in the literal shape provided by imagination and special effects or in a rather metaphorical sense that cuts to the core of everyday language and use. We talk, for instance, about the ghost of a smile or a breeze, we might come across a ghost town, a ghost station or a or even a ghost ship; ghost limbs feel as if they were there, but they are not; and with today's social media *ghosting* has come to designate an attitude of voluntary dismissal and neglect of contact. These metaphorical uses reveal that paradoxical and yet defining characteristic of the ghost as an absent presence. In Catherine Belsey's words, they "point out what is there and not there: named but not present, located but not lived in, a trace, a residue, incomplete" (239).

Taking this into consideration, it is hardly surprising that references to ghosts emerge across the world, for at its very core is the perpetual and anxiety-inducing mystery of an afterlife, mortals' ultimate frontier. In the West ghosts made their way to the stage of Greek and Roman theater, often to seek rest through proper burial, to warn the living or simply to create havoc among them (Morton 29–31). By the time Christianity replaced previous pantheistic religions, belief in ghosts was so widespread that the religious orthodoxy warned against it and officially prohibited any commerce with the dead. However, instead of evanescing, these beliefs were only transformed, a fact that signals the malleable and adaptive nature of specters, a feature that will determine their social understanding and evolution. With medieval Christianity having left open the doors of Purgatory as a place where the souls of the deceased awaited a final judgment—to be rewarded with eternal bliss or punished with eternal damnation—this liminal space became a terrain ripe with ghosts, for the souls of those with an unfinished business to remain on Earth. Nonetheless, the sixteenth-century Reformation that virtually restructured Western religious and cultural beliefs did away with the notion of Purgatory and subsequently with the possibility of any communication between the realm of life and death (Owens 35), thus delivering the first fatal stroke to the belief in ghosts. According to the Reformation orthodoxy, souls went directly to heaven or hell, so revenants were nothing but devils who adopted the shape of the deceased with ill intentions (Belsey 20).

The second fatal stroke to the belief in ghosts came from the rationalism developed with eighteenth-century Enlightenment when ghost sightings and stories came to be associated with superstitious ignorance and strongly evocative of Catholicism. In an age dominated by the idea of a rational human mind as the privileged measure of the world and means of inquiry into reality, it would have seemed that the death of ghosts was imminent. This, however, could not be further from the truth; parallel to this dominant rationalism a new counter-current was developed, defined by a melancholy toward the eerie and the dark which would be reflected, for instance, in the emergence of Gothic literature that was born in this period. Terry Castle has called this phenomenon "the invention of the uncanny," explaining that "the

very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment—the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch—also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse" (8). Therefore, far from removing the ghost from the scenery, this shift would anticipate the final relocation of the ghost from the twentieth century onward in an impregnable fortress: the human mind.

Before that, however, we should refer to the rise and fall of Spiritualism that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly in the United States and Great Britain. This new religious movement started to develop in the United States in 1848 after Margaret and Kate Fox, two sisters from New York, claimed that they were able to communicate with the dead. Séance tables began to spin through the Atlantic and in no time thousands of people wanted to partake in sessions moved either by a genuine intention to communicate with their loved ones or simply for entertainment. Colin Dickey estimates than in less than a decade, the movement gained eleven million adepts in the U.S. alone (71). Among the factors that contributed to its booming, this author underlines in the first place how séances provided a sort of closure in a moment where vigil days had been drastically reduced due to the importance of sanitary corpse disposal; he also points out how this idea downplayed a strict Calvinist doctrine of salvation or damnation, establishing instead a continuum between the world of the living and the world of the dead; and lastly, that, unlike traditional religious practices, this new movement was more horizontal and less misogynistic, as everyone could partake equally and women often had a relevant role as mediums (Dickey 73–74). However, if something stood out as much as spiritualists it was their detractors. After uncovering with detail how several of those who claimed to communicate with the dead were frauds employing hoaxes—many of them recognized later by the authors themselves—questioning the logics of séances and parodying them in humorous sketches (Morton 73), they decided to begin a scientific enterprise aimed at debunking these myths once and for all. This was how first in the United Kingdom in 1882 and then in the United States in 1885 the Societies for Psychical Research were founded with the intention of applying the scientific method to the investigation of supernatural phenomena.[1] Eventually, as the twentieth century advanced, attacks on spiritualism and the discredit of its practitioners increased so rapidly that the movement began to recede, although some remnants can still be found in both individual and group practices throughout the Anglo-Saxon world today (Morton 80).

These ontological debates that marked the nineteenth century and centered on proving or disproving the existence of ghosts were progressively abandoned and attention turned to the old and yet truly unknown mysteries of the human mind. This meant the definitive confinement of the ghost to the human imagination leading to an interesting paradox: this

[1] This was not the last "scientific" incursion on the topic. In 1925 parapsychology was inaugurated as a continuator of these societies and in 1969 it was formally recognized as a science by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In the 1940s Dr. Nandor Fodor prompted a change in attitudes when he abandoned this discipline to analyze supernatural events from a psychological perspective (Morton 81–82). Today scientific consideration of ghosts looks at them as derived from the power of suggestion, stress, infrasound that may affect organs without us noticing it, temporal lobe epilepsy that produces, among others, seizures and hallucinations, sleep deprivation or drug effects (Morton 140–144).

shift, far from de-supernaturalizing the phenomenon of ghosts, led to a supernaturalization of the mind itself, which Castle describes as a "momentous event in the history of Western consciousness" (161). Crucial to this move is the process of metaphorization undergone by the ghost that would characterize its use and understanding throughout the twentieth century, chiefly through the approaches of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and ultimately within the bosom of spectrality studies. Although psychoanalytical theories have been amply discarded as scientific therapeutic methods, it is worth considering some of the concepts that were formulated by their exponents as they often employ a spectral language that has contributed to the development of different approaches to the study of the ghost and that sheds light on current understandings of the literary specter. One of the first steps toward this new critical inquiry in the realm of ghosts was Sigmund Freud's discussion of what he termed the uncanny (*unheimlich*) in a homonymous article published in 1919, where he defined it as "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241), that is to say, "the *unheimlich* is what was once *hemisch* [sic], familiar; the prefix *'un'* ['un-'] is the token of repression" (245). Although in this article the father of psychoanalysis does not engage directly with the figure of the specter, he tackles the elusive nature of haunting that has recurred in fiction by pointing at certain aspects—mainly uncertainty, iteration and repression—that will become defining characteristics of the post-modern specter.

Freud's was not the only psychoanalytical incursion in the topic of spectrality. Decades later, the Hungarian psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok grappled with this topic of repression when advancing their theories on the workings of trauma in a series of articles published during the 1960s and 1970s that would deeply influence the development of trauma studies in the 1990s. As explained by their English translator and editor, Nicholas T. Rand, Abraham and Torok understood psychoanalysis as an investigative theory aimed at deciphering meaning and, as such, they were especially interested in those instances in which this process was disrupted by trauma (6). Thus, trauma acquires a central stage in their work, and it is on the accounts of its mechanisms where the intersection with spectrality is more evident. The ground for their theories is located at the crucial distinction between introjection and incorporation: for them the first refers to the ideal progress of life and maturation, while the second denotes the inability to fulfill that process of growth and adaptation due to some kind of hindrance, chiefly, traumatic events or losses. Their minimal unit of analysis is the secret—"a trauma whose very occurrence and devastating emotional consequences are entombed and thereby consigned to internal silence, albeit unwittingly, by the sufferers themselves" (Rand 99–100). Far from being understood in a traditional sense, the secret is akin to the effects produced by a repressed trauma, what they call preservative repression or the topography of encrypted secrets (Rand 18). With this initial distinction, the articulation of trauma can already be seen through the spectral language of the dead who remain buried within our own selves.

However, the two concepts coined by these authors that have gained currency in this field of inquiry and that involve the spectral more directly are the crypt and the phantom. These notions try to account for the mental process and status of an individual in regard to a loss or a

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traumatic event and they function at different levels. The first of them refers to the creation of a psychic tomb that houses these unspeakable life experiences, or, to use the author's definition: "the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impracticable" (Abraham & Torok 130).[2] The phantom, in turn, entails a transgenerational turn and effects a re-orientation of Freudian and post-Freudian theories of psychopathology by transcending the individual to emerge as a marker of someone else's psychic burden (Rand 166; 22), as described by Torok: "The 'phantom' is a formation in the dynamic unconscious that is found there not because of the subject's own repression but on *account of a direct empathy with the unconscious or rejected psychic matter of a parental object*" ("Story" 181). The concept of the *phantom* is relevant for this study not only as a conspicuous example of the spectral language permeating the critical discourse on different fields throughout the twentieth century, but especially because it introduces a dimension that will be essential in our discussion of the specter in African American literature: the intergenerational transmission of trauma. At the same time, it signals how this may be developed in a collective, rather than simply on the individual level, as explained by Rand:

> Abraham and Török's work enables us to understand how the falsification, ignorance, or disregard of the past—whether institutionalized by a totalitarian state […] or practiced by parents and grandparents—is the breeding ground of the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of individuals, families, the community, and possibly even entire nations. (169)

These initial approaches to trauma will evidence the relevance of the transmission of traumatic memory across generations and their communal dimension, which will be explored in greater depth with the revisions of the paradigm of trauma at the turn of the twenty-first century.

1.1.1.1 The Spectral Turn and the Rise of Spectrality Studies

Reviewing Jacque's Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), the Marxist theorist and literary critic Fredric Jameson evaluated the state of the spectral at the end of the twentieth century, after innumerable ontological debates had practically effaced and scholars of different disciplines were turning to this trope with a renewed gaze. He pointedly signals the relevance of the ghost

[2] These concepts are also related to the notions of mourning and melancholia. First described by Freud as the standard and pathological reaction, respectively, to the loss of someone beloved or an abstract equivalent, Torok understands mourning as an individual's feeling of guilt before the inappropriate response to the loss of the love-object ("Illness" 110). Both authors believe that melancholia sieges the individual when the crypt is opened by the loss of a secondary love-object (Abraham & Torok 136–37). Derrida eventually de-pathologizes melancholia by investing it with an ethical significance: for him, protesting against the amnesia of mourning and accepting melancholia is an ethical obligation towards the deceased other (C. Davis, *Haunted* 148). Likewise, the field of racial melancholia will reevaluate the relevance of this phenomenon in traumatic contexts, as will be shown through the work of Sarah Kaplan, among others.

as a fundamental figure through which the nature of a postmodern intervention in a capitalist society could be best understood:

> Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (Jameson 39)

Indeed, Jameson's assessment perfectly captures the crux of Derrida's argument in what has been one of the most relevant contributions to the foundation of spectrality studies and a clear indicator of the progressive centrality of ghosts in the academic sphere. The frame under which Derrida develops his theory of the ghost is deconstruction—a philosophical current based on the destruction of binary oppositions over which Western metaphysics has been erected. Placed in the space between life and death, past and present, the real and the imagined, the specter defies any binary opposition and becomes the deconstructive trope par excellence. It is constituted as the subversive agent through which the basic categories of the Western understanding of and access to the world has been shaped, as this specter "points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes effectivity or actuality (either present, empirical, living—or not) and ideality (regulating or absolute non-presence)" (Derrida 78).

Among the multiple notions that have become part of the theoretical framework of deconstruction, there are two concepts that I will explore in some depth due to their import for inquiries into spectrality. The term *hauntology* was coined by Derrida to capture, in general terms, an ontology perpetually haunted by past events. Colin Davis argues that this notion owes much to Abraham and Torok's idea of the phantom, but at the same time it presents crucial differences from it. While for the psychoanalysts the unspeakability of the secret is an undesirable condition and needs to be put into words to be exorcised, for Derrida that same unspeakability "pushes at the boundaries of language and thought" (*Haunted* 13), thus showing the lack of a readily-available language that can convey certain ideas and, instead of attempting to reduce it to language, it would get us in touch with the utter alterity that is represented by the ghost (*Haunted* 13). In C. Davis' words, it replaces "the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" ("État" 373).

Derrida states that "[one] should learn to live by learning […] how to talk with him, with her [the ghost], how to let them speak or how to give them back speech […] they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet" (221). Rather than exorcism, the philosopher opts for co-habitation, for an ethics of approach and opening to an Other which cannot be contained, which is pervasive.[3] In close connection

[3] According to C. Davis, Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Etre et le nèant* could be considered a precursor of *hauntology* insofar as it entails a suspension of the separation between appearance and reality, material objects and mere illusions or spectral

with this, we find the second idea of relevance: anachronism. Unlike the previous concept, this is not a deconstructivist's coinage, but it underlies all the theories that deal with the idea of the ghost, as it is in itself part of the ghost's nature. Although throughout the examination of the texts under analysis in this dissertation there are myriad examples of this element in the consideration of particular ghosts, it is brought up here in connection with the deconstruction of binary oppositions. As Peter Buse and Andrew Scott argue, "anachronism may well be the defining feature of ghosts […] because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality" (1). This, which on the surface may seem overly evident, has a clear repercussion in the common understanding of history as a monolithic and unperturbed narrative that is passed from one generation to another and in historicism more generally, for ghosts breach the ideal of historical progression and the idea of "linear teleology" (Buse & Scott 14). It will be by using this fissure that a revisionist discourse composed of the voices of the oppressed and silenced by the condoned racism, imperialism, sexism and heteronormativity will push the limits to finally crack the master narrative.

In recent decades some of Derrida's ideas concerning the specter have been deeply revised and reassessed by authors such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who, in her essay "Ghostwriting," written as a response to Derrida's book, stresses a lack of discretion and gradation of the dispossession endured by a multiplicity of Others (Blanco & Peeren, *Spectralities* 310). Achilles Mbembe has, likewise, dealt with this issue by articulating a critique founded on two points: first, he stresses that the indeterminacy espoused by Derrida in the treatment of the specter is valued from a Western perspective as an improvement from ontological fixity, while for many people indeterminacy is their only option as they are forced to live under the tyranny of uncertainty (Peeren 49). Second, Derrida sees in the specter a figure of utter alterity and advocates for an attitude of absolute openness. It is important to take into consideration that this idea is intrinsically linked with the focalization of the ghost that he puts forward. Esther Peeren argues that in Derrida's thesis the focalization is on the Western's attitudes toward the specter/Other and as such his advocacy for an absolute hospitality tries to counter xenophobic attitudes that have characterized the West's internal and external relations. In doing so it impels us to respect the otherness that the ghost represents. At the same time, however, such focalization demonstrates that 'we' will unlikely be posited in the position of the ghost (Peeren 28). The criticism articulated by Mbembe emerges from the fact that, while hospitality without demands avoids a situation of domination toward the Other, it may also denote an abdication of responsibility and an injustice in so far as we avoid to truly engage with them (Peeren 19). Thus, Mbembe advances an understanding of spectrality outside of Western thinking that is present in many previously colonized places where people are forced to live as ghosts (Blanco & Peeren, *Spectralities* 95). This author coined the term *necropolitics* to refer to the way particular forms of severing power define certain subjects as disposable, placing them in a state of living-deadness: "these subjects are concentrated in tightly controlled spaces of exclusion in which their lives are

presences and living beings. Sartre also signals the pervasiveness of the deceased's ghosts: "the dead are with us always; they are an objective part of our situation and they are a factor which cannot be ignored in our decisions and actions" (C. Davis, *Haunted* 44).

definitively subjugated to the power of death and their existence is characterized by terror, constant uncertainty and unfreedom" (Peeren 69).

As Derrida's intervention evidenced, opposite to what might have been expected, the spectral did not fade away as scientific and technological advancements made the population grow more skeptical and the aggressive materialism of the capitalist system left little room for the concern and value of the intangible. Instead, the spectral, in its various shapes and forms, began to permeate the critical language of many different fields of study: from architecture, photography or cinema to literature and history. This shift in the critical and theoretical discourses that became more evident in the decade of the 1990s has been referred to as the spectral turn and it could be considered the cornerstone for the constitution of what we today could call spectrality studies. The expression was first used by Roger Luckhurst precisely to problematize the conceptualization of modernity in these terms. He focused on the limitations of the concept, claiming that "Unable to discriminate between instances and largely uninterested in historicity (beyond its ghostly disruption), a discourse of spectralized modernity risks investing in the compulsive repetitions of a structure of melancholic entrapment" ("Contemporary" 535). A closer look at the most recent developments in the field shows that Luckhust's preoccupation was unfounded: theories of spectrality that have been developed since the 1990s with the seminal studies of Avery Gordon and Kathleen Brogan, among many others, have been adapted to the specific inquiries into aspects such as politics, gender, race or ethnicity, categories that, even though they often intersect, demonstrate different uses of the spectral. Furthermore, the unpaired relevance of the historical specificity in the consideration of particular ghosts is an aspect that has been largely stressed by critics in this field. Likewise, current approaches to the specters that populate our culture have transcended the narrative of iteration and repetition of a repressed aspect to demonstrate how spectrality can be used as a tool for agency. As such, Peeren advocates for an understanding of the spectral turn not as a programmatic movement but rather as a "loose convergence of interest in the conceptual force of ghosts and haunting" that has helped to provide insight into historical, social and cultural functions that were already associated with the ghosts and the supernatural (9–10).

This critic, together with María del Pilar Blanco, two of the foremost contemporary spectrality researchers, echo precisely how the spectral turn amounted to the transformation of the spectral into a conceptual metaphor in their edited volume *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, published in 2013—a compilation of the seminal essays that configured the origins of this field of inquiry that has revealed its relevance in the present. They adopt Mieke Bal's definition of this kind of metaphor as differing from traditional ones, inasmuch as it "evoke[s] through a dynamic comparative interaction, not just another thing, word or idea and its associations, but a discourse, a system of producing knowledge" (Blanco & Peeren, *Spectralities* 1), to deploy the understanding of the spectral as an analytical tool to theorize about social, ethical, and political questions such as the spatial and temporal sedimentation of history and tradition, intricacies of memory and trauma, effacement of social norms pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality, among others (Blanco & Peeren, *Spectralities* 2). Thus, this use of the spectral in a conceptual-

metaphorical sense makes use of the particular nature and characteristics of the ghost as being located at the juncture of past and present, of the living and the dead and thus persistent across time and space to effectuate a historical revision. According to these two scholars:

> […] spectrality is used as a conceptual metaphor to effect revisions of history and/or reimaginations of the future in order to expose and address the way certain subjectivities have been marginalized and disavowed in order to establish and uphold a particular norm, as well as the way such subjectivities can never be completely erased but insist on reappearing to trouble the norm. (Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities* 309–310).

The widespread use of spectrality as a theoretical tool in different fields of inquiry can be best seen in what Blanco and Peeren have designated with the umbrella term *spectropolitics*, which accounts for the use of the spectral to render the "diffuse operations and effects of present-day globalization" that turns certain subjects into marginal specters (*Spectralities* 93). Likewise, and more relevant for our object of inquiry, is the mobilization of the spectral in the process of subjectification when considering categories such as race, gender or sexuality that, due to their lack of immediate perceptibility, could be defined as spectral (*Spectralities* 310). Within these different realms there are various degrees and spheres where this process is relevant. Here, and in connection with what will be our discussion of some of the literary works that are part of the corpus, it is relevant to mention the category of gender and sexuality where Carla Freccero has put forward a theory of "queer spectrality" based on how spectrality can be used to challenge the ideal of historical continuity based on a model of heterosexual reproduction. For Freccero, queering history and historiography by means of spectrality would allow for a more ethical relation to the past than current historicism, as it may counter the symptomatic fantasy of reproductive futurity and propose an alternative mode of non-linear temporality (337). In a similar line, Castle's coinage of the term "the apparitional lesbian" would represent this paradoxical agency of the ghost: lesbians have traditionally been ghosted in patriarchal culture either by marginalizing them or depriving them of sexuality. However, the literary attempts in literature to turn them into actual ghosts backfired because the ghosts mark a presence that refuses to go and imposes itself (Peeren 117). This shows how two opposing forces coexist in ghosts; on the one hand they can represent that which is marginalized, invisibilized, disavowed, but on the other, they importune by refusing to go, they keep their hold on the haunted forcing them to notice and act. The tension between these two elements is highly productive and key to the understanding of the symbolic force of ghosts in literature.

More directly connected with this research is the category of race, especially as it has been constructed in the United States regarding the status of African Americans. Peeren has advanced the idea of social invisibility, that is, the quality of certain subjects to be materially present but nonetheless remain unacknowledged (36) that ultimately leads to social erasure. She develops this idea through the concept of the *avisual* coined by Akkira Lippit to refer to an image that remains unseen despite the visual cues, an image of which we only see its absence and more specifically through what this critic terms the *paradox of avisuality*. As

Peeren explains, "what causes the avisual and ultimately leads to social erasure to be disavowed is its excessive visibility, an overwhelming or threatening materiality that the eyes cannot or do not want to take in, a blinding sight" (36). As instantiated through Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), this phenomenon has a marked racial inflection that appears recurrently in literary works. Glenn Loury deals with this topic from a sociological perspective by approaching the mechanisms of racial stigmatization in the case of African Americans. He explains that if the social identity—that which is socially constructed—attributed to a subject on the grounds of physical (visible) traces has associated negative values, that subject will be stigmatized. According to him, this would entail "doubting the person's worthiness and consigning him or her to a social netherworld" (Loury 61). Loury argues that inasmuch as these assumptions are made on the basis of historically constructed stereotypes, they obscure the real identity of the subject leading to a subsequent process of invisibilization. He explains that, "given that the social meanings carried by the race-markers support the deleterious, homogeneous view, an observer may see no reason to track the personal life history that defines a subject's actual identity. In the event, and ironically, the subject becomes an 'invisible man' precisely because of the visibility, and the social meaning, of his stigmata" (65). Parallel to the case of African Americans that will be developed in more detail in subsequent sections, Renée Bergland explores the representation of Native Americans through the lens of spectrality. She explains that in the specific case of American Indians their ghosting is seen as a technique of removal (5). Due to the centrality of race in the configuration of a cohesive national American identity, Native Americans and African Americans are seen as the "others," the representatives of the terrifying possibilities of powerlessness (or subjection) that Americans try to repress (Bergland 15).

In this regard, Blanco and Peeren have established a basic distinction between non-figurative or literal ghosts—"those manifestations, in some form or another, of the returning dead and other ghostly beings or images emanating from realms beyond what is considered 'real'" (Blanco & Peeren, "Introduction" x)—and figurative or "living ghosts"—"including marginalized citizens, invisible terror threats, the illusionary presences of computer-generated imagery (CGI), and the intangible, spectral nature of modern media, ostensibly unmoored from distinct locations in time ad space" (Blanco & Peeren, "Introduction" x). Peeren explains that what they term "literal ghosts" does not necessarily imply that the event actually occurs but, as it is a common reference in the collective imaginary, it becomes the basis for a figurative use. The category that she designates as "living ghosts" includes social groups such as the unemployed, the homeless, the exiled, migrants or ethnic minorities who are perceived—and most often end up perceiving themselves—as ghosts, an association created "on the basis of their lack of social visibility, unobtrusiveness and enigmatic ability or uncertain status between life and death" (4–5). Peeren highlights the social mechanisms at work behind this process of spectralization prompted by liberal-democrat capitalism that leads those social groups to a situation of vulnerability and marginalization (17).

Unlike Mbembe, who has been criticized for not offering any kind of resistance model, Peeren does not comply with the idea that spectralization annuls agency at every level, leaving the subjects who belong to this marginalized groups to become only objects defined

by the dominant ideology and power structures. Without negating the destructive effects that this process entails for the people involved, she introduces the possibility of strategizing invisibility in what she calls "spectral agency" or "the agency of invisibility": "Under certain circumstances, ghosts that come close to not registering at all can become specters that haunt actively and efficiently" (Peeren 16). The hold that the structures of power sustain over the ghosted subject cannot be denied, and this is the reason why Peeren advocates for an understanding of the process of haunting as a reciprocal one where the ghostly power and the ghostly subjects may haunt each other. As she explains, "It is, therefore, not a case of identifying a purely oppressive system or untainted acts of subversion, but of pinpointing the moments of spectral agency—inherently incomplete and impure—that emerge from the interplay between ghostly power and spectralizing dispossession at the level of everyday life" (Peeren 53). This notion is going to be central in the consideration of the ghosts that populate African American fictional works: resurrecting the dead and listening to them while revealing the oppression to which they were victims endows them with the possibility of becoming subjects anew by retelling their story in their own voices. As for those living ghosts that populate the ghettoes of the cities or the cells of the prisons, their acts of subversion in literature are, likewise, claimed by their using the force of the spectral to haunt people into social awareness. All of these aspects emphasize first the productivity of this trope in narratives with a marked racial and gendered focus as means to depict not only a situation of dispossession but also a site of resistance, and second, they provide a multilayered meaning that transcends the conventions of traditional epistemological frames. It is for this reason that the notion of a spectral turn and all the subsequent developments that settled the foundations of a distinct field of inquiry are constituted as the main tools for the development of this dissertation's thesis.

1.1.1.2 The Spectral Turn in Literature

The works that have settled the basis for the analysis of spectrality in literature were published in the decade of the 1990s, coinciding with the so-called spectral turn. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) and Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998) offer a complimentary view of the phenomenon of haunting deeply rooted in socio-historical coordinates. These critics advance their arguments through the critical analysis of literary works that marked a literary shift in the consideration of spectrality, chiefly *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, putting forward an idea of haunting that is social and political.

Gordon approaches the topic of haunting from a sociological perspective and traces her theory to the social use of this trope throughout the twentieth century, under the influence of psychoanalysis. She illustrates the social relevance of this phenomenon through the analysis of two case studies: the Argentinean *desaparecidos* during the dictatorship that the country went through between 1976 and 1983 in Luisa Valenzuela's *He Who Searches* (1977) and slavery in the United States through *Beloved.* Gordon understands ghosts within the frame of the return of the repressed, as a visible sign of an underlying haunting, and stresses their

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social dimension (8). This aspect is essential in the present consideration of ghosts as conceptual metaphors since, as it will become evident in the analysis of the different literary works, each ghost is composed of a double dimension where the individual plane is intrinsically linked to a collective one that describes a broader social reality. The paradoxical nature of the specter being the materialization of an absence in the shape of an apparition draws attention both to itself and to the loss it represents (63). This, together with the disruption the ghosts entail in the chronological linearity, opens a space for revision, for the exploration of these "historical alternatives" (Gordon xvii) that have been annulled and silenced by the master narrative of History, as well as for the articulation of the future (64). The ghost, thus, would be the symptom of a transcendental reality which is the haunting, described by Gordon as follows:

> […] haunting is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular but yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. (xvi)

The description provided by Gordon encapsulates the main aspects of the understanding of spectrality as a conceptual metaphor: first, she stresses the historical materiality of ghosts not just as timeless narrative tropes, but rather as figures located in a reciprocal position with history. Their emergence is distinctively linked to abusive systems of power that oppress a group of people to different degrees of social erasure, as in the case of slavery. An erasure that, on many occasions, is critical for the foundation and consolidation of a national narrative such as the case of the United States. Thus, these specters are not only contextually defined by the socio-historical circumstances that birthed them, but they are also dependent on those conditions that have brought them to the attention of the public. The best example is *Beloved*, which will be analyzed in further detail at the end of this chapter: not only is the ghostly Beloved a carrier of the trauma of the Middle Passage, slavery and Reconstruction with which the novel directly engages, but it also draws attention to the neo-conservatism and the incipient discourse of color-blindness of the Reagan era during which it was published. Furthermore, ghosts are not only contingent on history, but they also have the capability of defining the historical narrative by materializing that which has been erased, suppressed or disavowed.

Gordon also tackles the issue of repetition in connection with trauma and as a necessary condition to work through the traumatic memories of a given event or legacy, re-living these events to be able to articulate them anew: "[Haunting] is about reliving events in all their vividness, originality, and violence so as to overcome their pulsating and lingering effects" (134). She establishes this connection between haunting and trauma, but she emphasizes that, while both share the referent of violence, the former produces "something-to-be-done" (xvi).

In other words, haunting ultimately constitutes a site of resistance, a tool for the subversion of a narrative intended to ghost the Others that ends up providing a locus for the development of a subversive discourse. In this view, haunting would imply an affective turn inasmuch as it is understood as a condition that involves the haunted personally. Gordon labels this process "haunting recognition," and she describes how the ghost "makes itself known to us through the haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as recognition" (63). Ultimately, being haunted denotes an ethical stance; it is through this initial affective turn that haunting is converted into an act of gaining awareness of the social injustices upon which the gears of history were put in motion. As such, Gordon sees literature's engagement with ghosts as fundamentally an act of bearing witness and creating a space where the past is acknowledged in the interest of a more just future:

> Following ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bother to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future. (Gordon 22)

While working with a similar framework, Brogan focuses to a greater extent on the collective nature of the spectral and the importance of ethnicity in the model. Her monograph, published only a year after Gordon's, opens with an introduction that establishes the key theoretical concepts and is followed by the analysis of several literary works written by authors who belong to different ethnic and racial groups of the United States and the Caribbean. In her introduction, Brogan explains the motivating force behind her inquiry—the prominent recurrence of the spectral in African American stories of the 1980s, in works such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987), or Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—a trend that has kept steady since then and can be traced with great relevance in the present moment as well. The key concept around which Brogan develops her model is that of *cultural haunting*; with this term she seeks to differentiate traditional Gothic stories in which the ghost appears either as a plot device—providing crucial information and setting in motion the plot, normally in a tale of revenge or atonement—and as a source of entertainment for the audience, what she calls the "pleasurable thrill we derive from the uncanny," at a basic level, or as means to illuminate repressed aspects of characters, at a more sophisticated level (Brogan, *Cultural* 2) from these new ghost stories. In these, the previous functions become peripheral to the addition of a new, central one: exposing the historical oppression of a social group. Furthermore, opposed to the American ghost stories at the turn of the twentieth century that, following a more general social trend, transformed the Victorian haunted setting and the Gothic plots into an inquiry into the psychology and ethos of an individual, the stories that Brogan understands as pertaining to a form of cultural haunting foreground the communal nature of ghosts (*Cultural* 5). Thus, cultural haunting is defined as a pan-ethnical phenomenon that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth

century (Brogan, *Cultural* 4), where ghosts signal an attempt to "recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (*Cultural* 2). Within this model, spectrality would have a double function: the recreation and re-construction of ethnic identity and the revision of the past in the service of the present (*Cultural* 4). As can be derived from this approach, ethnical and racial belonging constitute a core aspect of Brogan's thesis. She understands ethnicity from a constructivist perspective, as "a cultural construct, a variable entity reshaped by consensus over time" ("American" 157), where both form and content are relevant for the nuanced depiction and meaning of the ghosts in the different ethnic narratives ("American" 158).[4] Brogan accentuates the value of considering the parallelisms among these specters, as they all share a concern about assimilation and cultural identity. Taking this into account, she identifies three common elements that structure the various narratives of cultural haunting: "the emphasis on storytelling and the narrative construction of experiences; the performance of ethnicity through rituals of cultural 'mourning'; and, finally, the peculiar position of ethnic writers as both 'heirs' and 'ethnographers'" (*Cultural* 17).

These two initial approaches share key aspects that will configure the theoretical inquiry into literary spectrality. First, the socio-historical rootedness of ghosts: their appearance is connected to the political circumstances, not only in terms of social conditions but in a more fundamental sphere of identity construction and group belonging which evidences the relevance of the collective plane. Second, the experience of trauma is foregrounded as these ghosts are conjured by a violent history of multiple forms of oppression. Third, an identification of specific African religious and cultural traces in the employment of ghosts within the African American literary tradition (Brogan, *Cultural* 2). Finally, the understanding of spectrality as a tool for both a historical and historiographical—inasmuch as the return and use of discredited cosmologies call into question traditional models of historical recording (*Cultural* 132)—revision, constitutes it as a privileged space for the articulation of a future. All of these will settle the basis for the present elaborations on the matter.

1.1.2. The Literary Development of the Ghost: The Gothic

The everlasting fascination with the spectral that has been part of the Western cultural history has found a productive means of expression in multiple cultural forms. Among these artistic creations that have featured ghosts and the supernatural in general—ranging from paintings and to the so-called *phantasmagoria* shows of the nineteenth century to horror films and

[4] In an article published prior to her book, Brogan echoes different understandings of ethnicity; Frederick Barth for instance advocates for understanding of ethnicity as a process rather than a category where groups are only able to maintain their identity by establishing boundaries that differentiate one from another. For him this would explain why in a moment where assimilation is so widespread there seems to be a return to "largely imagined cultural sources" ("American" 157). Those critical with his posture of "culture as invention" argue against eliding ethnic differences in favor of a "too narrowly conceived American identity" as this may become the proxy of a pseudo-universalism of a white, Protestant culture ("American" 197). Likewise, they point out the specificities of different groups regarding their relation to their own and the dominant culture by warning against the wrongful assumption that "the same acculturation choices are available to voluntary immigrants as to colonized or enslaved people" ("American" 157). At the same time, they draw attention to the persistence of culturally marked elements, even when on some occasions these have been subdued to "formidable disintegratory forces" ("American" 157).

apocalyptic videogames—literature has been a preferred means of exploration of this trope throughout the centuries. The narrative genres that have engaged the use of the spectral are multiple, and these works have often been classified along the lines of fantasy, magic realism and above all, the Gothic. The aim of this section is to establish the emergence and development of the Gothic genre in relation to the use of the trope of spectrality. As the characters that nourish it, this genre moves and blooms in those dark, liminal spaces between absolutes. Though it was initially conceived as means of entertainment, contemporary conceptions of the Gothic put forward an understanding of the genre based on its articulation of the socio-historical concerns and the construction of non-normative subjectivities. This examination will focus on the emergence and evolution of this tradition in relation to the construction of Otherness, with especial attention to race, as well as the subversive strategies of appropriation in the African American case.

1.1.2.1 The Anglo-Gothic: Emergence and Evolution

As mentioned above, the literary Gothic emerged as a counter-current to the dominant discourse of the Enlightenment in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, coinciding with some major social changes that would, to a great extent, determine the fate of the West, such as the French Revolution and the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie to power. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by Horace Walpole, is generally considered to be the inaugural work of the Anglo-Gothic tradition, one that maintained its popularity for over a century, and dominated the market during the 1790s with writers such as Anne Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis. These early works deploy a number of conventions regarding setting (dark and ancient spaces), characters (haunted by secrets of the past and unresolved social dilemmas), as well as the use of supernatural elements (monsters or ghosts that embody the characters' fears and anxieties), all of them in a sphere sometimes bound by conventional reality, others with exceptional possibilities and yet some others employing the technique of the "explained supernatural" where unconventional events are later on accounted for with rational explanations (Hogle 2–3). Although *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Robert Maturin, published in 1820, is considered to be the last work of this kind, the genre never truly disappeared but, instead, with each new iteration it proved its high adaptability and malleability. A case in point is the shift that the genre underwent during the Romantic period toward the exploration of the inner self. The figure that would come to dominate this type of fiction is the outcast, part villain, part victim, alienated from society and often torn by psychological dilemmas as instantiated in one of the most celebrated literary works of all time, *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley (Botting, *Gothic* 59–60). With this new Romantic impulse, the genre, which was exported to the United States at the turn of the century, would eventually settle to become one of the most predominant forms of fiction in the new country.

As a counter-narrative to rationalism, the Gothic engages with the excess and transgression that have no place in the dominant culture. The plots and characters of these fictions exceed this frame and transgress both the epistemological boundaries of this framework and also the social norms of the period (Botting, *Gothic* 1–2; 4). This second

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aspect, however, has been a point of contention since it taps into the ambivalence that has defined the genre regarding its revolutionary or conservative nature. While social transgression is normally understood as a revolutionary act, Fred Botting argues that in many of the original texts it can also function as an *exemplum ad contrarium.* In this light, it may also be intended as a powerful means to reassert the cardinal values of virtue and propriety in the society of the eighteenth century. As he explains, "transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limit, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits" (*Gothic* 5). This porosity and ambiguity turned the Gothic into an apt tool to channel those aspects that remain at the interstices of human consciousness and unconsciousness, at the borders of the ego and at the margins of society that can account for its longevity and a renewed interest in the present. From its inception, the genre has addressed the desires, quandaries and sources of anxiety that affected both the individual subject and the general public (Hogle 4). Moreover, establishing the existence of a supernatural alternative reality, even when this is anchored in a historical specificity, permits casting all that is repudiated from human nature or history in these figures that become the very essence of the abject. This notion, first coined by Julia Kristeva, is especially useful for Gothic theory inasmuch as it encapsulates this process of rejection and projection. As Glennis Byron explains, "In abjection the most multifarious, inconsistent, and conflicted aspects of our beings are 'thrown off' onto seemingly repulsive monsters or ghosts that both obscure and reveal this 'otherness' from our preferred selves that actually exists very much *within* ourselves" (498).

Taking all of this into consideration, it comes as no surprise that contemporary critical views advocate for a dynamic understanding of the tradition mirrored in a variety of labels—a "tendency" (Punter, "Introductory" 12), a "rhetoric" (Mighall qtd. in Byron 370) or a "discourse" (Wester 2; Edwards xxii; Martin & Savoy vii)—that seek to capture its continued presence and coexistence with other forms of writing. This has also contributed to what Botting calls "diffusion," a term that tries to account for the influence of the genre on a variety of literary and non-literary spheres and the impact that these, at the same time, have had on traditional conceptions of the Gothic which have contributed to its hybridization (*Gothic* 9). It is worth noting here the case of magic realism with which this fictional mode shares strong formal and thematic bonds.[5] This literary genre is characterized as one where the boundaries of conventional reality are bent to include the extraordinary, a space where the

[5] In addition to magic realism, there are multiple genres that share strong affinities with the Gothic and that can oftentimes feature the spectral as a main trope. Among this it can be mentioned horror literature, or the so-called speculative fiction. The latter appears as an umbrella term that encompasses from science fiction to fantasy and that has been used as a theoretical framework to approach the contemporary resurgence of a number of conventions proper of these traditions in contemporary Black literature with currents such as Afrofuturism, briefly discussed in the second chapter. In this regard, it is worth noting Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's work *The Dark Fantastic* where she engages in dialogue with Morrison's essay *Playing in the Dark* and argues for an understanding of the "dark Other" in fantastic tales proximal to the Gothic Other. As she explains, "in the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, the Dark Other is the spectacle, the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of *hesitation*, *ambivalence*, and the *uncanny*. The Dark Other is the present-absence that lingers at the edges of every fairy tale. She stalks the shadows of the futurist visions of science fiction, lurks along the margins of the imagined magical pasts of high fantasy, and renders the uchronia of alternate history into a nonsensical cipher" (23).

uncanny exists in everyday life. As Elizabeth T. Hayes indicates, this is "the literary mode in which the supernatural and the material are the equally weighted contraries simultaneously inscribed in the text as experienced reality" (169). Magic realism offers a number of alternative realities defined by their multiplicity, permeability, transformative nature and animism (Parkinson Zamora 500). These qualities posit a strong generic affinity with postmodernism as well, inasmuch as they reject the established binarisms, rationalism and materialism that determine Western modernism, offering instead a number of counter realistic conventions that allow for the enlargement and enriching of this traditional ontological understanding (Parkinson Zamora 498). These features, together with the polivocality and exploration of ex-centric discourses (Hayes 169–170) that posit the genre, are well-suited to the exploration of the nature of haunting, as demonstrated in the myriad fictional works within that tradition that feature the spectral, such as Randall Kenan's fiction, analyzed in the third chapter.

Like the Gothic, therefore, the ties that magic realism has with the field of spectrality studies are best explored by taking into consideration how both share an interest in the exploration of the limits of the knowable, and the articulation of a critique of modernity founded on the conception of history as a linear and teleological entity and the Foucauldian "subjugated knowledge" of those groups that exist at the margins of mainstream society (Parkinson Zamora 498). The ghost, as that in-between being, evokes a feeling of cultural displacement and becomes here again a privileged figure through which to dramatize "the painful economic and social liminality caused by the obliterating forces of modernization" (Parkinson Zamora 541). Thus, although the genre has been traditionally associated to Latin American fiction, the phenomenon has crossed frontiers and appears more prominently in the fiction of minorities throughout the United States, where the trope of the ghost is mobilized especially in contexts of the aftermath of disruptive cultural transitions or political abuses to enrich and remedy a wounded culture (Parkinson Zamora 542). According to Hayes, for these writers who often belong to marginalized races, social classes or genders, the magic realist story allows them both to reclaim a voice of their own to render their experiences and to recuperate a communal history and mythology (172), thus effecting a re-alignment of the center and the margins.

Due to its engagement with "improper" topics and the vast success among the masses of readers, the Gothic has often been repudiated as a popular form of fiction. Most critical studies of the genre, however, detect an underlying motivation that transcends a merely evasive reading. While it is true that, especially in its origins, an important part of the success of the genre came from its sensationalism, especially because it allowed for the vicarious experience of the thrills and adventures in which the readers are comforted with the retribution that punishes excess and rewards the observation of mores (Lloyd-Smith, *American* 5–6), it cannot be denied that these texts appear often as a distorted, darker mirror of their times. According to the view espoused by many of these critics, these narratives are deeply rooted in the socio-historical coordinates of a given period and they become clear representations of the social concerns that mark that time. Christian Baldick and Robert Mighall criticize an oneiric understanding of the genre and argue against the de-historizing

tendency that collapses history into universal psychology (278). To approach these novels that inaugurated the tradition, they opt instead for the "anxiety model" that they depict as "A model of culture and history premised on fear, experienced by a surrealist caricature of a bourgeoisie trembling in their frock coats at each and every deviation from a rigid, but largely mythical, stable middle-class consensus" (Baldick & Mighall 238).

Notwithstanding the employment of supernatural devices or even the configuration of an alternative reality, the predicaments at the core of these texts reveal the underlying social anxieties and taboos that define and covertly determine a given *zeitgeist.* Botting explains how these become "signs of a pervasive cultural anxiety concerning the relation of present and past, and the relationship between classes, sexes and individuals within society" (*Gothic* 57). A case in point is the mobilization of the vampire and the double to channel anxieties about the stability of social and domestic order and the effects of economic and scientific rationality in the Gothic revival of the 1890s (Botting, *Gothic* 88). Likewise, although women feature prominently in this type of literature as authors, readers and characters, Allan Lloyd-Smith notes how an acute anxiety of the feminine in nineteenth century culture can be found in the treatment that women characters receive in many of these novels: their violent demise, death and brutality ("Nineteenth-century" 174). This aspect is of the utmost importance for the discussion of spectrality that this dissertation engages because it reveals the connection between the literary representations of spectrality within the genre and the material conditions of a given society. Through the upcoming exploration of the American and African American Gothic—two traditions that are particularly bound to determining historical events and social configurations—this premise will become the core pillar on which to erect the hypothesis behind the current resurgence and transposition of Gothic forms.

1.1.2.2 The American Gothic: Creating the Racial Other

If the British Isles saw the birth and consolidation of the Gothic as a dominant genre for over a century, in America this tradition bloomed to the extent of becoming a defining trace of the foundational texts in the emerging nation. Far from embracing the prevailing narrative of a country with a clean slate and no history, American texts of this kind, generally in an oblique manner, dealt with the sins that the national narrative desperately tried to repress; chiefly, as we will see throughout the section, the issue of race. The connection between the Gothic and America is ineluctable; one of the first critics of this type of literature, Leslie Fiedler, described the American literary tradition as "bewildering and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealist and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in the land of affirmation" (xxiv). As early as 1960 this author pointed out several defining aspects of the American Gothic that have continued to be explored and re-assessed to this day. He claimed that in the American adaptation of the European tradition one could find the perfect metaphor for terror, psychological, social and metaphysical (Fiedler xxiii), an idea that Botting also manifests when assessing the profound influence of this tradition on the creation of the American literary canon: "In the United States, where the literary canon is composed of works in which the influence of romances and Gothic novels is far more overt, literature again

seems virtually an effect of a Gothic tradition" (*Gothic* 10). Fiedler's argument, adopted by later critics, puts forward an understanding of the Gothic as showing the dark nightmare which is the reverse of the American Dream (Savoy 167), where the dream of innocence is destroyed, and the country is forced to confront its own evil image (Fiedler 127). Ruth B. Anolik maintains that the attraction of American writers to this form was rooted in its adequacy to articulate anxieties derived from an encounter with the Other (*American* 2). These were embodied more blatantly in the Native Americans, who were subject to a process of removal, and the African slaves who were subjugated under the institution, but also in every dissident identity (hence gender and sexual orientation) that compromised the fragile male and white supremacist ideology. As Eugenia DeLamotte explains, "this terrifying metaphysical, suprapersonal general Other is embodied in the physical persons of particular racialized, nationalized, and/or sexualized Others, whose inherent otherness is identified with an inherent evil" ("White" 26).

The earliest appearance of the genre in America at the end of the eighteenth century was through the so-called "shilling shockers"—"short paperbacks containing the most exciting scenes of Gothic novels" (Ringel 22)—which, despite their public condemnation and attempts at censorship, interested a broad number of readers. It was in this same period that Charles Brockden Brown, considered to be the first professional American writer, also engaged with the genre and published four novels of this kind between 1798 and 1800. However, it is with the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the Romantic period, where the pull of the European Gothic had a greater impact on the American adaptation of the genre. Acclaimed authors such as Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, or Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as other less well-known ones such as Fitz-James O'Brian or Harriet Prescott Spofford, tailored the Gothic's conventions to specific American preoccupations and crafted the genre of the short story to their narrative needs (Bendixen 35–41;31). These authors were more focused on the psychology of the individual and the premise of individual freedom in tension with social control and coercion (Botting, *Gothic* 45). After this turning point, the Gothic discourse continued to be adopted and adapted throughout the different literary movements to address the social fears and ideologies of the different periods.

On the grounds of the basic premise that "Gothic narratives give shape to culturally specific anxieties and tabooed desires," Andrew Weinstock argues that American Gothic clusters around four interconnected primary loci: religion, geography, Otherness and rationality (6) that Lloyd-Smith further develops in his studies. Regarding religion, the latter emphasizes the legacy of Puritanism and its Manichean conceptions of good and evil, a pervasive feeling of guilt, as well as dread and a binary opposition between black and white, the kingdom of light and the realm of darkness (Lloyd-Smith, *American* 38). Concerning geography, it is of special relevance of the notion of the Frontier which in colonial times had as much a physical as a psychological meaning, since the settlers lived quite literally on the verge of the wilderness, a space where material promise was infused with the realities of solitude and the threat of potential violence (Lloyd-Smith, *American* 37). Thirdly, sexual and racial otherness is an element that, as discussed by Lloyd-Smith, in America acquires the uttermost importance, especially in connection to African slaves and indigenous people

(*American* 38). Finally, the realm of rationality; since America turned the principles of the Enlightenment into constitutional pillars, a parallel fear to this foundation developed regarding the dangers of enfranchisement and the outcome of the nation. As explained by Lloyd-Smith, "along utopian inspiration came more pessimistic insights into the dangers of trusting society to the undisciplined rule of the majority, fear of faction in democratic government, the rule of the mob and the danger of a collapse of the whole grand experiment" (*American* 39). All of these aspects are directly related to the basic premises of transgression and power that had nourished the development of the genre in Britain and that became inherent to the American adoption of the tradition. Summarizing the essence of the genre in America, Lloyd-Smith states that "The shadow of patriarchy, slavery and racism, as of Puritan extremes of the imagination and the political horror of a failed utopianism, fall across these works of American Gothic and direct its shape toward a concern with social and political issues as well as toward an agonized introspection concerning the evil that lies within the self" (Lloyd-Smith, "Nineteenth" 174). This assessment illustrates how deeply the historical circumstances in which the United States was formed reveal a clash between the ideals espoused by the founding fathers and the realities of the nation which, since it was not publicly acknowledged, finds a channel of expression in the Gothic.

Undoubtedly out of these four spheres of action, the one that has received more critical attention and that is fundamental for this thesis is race and racial construction in the American Gothic. As Ellen Weinauer has pointed out, "In the US context […] the Gothic tells the 'true' story of race in America—a story that points not only to the existence of substantive national 'unfreedoms' but also of the strenuous effort to create racial categories that distinguish free from unfree, civilized from savage, white from black" (86). Weinauer goes on to explain how the dominant discourse about the social conditions in the emerging country was often mediated by "proto-Gothic metaphors, tropes and techniques" that allowed, in the first place, the construction of national Others in the shape of Native Americans and African Americans, and then the justification of their extermination and enslavement (87–88). These historical events have had an everlasting impact on this tradition since, even in the present, American Gothic texts find a distinctive feature in the obsessive return to the past (Savoy 169) that is intrinsically linked to the bloody history of the nation, thus reinforcing the idea that far from de-historizing, these texts often work toward a re-materialization of history by embodying the pervasive hold of the past in the present through tropes such as the ghost (Edwards 36), and allow for an interrogation of the historical narratives that have been displaced or submerged in the national narrative.

If the Gothic is defined by an encounter with the Other—be it gendered, sexual, or racial—where this comes to embody the characteristics of the monster, in American literature and culture at large Otherness is deeply and intricately associated to race. As Anolik points out, "Gothic fear is relocated onto the figure of the racial and social Other, the other who replaces the supernatural ghost or grotesque monster as the code for mystery and danger, becoming, ultimately, as horrifying, threatening and unknowable as the typical Gothic manifestations" ("Introduction" 2). Although studies of the genre have focused on the two aforementioned historical realities that determine the centrality of race in these texts (the

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Indian Removal and slavery), in the following the focus will be placed exclusively on the case of African Americans and the construction of Blackness as Otherness. In a now widely circulated essay entitled "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination," published in 1992, Toni Morrison suggests that in American literature written by white canonical authors there is an underlying presence of African Americans. She coins the concept "American Africanism" to evoke this reality and looks at "the ways in which a nonwhite, African-like (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (*Playing* 6).[6] A fundamental aspect of Morrison's theory is the claim that this construction is profoundly reflexive as it reveals the conscious and unconscious bias (*Playing* 17) and it becomes a means to provide a definition of whiteness in opposition to Blackness. As she explains, "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (Morrison, *Playing* 52).

Recent critics like DeLamotte have stressed this idea, claiming that Gothic texts can actually be seen as documents in the history of racial formation that expose both the mechanisms behind the construction of whiteness and the specific fears that it channeled ("White" 19). This second aspect can be identified in the most common tropes and motifs found in this literature, both in an overt and a covert manner. The tropes found in the British Gothic are adapted and filtered through a racial lens that reveals much about the underlying anxieties of the heteropatriarchal, white American society. Aside from the fear of slave revolts and insurrections, the Black man is posited as the Gothic monster bent on forcefully destroying the innocent white woman's virtue. The rape complex and the stereotype of the Black beast rapist are rendered as destructive for the white patriarchal society because they threaten the gender construction of white femininity as an incorruptible element that reproduces the very system in which it is embedded. Beyond the perniciousness of this image for African Americans in the past and the present where it has left a stigma, Maisha Wester points out how it also reveals, as in a distorted mirror, the repressed reality of systematized white violation and silencing of the abused female Black body under slavery (19). Taking into account that racial division was critical to the sustenance of the white supremacist social order, transgressions of racial boundaries become a pervasive fear in American society that is epitomized chiefly, although not solely, in the terror of miscegenation. This is best shown through the treatment of mulatto or passing Blacks that, according to Justin Edwards, become vehicles of cultural anxiety as they undermine the fragile categories upon which racial privilege is maintained (xxxi).

[6] Morrison distinguishes her use of the term "Africanism" from other contemporary uses of the term to refer to a body of knowledge of African or "the varieties and complexities of Africans and their descendents." In her adoption of the term she understands it as "the denotative or connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (*Playing* 6–7).

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Once the mechanisms at work in the production of Gothic texts by white American authors are deciphered, it becomes apparent how this genre, inasmuch as it becomes a channel for the repressed social and political preoccupations that besieged the emergent nation, functions as a counter-narrative to the dominant national American narrative of innocence and exceptionalism. Teresa Goddu bases her seminal monograph, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1996), on this premise, arguing that American Gothic is inextricably bound to sites of historical haunting such as slavery, an institution that in itself collapses the definition of America in new terms and undermines the myth of American exceptionality (18). Goddu argues that a close survey of texts from the eighteenth century until the turn of the twentieth century unveils an underlying preoccupation with the effects that the existence of slavery entailed to the conception of America as a country with no history, where equality and freedom were the governing principles. Starting with St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the wounded slave body appears as the abject that must be repressed to comply with the national narrative (Goddu 26). Goddu sees another iteration of the trend in Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), where the Enlightened narrative of progress is undermined by a counternarrative of disease, degeneracy and decay, all characteristics associated to the slave commerce and the fear of an insurrection (32;37). This tendency reaches its apex with the revisions of the most famous American Gothic author: Edgar Allan Poe. There are many critics that have approached the southern author's oeuvre from this perspective, emphasizing the hidden references to the system of slavery through motifs such as the fear of possession, entrapment, imprisonment, the fear of retribution or the importance of sin (Goddu 73–133) that adopt a greater significance within the specific cultural and geographical coordinates of his birth and origin.[7]

This revision shows that slavery was a haunting presence in the writings that form the early American literary canon. The interventions that the authors make through these texts demonstrate how the Gothic's disruptive force challenges the established national discourse:

> The nation's narratives—its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations—are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, these interventions disrupt the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the genre discloses the instability of America's self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. (Goddu 10)

Jannette Idiart and Jennifer Schulz have also echoed this idea, arguing that American Gothic unveils a "haunted consciousness" at the heart of the nation (127). Furthermore, they defend that this genre used to compromise the narrative of the nation can be employed as well to devise an alternative history and historiography that channel those voices of dissent that interrupt narratives of national consensus (Idiart & Schulz 138).

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[7] See for instance Fiedler (348), Savoy (182) and Anolik (*American* 35).

Although the pull of this tradition is discernible in American literature considered as a whole, the specificities of the South—both in racial and social terms—led to the development of the genre into a distinctive regional form which has amongst its various representatives authors such as Poe himself, William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, among others. The relationship between the South and the genre seems almost symbiotic, since in the region the stuff of fictional Gothic terror was very much a reality for those who experienced the tolls of slavery and its aftermath. Nurtured in a region ruptured by a convulse history, southern Gothic is deeply entrenched in the past, especially that past which, like the ghosts that populate its fiction, resists closure and keeps coming back. As Elsa Charléty points out, "There is something about the South that makes it the perfect background for stories of specters, haunted mansions, and hidden secrets. An unfathomable region of the mind, it is haunted by the innumerable ghosts of its past" (112). Pointedly, Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner have accounted for this fact through the concept of *undeadness,* which they define as a "a wide continuum of posthumous phenomena" that includes both literal representations of revenants, as well as metaphorical ways in which these tropes may be engaged show the dehumanization of slavery (1–2). However, notwithstanding this association of the genre to the South, it is important to take into consideration that the terrible reality to which people of African origins, or of African descent, were subjected was not something uniquely southern. Goddu has called attention to this fact by pointing out that the region has functioned in this respect like the "nation's safety valve: as a repository for everything the nation is *not*" (76). Beyond this image that the country has tried to give to the exterior about a local problem, the racial marginalization and exclusion to which these narratives give voice was a generalized fact. As Goddu explains, "By so closely associating the Gothic with the South, the American literary tradition neutralizes the Gothic's threat to national identity" (2). It is through the interventions that African American authors make on the genre that this reality will become painfully evident.

1.1.2.3 The African American Gothic: Strategies of Subversion

Parallel to the development of the Gothic through the works of white authors, the publication as early as 1831 of the autobiographical *History of Mary Prince* by a former slave woman in Barbados, initiated a tendency that would be consolidated in the United States whereby Black authors of slave narratives mobilize this kind of tropes to depict the grotesque existence of life under slavery.[8] This trend demonstrates a structural shift through which those who had been narrativized as the Gothic Other employ these same conventions to depict the nature of the system in which they were forcefully imbued. In other words, the Black body that had become

[8] African American Gothic could also be understood within the framework of "poscolonial gothic." James Procter and Angela Smith emphasize how postcolonial gothic "writes back" to traditional gothic texts "in order to unsettle or in some way disturb their grand narratives of colonial mastery/degeneration, relocating the horror from the locus of the colonised to the violence and abuses perpetrated by empire" (95). Likewise, Judie Newman explains how authors within this current are intent on a process of revision and rewriting: "Postcolonial writers frequently begin from a self-conscious project to revise the ideological assumptions created by Eurocentric domination of their culture, to rewrite the fiction of influential predecessors and therefore to deconstruct conventional images of the colonial situation" (172).

the abject of American literature, claims a voice of its own to disclose the factors at play behind this construction. In this light, Wester borrows the term *multipolar reflecting reflection* from Trinh Minh-ha to describe Black Gothic as revealing "the archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered others as constructions useful in the production of white patriarchal dominance" (2). In this shift one identifies a process of appropriation and subversion, rather than borrowing, because the use that African Americans make of these conventions destabilizes many of the assumptions on which the American tradition of the genre had thrived, and shapes them into tools that simultaneously visibilize and denounce the construction of Blackness as synonymous with monstrosity when, in fact, it was the Black population that was subject to an oppressive and dehumanizing system. As Wester points out, "black writers' determination to seize the genre, write back to it, and revise it illustrates an awareness of its perils and a will to (re)possess it and neutralize its dangers, relocating the sense of horror in the very issues of ownership and (dis)possession at play in the process of writing the Gothic" (28). These texts, thus, to borrow a term from Goddu, exact a process of "haunting back" (132). In her own words, "By writing their own gothic tales, these authors combat the master's version of their history; by breaking the silence they reclaim their history instead of being controlled by it" (Goddu 155); because they are not inscribed in neither bound by conventional reality, the return of the ghosts from the past becomes quite literal and their testimonies become a key channel for the historical revision the genre undertakes. It is important to note, however, that, although the powerfulness of this type of literature as an act of subversion is beyond doubt, some critics have warned about the dangers, common to any counter-discourse, of reinscribing the norms of the dominant discourse within its apparent contestation (Newman 173). Discussing the same idea, Goddu explains the ambivalent reception of the Gothic tropes in slave narratives where a tension can be discerned between remembrance and combat on the one hand, and danger of erasure or departicularization on the other (135). Actually, former slave authors such as Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass were forced to defend, often with a white person's endorsement, that their writing was not fiction.

The most exhaustive study of this tradition in African American literature to date is Wester's *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012), where the author claims that the critical interventions that African American authors have made in the genre fulfill a dual function: establishing a dialogue with previous texts with the aim of revising them, and expressing the difficult conditions of life for Black people in America. As she explains, "Black authors appropriate and revise the genre's tropes in unique ways to both speak back to the tradition's originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America" (Wester 1–2). This involves a thematic adaptation that stems from a distinct focus on the material and historical conditions where the Gothic is rooted. Anolik points out how the distinctive features of power and transgression achieve new relevance in this context, since they constitute literal struggles for the enslaved and oppressed population: "the horrible situation of the chattel slave in the United States […] presented a new, uniquely American form of possession and power. […] And so, the issues of power, possession, and dispossession that occupied English Gothic literature from its origins took on new form and urgency in the literature by and about African

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Americans" (*American* 34). African American Gothic reworks the genre's conventions so these texts can witness the traumatic scars that racial oppression leaves on the African American subject. Besides, and relevant for this dissertation, authors within the genre opt on occasions for the use of the so-called Africanist elements—understood here as remnants of various African communities found in the Americas, such as religious cosmologies, beliefs and mythologies—that become important elements in the process of rewriting history from a marked cultural identity. Anne Schroder signals how the experiences of slavery and its aftermath in the African Diaspora were mediated and conceptualized through the use of these Africanist tropes, a process that echoes a common origin and similar experiences of forced migration and subjection: "These practices serve as a way of preserving, reconceptualizing and reinforcing a sense of identity and community through a belief system originating in an African past, but shaped by the encounters and experiences in the New World" (422).

Anolik pointedly states that "for African Americans, American history has been the claustrophobic site of recurring and inescapable Gothic horror" (*American* 54). This insight condenses the reality behind the particular deployment that Black authors make of the genre. While the experience of slavery directly impacted the use of these conventions in slave and neo-slave narratives, the everlasting oppression that the Black population suffered—and continues to suffer—in the aftermath of emancipation and civil rights informs and, like the specter that cannot be exorcised or the traumatic secret that cannot be worked through, repeatedly erupts in old and new formulations of the African American Gothic. Taking this into consideration, Wester provides a survey of how this tradition has been mobilized at different historical points to disclose and articulate the position of the Black subject within and outside the African American community. Beginning with the slave narratives, these conventions are at the mercy of the atrocious experiences of Black enslaved people under the peculiar institution. The scenes that configure these narratives not only feature the blunt horrors of physical, sexual and psychological brutality, but they also succeed in establishing two features that would be fundamental to later explorations of spectrality and Gothic elements in connection to these periods. The first of these features is the definition of slavery as a haunted and haunting institution that follows the slaves even after they become free impeding their progress (Wester 42); the second, closely connected to this one, is the rendition of the limitations or failure of language to convey the lived experiences obscuring the possibility of articulating the wounded self (Wester 46). These features continue to underpin African American Gothic manifestations in the aftermath of slavery, where literature becomes a vehicle for the expression of a general feeling of pessimism rooted in the factual failure of Emancipation to provide the former enslaved something beyond nominal freedom.

Likewise, it is in postbellum America where the construction of many racial stereotypes, often coded in a Gothic language, are formed together with new methods to perpetuate slavery through the penal system. These concerns will shape the fictional production of post-Emancipation and Jim Crow authors during the twentieth century, when one of the privileged themes is the insidious nature of racism. This exploration reevaluates the opposition between the South as an utterly racist region and the North as a progressive haven by showing the pervasive nature of racism throughout the country (Wester 102), a Gothic nightmare that

cannot be escaped. Wester claims that two works that are representative of the period, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), reflect an emerging tension that will become paramount in the texts that form the corpus of analysis: polarized between the artificial conceptions of Blackness and whiteness that only give the choice of being reduced to racist articulations of the self, or assimilating into whiteness and surrendering any trace of Black identity, the ideal space of Black freedom cannot be found anywhere, and is instead submerged in the underground, in the psyche (Wester 146).

While these concerns that cut to the very core of Black ontology never disappeared from African American Gothic, in the wake of the civil rights movement during the second half of the twentieth century, the literary explorations developed within this framework turned instead to the tension between the individual and the community. Written mostly by Black women, these texts foreground gender and the fragmentation of the self derived from an integration in a group with gender disparity (Wester 150). Keeping at the core of their writings the collective trauma of racial oppression, these authors point out the double oppression of many Black women who suffer the racist backlash of the mainstream white society and the gender discrimination within the African American community. Referencing Black feminist writer Evie Shockley, Wester explains how authors such as Alice Walker or Gayl Jones, among many others, employ the conventions of entrapment and circumscription to render the tyranny and reductionism of an imposed fixed identity:

> Contained under rigid cultural identity that fixes their role and liberties, black community as a racial and cultural "home" proves problematic for women and other marginalized figures. As a community that binds together to protect its members from racial subjugation, it is also simultaneously the structure that offers haven and a sense of ancestry and family, and self-alienation and abuse. (Wester 163)

In his 2012 *Companion* David Punter indicates that "in recent years in particular, we have found ourselves at a peculiar confluence between the major motifs of the Gothic and a set of ways of thinking increasingly current in contemporary criticism and theory" ("Introduction" 2). He goes on to explain how numerous disciplines alien to literature have specifically engaged the trope of the specter as instantiated by the psychoanalytical and deconstructionist approaches previously discussed. For him, the Gothic is specifically suitable for two of the key purposes of these theories: one, the exploration of the mystery of the human mind in relation to the uncanny; and two, the representation of the harmed body or psyche, chiefly in relation to the traumatic wound (Punter, "Introduction" 2). Punter's perceptive description signals the relation between the emergence of spectrality as an analytical category that dominated the academic discourse through the spectral turn, and the contemporary adaptations of the genre. This symbiosis between both elements stems from the basic fact that whenever a specter appears, no matter its literal or metaphorical condition, the subject becomes haunted by the past, the present, or even the future, one that may be already truncated, and the world that is so familiar to them becomes the uncanny arena of the lost opportunities and unrealized possibilities. A survey of the contemporary accounts reveals

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straightforwardly that African Americans continue to be haunted by the past and that their wound is one that will continue to haunt America for as long as the past is not acknowledged and justice not achieved. In her study of contemporary Gothic, Catherine Spooner indicates a renewed thematic focus on the legacies of the past in the present, embodied in the emergence of spectrality as a dominant trope, where the mind, plunged in the traumatic event, becomes the prison (8; 18). In addition, explorations of the construction of individuals as "other" are foregrounded (8), as these narratives are often concerned with how the intersections between racial, sexual and gender otherness are played out.

Thus, many of the features that characterized the Gothic in its inception are adapted to the present postmodern moment. In fact, Lloyd-Smith has emphasized how the genre at large, like the specters that increasingly populate it, shares a strong affinity with postmodernism. Of especial import for this discussion, he signals how indeterminacy and ambivalence question the absolute truths that have been established since the Enlightenment. He observes, furthermore, how both postmodern and Gothic fiction privilege ontological rather than epistemological questions, and how both discourses are characterized by an omnipresent concern with the past to which they feel both attracted and repulsed ("Postmodernism" 7–10). Summarizing the forces that move the genre, Botting appeals to the consolidated understanding of this tradition as one that is deeply rooted in history, claiming that "Gothic representations are a product of cultural anxieties about the nature of human identity, the stability of cultural formations, and processes of change" ("Aftergothic" 280). Taking into consideration the convulse history of the West throughout the last couple of centuries, there are many worries that have been channeled through the use of Gothic conventions: from the fear of reverse colonization to the technological explosion, passing through the rise of social movements like feminism, civil rights and gay liberation as well as a heightened attack on canonical and secular structures of power (Bruhm 160). Turning to the specific case of the United States, Weinstock claims that the relevance of returning to the Gothic today resides in its capacity to undo the premise that the country was ever a place free from history, class relations and other forms of social antagonism (2).

The many different preoccupations that furnished the incursions of a multitude of Black authors in the genre kept steady to the end of the twentieth century and, far from effacing, it seems that in the present they are gaining new momentum. Gothic imagery permeates modern cultural forms: from literature to films and music videos and the overused motifs of haunted houses and uncanny returns that seem to be taking a new hold of the African American imagination. Sherie Marie Harrison has dubbed this phenomenon taking root in the twenty-first century the *New Black Gothic*. Based on the disruption of temporal frames, this new iteration goes back to the concern with the inescapable legacy of slavery that is reinscribed and reproduced in our very present moment. As she explains, "This New Black Gothic functions through temporal collapses, in which aspects of a slave past disrupt the present, to demonstrate how and why disruptive and traumatic aspects of the slave past continue to manifest, and in fact are redoubled, in the neoliberal present of late capitalism" (Harrison 5). According to Harrison, this diasporic phenomenon relegates the topics of recovery and representation that were present in earlier literature to the background, and focuses instead on

the pessimistic inability to escape from racialized oppression and the "eschewal" of hope for the future derived from the structural quality of racism (7). Along similar lines, Rebecca Evans has coined the concept of *gothic geomemory* to address a return to supernatural tropes, especially haunting, in contemporary African American fiction as means to destabilize the narrative of historical progress that promulgates the end of racism. As she explains, "By integrating the gothic into realist fictions, contemporary Black novelists weave distributed understandings of historical causality, agency, and timescale into one story, and they use these hybrid stories to challenge the reductive progress narrative of liberal modernity (according to which regimes of racial violence have ended)" (Evans 452). This recuperation of the Gothic as a subversive intervention in the national narrative constructs a space for revision and rewriting where the master narratives and their representations are deconstructed. In this respect, and by using many of the tropes that define a state of haunting, the genre converges with the field of spectrality studies, and the renewed appropriation of its conventions and themes by minorities contributes to the expansion of the spectral turn in literature. As such, in the narratives analyzed in this dissertation, these revised Gothic forms that stem from real atrocities will serve as the background upon which the spectral makes its appearance.

1.2 The Convergence of the Spectral and the Racial

Having discussed the emergence and consolidation of spectrality as an analytical tool, and once the evolution of the trope of the ghost in American literature, and more specifically in the African American tradition, has been outlined, we turn now to the question on which this dissertation is premised: the pervasiveness of the spectral in African American fiction and the significance of its resurgence in contemporary texts. With the intention of examining these questions in detail, this section sets out to provide an exploration of the most recent theoretical approaches to spectrality in African American fiction that are informed by a close analysis of the historical circumstances that have determined these representations. This exploration is intended to establish the fundamental pillars on which the critical analysis of the literary works will be developed.

Most spectrality scholars within the field of African American studies coincide in signaling the insidiousness of death in the African American community, which becomes even more apparent if one considers the quantity of theoretical discussions, media reports and artistic manifestations that proliferate about this topic. Literary scholar Karla F. C. Holloway registers this long-standing association and the impact that brutal deaths have had on the community, claiming that "African Americans' particular vulnerability to an untimely death in the United States intimately affects how black culture both represents itself and is represented" (2). This centrality stems from a concept of death that is both literal—the sheer amount of people who have lost their lives to an oppressive racial system—and figurative—their spectral position in mainstream culture—two deeply interrelated aspects that have defined Black history. The defining historical event that marks the foundation of the African American community is the reality of chattel slavery that was present in the country from its very inception. The transatlantic slave trade transported millions of people from the West

African coast to the New World in a nightmarish journey called the Middle Passage where hundreds of thousands lost their lives before ever reaching the shore. The first slaves arrived in the British colonies of America in 1619 and, with the foundation of the United States as a nation, slavery spread throughout the territory as a profitable business which allowed not only for the territorial expansion of the emerging nation, but it also became the motor of the industrial revolution that would take place in Europe. Orlando Patterson has famously described the condition of the enslaved as a state of "social death." Even though his examination is not restricted to the United States, the theory he develops is intended to describe the social construction and repercussions of this institution in different slave societies across the globe, including the American case. He advances his theory by considering how the three dimensions of power relations—social (use or threat of violence for control), psychological (influence, i.e. the persuasion of one person to another to change the perception of interest and circumstances), and cultural (authority, i.e. the control of private and public symbols as well as ritual processes to manipulate someone into obedience) (Patterson 1–2)—are transformed in the case of slavery to the extent of becoming distinctive defining features.

Regarding the first aspect, Patterson points out the "extremity of the power involved" and the coercion that characterizes this relation of domination through the employment of naked force as the means to impose the status of slaves on these people (3). Furthermore, the slave is described as a "social non-person" because his public identity was constructed as an extension of the master (5). In relation to the second facet, Patterson introduces the slaves' natal alienation; the slave is defined as a socially dead person, "alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (5). With this concept, Patterson accounts first for the genealogical isolation from their ancestors and their descendants forced onto the slaves (5) and, second, he describes a condition that is perpetual and inheritable (9), both aspects that are central in the conceptualization of slavery and slaves in relation to figurative death. The last aspect would relate to the idea of honor as a social construct that determines the status and value of an individual in a society. Slaves were virtually deprived of honor because of their status and their powerlessness (10). Patterson explains how, configured as living-dead, slaves were relegated to an institutionalized marginalization, which he calls "the liminal space of social death" (45–46).

Throughout his study, this author applies his general theories to the case of the U.S. South and the question of manumissions in relation to natal alienation as a perpetual and inheritable status is of special relevance for our discussion. Patterson explains that this practice problematized the conception of slaves along these terms because their emancipation implied an ontological transformation from an entity alienated from society to a full-right citizen. The author indicates that, generally, in the U.S. South these voluntary manumissions were granted selectively to those believed to continue a relation of dependency with the master, namely rural families economically subordinated to former masters, or, in urban areas, slave women who continued to be sexually exploited by the former masters (246). Another aspect that Patterson points out in the case of the United States in particular—an element that seems to set it apart from the rest of slave societies—is the fact that it granted no space for the freed slaves in their society due to a number of reasons that ranged from demographic

structure to economic fears, as well as cultural, familiar and sexual values (259). These two ideas prompt a reflection on the long-term effects that the forceful emancipation of slaves in the United States had. The reluctance to a voluntary manumission would be transformed into a diametrical opposition to emancipation brought about by defeat in the Civil War. At the same time, this would be translated culturally and socially into two different narratives with terrible consequences for the emancipated Blacks. For one, in the aftermath of the Civil War the white discourse would be defined by an evocation of the Lost Cause myth that would recast the conflict as a fight for regional identity and subsequent victimhood at the hands of a foreign invasion, and forced assimilation of northern values. Thus, this mythological rewriting of history transformed slavery into a pious and educative institution aimed at civilizing Black people and depicted the master-slave relationship in paternalistic and benign terms. Parallel to this, African Americans—especially men—were transformed into menaces that threatened white purity through the development of the rape complex. This artificial construction presents a double-fold agenda: extra-legally, Black people will be prosecuted and brutally murdered to reaffirm the color line, a tragic reality best represented by the regime of terror unleashed in the South during Reconstruction, and epitomized in the thousands of lynchings that took place in the country until well into the twentieth century. Legally, the myriad Black Codes passed by former Confederate states criminalized Black freedom and were specifically intended to restrict African American civil claims, and to send former slaves to legally sanctioned forms of slavery such as convict leasing or peonage. Thus, in the aftermath of the Civil War former slaves would be subject to a process of legal prosecution, economic subjugation and social marginalization that would mark one of the most violent and bloodiest periods in the history of America.

In his preface to the 2018 edition of his classic study, Patterson emphasizes that the term social death was "intended to capture the nature of human suffering and brutalization that slaves experienced" (viii). His approach is not aimed at describing the personal ties and relationships enslaved people managed to forge under these circumstances, the presence of cultural heritage or, much less, an immanent self-identity or their claim to selfhood, but, rather this is an account of the power dialectics and social mechanisms at play in the consideration of the social status and representation of those enslaved. Notwithstanding this, his theory has been contested by recent race scholars on the grounds that it obscures the acts of resistance carried out by the enslaved and thus annuls any claim to agency. Despite the validity of these arguments, the notion of social death is still valuable for this study, firstly in relation to the reverberations it has had in different theories of racial construction; and secondly, as the inaugural—but by no means the last—instantiation of the conceptualization of African American ontology imbued with a spectral trace, in terms of living-deadness. In fact, current philosophical approaches to the question of Blackness and the African American community such as Afropessimism have adopted Patterson's concepts to account for the persistent nature of racism in America. Some of these revised ideas, especially considering the socio-economic and legal macrostructures, provide a valuable insight into the present situation of the Black population in the United States, marked as it is by a continued racial oppression.

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All the previous reveals the aforementioned paradox to which African Americans are subject: the visibility placed on them by the focus of marked physical difference makes them invisible inasmuch as they are pushed to the margins of a white dominant society, virtually erased and thus invisibilized. As explained by Bianca del Villano, "the visibility of blackness makes the subject invisible in respect to his/her agency, since s/he is fixed by an absolute difference, compelling him/her into a condition of subalternity" (45). However, this paradoxical condition is further emphasized when simultaneous to the process of invisibilization there is a push toward hyper-visibility, a condition that stresses Black physical difference to support a definition of white identity in negative terms (del Villano 51). Within the general frame of structural racism, this hyper-visibility becomes threatening, as evidenced in the racial prosecutions during the first half of the twentieth century, when any Black individual could be attacked as warning to the whole African American community, or present-day brutality that often targets Black people with fatal outcomes. A similar contradictory or paradoxical tension can be detected in the use of spectrality in contemporary African American fiction. As Sharon P. Holland writes, "Should they [the dead] rise and speak for themselves, the state would lose all right to their borrowed and/or stolen language" (28). While the specter may appear as a metaphor for dispossession, the symbolic power that allows it to unravel chronological order, destabilize master narratives, and claim a voice of its own, even if it is in death, turns the haunting into a productive space of resistance. This brings us to the present day where images of death and spectrality continue to permeate African American cultural and artistic manifestations. In her exploration of death and Black subjectivity, Holland contends that the isolation to which African Americans were relegated on the grounds of their definition as nonentities has led to a closer relation with their dead, both their ancestors and their heritage (15). In her view, this connection is reinforced by the fact that the state of living-deadness may in some cases become an ontological characteristic defined at group level: "What if some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the 'living'? What if these subjects merely haunt the periphery of the encountering person's vision, remaining, like the past and the ancestors who inhabit it, at one with the dead—seldom recognized and, […] often unnamed?" (Holland 15). Holland's insight sheds light on the continuity of a state of dispossession that affects many Black people in the present, and the marginality to which the Black community continues to be subjected in the United States. A full understanding of these relentless iterations of death can be best explored by considering the phenomenon of spectrality and haunting as vehicles for many of these concerns through Joanne Chassot's model.

In *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* (2018), Chassot offers one of the most comprehensive literary studies of spectrality in African diasporic literature to date. Her invaluable contribution to the field of spectrality studies recuperates long-standing premises found in the works of Gordon and Brogan, and actualizes them by incorporating the previously mentioned revisions put forward by critics such as Castle or Mbembe. As such, her conception of the ghost seeks to reunite the Derridean approach to the specter as the postructuralist epitome of liminality, instability and indeterminacy, with its role as a trope of dispossession and social erasure that brings about

complex issues such as history, memory and identity (*Ghosts* 7–8). Chassot's theory of spectrality focuses to a greater extent on two aspects that had been previously introduced but were still underdeveloped: first, the implications of an understanding of the ghost as an Africanist element; second, the gender perspective. Following the contributions of John Mbiti regarding African religious cosmology and philosophy, the author remarks on the familiarity between the apparitions and their witnesses which evoke original West African beliefs and conceptions of time that were transplanted to the Black diaspora in America (Chassot, *Ghosts* 8). The importance of this understanding resides in the fact that the spectral here is constituted as an important tool of resistance with a double purpose: for one, it acts as a contestation to the dominant culture that produced slavery and maintained its structures. As explained by Chassot, "In affirming the continuous place of ghosts in African diasporic culture, contemporary writers thus reenact and extend this oppositional gesture against a hegemonic culture that itself keeps reenacting and extending its historical repressive and marginalizing structures" (*Ghosts* 11). Moreover, this critic's approach responds to the intellectual discourse that was developed within this framework to establish a monolithic narrative of truth and history that obviates the experience of the subaltern: "The ghost destabilizes the boundaries Western metaphysics and post-Enlightenment rationalism erected between the myriad categories that have traditionally served to establish and perpetuate violent hierarchies, relations of dominance and discourses of othering" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 14). Chassot further points out that gender and other categories of marked difference are a relevant aspect, since spectrality is mostly deployed by women or other writers who belong to these groups, and she argues that this tendency stems from their particular situation derived from an intersection of race, gender and/or sexual oppression (*Ghosts* 12–13). This becomes apparent in the corpus of analysis where all except one of the novels are written by women, and in the case of this one the author engages with the topic of homosexuality. These subjects who have experienced on their own selves the perniciousness of a world divided along opposing lines of definition, distrust these binary oppositions that have traditionally marginalized and silenced them (Chassot, *Ghosts* 12). Their texts, thus, contribute to the revisionist impulse of those who have been excluded from the historical master narratives.

Taking these aspects as a basis, Chassot provides a model that she denominates *spectrography*, intended to locate the main functions of spectrality in African diasporic fiction and developed through the analysis of literary works within these coordinates—chiefly *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor and *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall. As a continuation and expansion of the theories of spectrality developed during the 1990s, it shares many of their characteristics. At the same time, however, she delves deeper into aspects such as trauma and the relation with the African diaspora, both aspects that are integral to this analysis. Her model is based on three fundamental pillars that account for the iteration of the spectral in fiction: the revision of master narratives, the rendition of traumatic experiences, and the cultural bonds of the African diaspora. The revisionary dimension of the ghost is one that has been dealt with at great length by all relevant accounts of spectrality, as it is inextricable from the very essence of the ghost, and Chassot looks into the process through which this critique is articulated. By virtue of their

capacity to make the absent present, ghosts stress the need to look beyond what our eye has been trained to see, not just in terms of noticing those who are made invisible, but especially regarding the mechanisms that have effected this process of invisibilization and that are immersed within the dominant narratives. Actually, one of her main arguments is that "the ghost precisely draws attention not only to this erasure—this absence, this invisibility—but also to the ideological, epistemological, and discursive processes that have produced and perpetuated it" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 17). In performing this materialization, ghosts challenge teleological narratives of history and give voice to the voiceless, as it has already been stated. However, this revision does not affect only the past, but it directly points to the significance of the effects of this silencing in the present (Chassot, *Ghosts* 20). The idea that Chassot emphasizes that is of greater relevance for this study is the fact that ghosts transcend the historical coordinates to reflect on the present effects of silencing and erasure. It is through these mechanisms that it becomes apparent how ghosts, even when belonging to a different era, are not simply circumscribed to the past but their symbolic power applies directly to contemporary circumstances. Although she focuses on the literature of the 1980s—"marked by an affirmation of folk culture, a turn to history, and a general critique of master narratives, as well as a growing presence of women's voices in literature" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 29)—, her model is of great currency and value for the literary analysis attempted here.

The second and third functions of spectrality signaled by Chassot are deeply interconnected. She labels "impossible stories" those experiences that, due to their traumatic nature, surpass narrative structure (*Ghosts* 24), those famously named by Morrison "unspeakable things unspoken" ("Unspeakable" 1). The ghost, in addition to becoming the materialization of the haunting that the traumatic memory has on the sufferers, is able to evoke the tension between the need to convey the traumatic experience and the insufficiency of language to articulate it. In Chassot's own words, "It captures the epistemological and ethical tension between the necessity to narrate this history, to recover these subjects and voices, and the necessary failure to do so" (*Ghosts* 24). Along with the ethical implications she points out, Chassot claims that "the (un)capturability of the past corresponds to a positioning that is epistemological (recognizing the limits of our tools for recovering and representing history) and political (opposing narratives that claim to capture the past by speaking for the victims, silencing them in the process)" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 23). These ideas will be further developed and instantiated through the specific analysis of *Beloved*—a novel that Chassot also chooses as the structuring axis of her theory, and where the tensions at the core of the traumatic memory have an impact both on the form and the content. Keeping in mind this development of the central function of the ghost as channel for the expression of trauma, Chassot accentuates the collective dimension of the traumatic experience in the third function she delineates: "re-membering diaspora." This quality is explored through theories of trauma that account for its transgenerational transmission, as well as through three key concepts: *postmemory, rememory* and *cultural trauma.* The first was coined by Marianne Hirsch to define a form of constructed memory experienced by descendants of survivors, while the second was introduced by Morrison in her novel to name the forces of repetition and revision inherent in the act of remembering. This is used by Chassot to account for "the

tension between a compulsive return to and return of historical traumas and a productive engagement with the past" (*Ghosts* 27). Lastly, the concept of cultural trauma was coined by Ron Eyerman to underline the lasting effects of slavery in the formation of African American identity, and Chassot emphasizes how they often involve the language of haunting (*Ghosts* 26). In this collective appropriation of trauma there seems to be two axes implicated: vertically, individual trauma may be passed from one generation to another; horizontally, the traumatic experience is present among the different members of communities who both share a common past experience—in this case, the forced migration, enslavement and oppression—and are also ingrained in similar socio-cultural and economic structures that perpetuate these race relations. Due to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, these communities are a multitude, so this moves beyond geographical boundaries of particular groups (such as the African American one in the United States) to encompass the whole African diaspora spread throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States.

1.2.1. The Intersection of Trauma and Spectrality

The connections between spectrality and trauma have been long and withstanding: at the core of the understanding of the ghost as a tool to give body to an oppression that defies conventional representation is an ineluctable traumatic reality. Characteristics that define the workings of the spectral have contributed to turning it into a privileged trope for the representations of trauma. Thus, in both literal and fictionalized accounts of trauma, the language of the spectral (either referencing ghosts, or a sense of hauntedness) becomes a recurrent form of expressing this disruption and iteration of the traumatic event that, given the impossibility of exorcism, must be integrated as part of the individual and collective history. Chassot's model focuses, to a great extent, and especially in the second function that she delineates, on how spectral narratives try to articulate an impossible story, impossible because language often seems insufficient to convey the reality of the traumatic wound. This problem of representation is a key concern of the theories of trauma that emerged in the decade of the 1990s and gave shape to the field of trauma studies. This section briefly discusses some of the central tenets of this theoretical framework that will be relevant for the literary analysis.

In order to analyze how trauma theories have developed in the context of literary studies, it is imperative to consider some aspects surrounding the emergence and consolidation of the concept itself. Although initial studies of the phenomenon had already been tackled by Freud and Janet, among others, at the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until 1980 that the term post-traumatic stress disorder was introduced in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* which led to the subsequent academic inquiry into the topic. This term was coined to name a condition suffered by individuals who had been victims of a profoundly disruptive event.[9] Medical accounts emphasize that what sets the traumatic

[9] Recently, Joy DeGruy has coined the concept "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)" within the framework of epigenetics. She defines this concept as "a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today" (105). With

event apart is not its uniqueness, but the impact it has on the human psyche and behavior. As explained by Judith Herman, "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (33). These effects can be best seen considering a list of symptoms attached to the sufferers of trauma that she classifies in three macro-groups: hyperarousal—defined by a permanent alertness of the nervous system to the possibility of imminent danger (35)—, constriction—defined by a general numbness or dissociation from reality (43)—, and intrusion—the repeated interruption of the traumatic events in the life of the victims (43). In relation to the latter, Herman mentions one aspect that will be the core of the debate within the field of trauma studies applied to literature, which is the emergence of a distinct form of memory characterized by lacking a verbal narrativization and being dominated instead by a powerful vivacity of sensations (38).

Concerned with the issue of trauma representation in literature, a group of scholars—mainly Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman—began in the decade of the 1990s to research the topic by focusing on the Holocaust narratives. Taking as a basis the Freudian concept of traumatic neurosis, Caruth provides in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) a definition of trauma where she draws attention to the disruptive force of the event, and the issue of belatedness, also referred to as *nachträglichkeit*, as two key characteristics. She thus defines it as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (*Unclaimed* 11). This initial conceptualization of trauma has been strongly contested by scholars working within the framework of the decolonization of trauma studies who advocate for a revision of the Eurocentric bias in the paradigm. Caruth's notion of belatedness is based on the idea that the traumatic event can only be comprehended in the afterwardness, so it imposes a disruption of time that directly impacts the construction of memory and history. Furthermore, she argues that since the traumatic cannot be understood as it happens, it is neither part of the past nor part of the present, and thus it poses a great difficulty to be integrated in the past and dealt with in the present (Caruth, "Introduction" 153). Taking into consideration the distinction developed by Pierre Janet[10] between narrative memory—the ordinary memory common to all human beings that is developed within previous mental schemes—and traumatic memory—"the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences which need to be integrated with

her model DeGruy tries to account for issues that affect the Black community such as violence, family formation or educational problems as an effect of this that manifests in different patterns of behavior such as vacant esteem, ever-present anger or racist socialization (110–115). The reception of her theory has been divided: while some authors praised her original insight, historian Ibram X. Kendi has described it as "the latest expression of the oppression-inferiority thesis" (*How* 97) and emphasizes how it perpetuates racist ideas that posit the degradation of Black behavior as derived from historical oppression.

[10] Janet's *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study* (1919), together with Freud's studies on neuroses—*Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)—, were the first approaches to trauma. At the core of their discrepancies there is a different understanding of the structure of the mind: while Freud defended vertical understanding of the mind where the traumatic repressed event went downward, Janet's view proposes a horizontal understanding where the traumatic event is dissociated, as it belong to a different stream of consciousness (van der Kolk & van der Hart 168–69). The theory of repression did not gain relevance from a biological perspective and current psychotherapies have clearly opted for Janet's paradigm of alternative consciousness (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 19).

existing mental schemes and be transformed into narrative language" (van der Kolk & van der Hart 176)—narratives of trauma could be understood as those attempts to literally translate the traumatic memory into a narrative of trauma. Thus, from this viewpoint, at the core of the act of narrating trauma there will always be a tension between the insufficiency of language to convey an event that, due to its powerfulness, annuls all previous knowledge schemes, and the imperative necessity to narrate it in order to integrate it in one's past as part of the task of recovery. Both Soshana Felman and Dori Laub, when approaching the topic of testimonial narratives, point out the excessive nature of an event that surpasses and leaves all previous categories of cognition obsolete. Felman claims that "testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (16), and Laub describes it as producing a fracture that leads to the existence of two irreconcilable realities, "a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so" (74).

While testimonial narratives emerged as a psychotherapeutic activity, they have become the basis of what has been labeled "literature of trauma." Analyzing this kind of literature, which is primarily concerned with the recuperation and reconstruction of the survivor's trauma, Kalí Tal has pointed out that these writings share a marginal position with writings of minorities, with which they often intersect (17). In her account, she underscores the idea that at the core of these narratives there is a battle fought over the meaning of these traumatic experiences mediated by the political discourse, popular culture and academic debate whose outcome will shape either the public recognition of the survivors with the concomitant socio-political changes or, alternatively, the appropriation of the trauma by the dominant culture to keep the status quo (Tal 7). As a part of the growing literature of trauma, the accounts of those who are not direct victims but nonetheless share with these a certain cultural, political or personal affinity, has prompted the emergence of trauma fiction. Many different authors have engaged with this topic since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the common aspect shared by them all is a greater focus on the collective level and the impact of socio-historical circumstances. Michelle Balaev identifies this as a crucial shift in literary trauma theory when she states that "trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time" (4). The eclosion in the production of literature that deals with the traumatic experience in recent years has been read as a testament to the frequency with which traumatic events occur, and the questions they raise about individualized subjectivity and selfhood in the context of loss and fragmentation. Furthermore, it has also been understood as derived from a larger affective turn regarding the possibility of confronting personal fears and of tracing a relationship of empathy with or alienation from the victims (Vickroy 2). Evoking previous research on the topic, Laurie Vickroy argues that in these contexts the individual may be constituted as a representative of his social class or group, assuming responsibilities and relationships to others beyond personal interests (5). According to Anne Whitehead, this emergence is also linked with a broader cultural context, especially

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regarding postwar legacies of consciousness, postmodernism—the debate around the limitations of narration and a number of literary techniques that lend themselves to the representation of the traumatic event—and postcolonialism—the recovery of memory of suppressed groups and a rethinking of the ethics of historical representation (81–82). Regarding the impact of postmodernism, Vickroy claims that a significant aim of trauma narratives is to "reshape cultural memory through personal contexts" as a form of bearing witness and of preventing the repetition of such horrors (5). According to this critic, these fictionalized accounts intend to engage the audience by employing a number of personalized and experimentally-oriented narrative modes that try to capture the essence of the traumatized (3). Roger Luckhurst has called these "trauma aesthetics" (*Trauma* 89) and they are defined by fragmentation that manifests itself in myriad ways—disruption of chronological order, spatial disjunction, multiple perspectives, changing focalization, gaps and omissions or open-endedness. In terms of the impact of postcolonialism, the new incorporations orbit around a greater emphasis on the collective dimension and a valuing of collective memory as bases of a shared cultural identity. This is an aspect of great relevance especially for the African American case in connection to the diaspora, as will be shown in the following section.

It was precisely in the context of the post-colonial that the work of Caruth and the so-called fist-wave trauma theories have been revised. While, as Irene Visser maintains, "the enduring and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible nature of traumatic wounding" (255) is sustained from the previous work, a new group of critics will advocate for a model that expands beyond the Holocaust to new contexts and differential forms of traumatic experience. This project of "decolonizing trauma studies" (Rothberg, "Decolonizing" 226), in Setef Crap's words, "is not just about expanding the scope, broadening the focus, but also about critically examining and revising dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery" (Craps et al. 907). In one of the seminal articles of this new current of trauma theory, Craps and Gert Buelens point out the main problems of classical trauma theory that are further explored by other critics. First, they charge against the unfulfilled promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement, denouncing the marginalization or neglect of non-Western minorities' experiences, with its attendant discriminatory outcome. As they explain, "by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world" (2). In the second place, they question the universal status of hegemonic definitions of trauma. Crucial to this argument is the opposition of this current to the event-based paradigm whereby the trauma is produced by a single extraordinary event, and they posit the existence of different forms of trauma (Craps 25). Next to the specific case of racism discussed by Craps, Visser similarly contends that the previous model is inefficient inasmuch as it "does not account for the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism" (251). In addition to this, Alan Gibbs challenges Caruth's notion of traumatic amnesia as derived from the conception of belatedness, which he labels a misappropriation of Freud's concept of repression, which implies a voluntary elision of engagement with the traumatic memory, amply supported by

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clinical accounts (11).[11] In close connection to this, the third point of criticism is related to the favoring, or even prescription, of "experimental," "(post)modernist textual strategies" as the most appropriate means for the narrative representation of trauma (Craps & Buelens 5). While features such as anti-linearity or self-reflexivity seem to constitute an important mechanism of representation across different literary traditions, other unnoticed characteristics such as "attachment to realism and indigenous literary practices" (Craps & Buelens 5) are also to be considered as tantamount to traumatic representation in diverse contexts. In this regard, Joshua Pederson argues for a new model of critical approach to literary representations of trauma that advocates for a closer examination of the text in search of the victim's agency in crafting a narrative and the healing power of this process, augmented narrative detail (in opposition to absences), and different modes of perceptual distortions (338–340). The fourth and final piece of criticism deployed in this revision of classical trauma theory is the disregard for the connection between Western and non-Western minority traumas (Craps 2). As such, these critics are going to focus to a greater extent on race and ethnicity in postcolonial contexts as well as on the collective dimension. An important contribution in this regard is Luminita Dragulescu's exploration of race-based trauma in the United States, where extended iterations of violence are fundamental. Appealing to the "recurring" and "omnipresent acts of racism that span the entire history of the United States" (271), she argues that "As long as racist discourses still define a society, they act as a catalyst of trauma both through the reenactment of the traumatic past and through the present experience of failed inter-racial rapports" (275). Race-based trauma is, thus, defined as transhistorical and collective formulation that will be formative of a cultural identity, as discussed in the following section.

1.2.2. Cultural Trauma and Diasporic Memory

Together with a deeper exploration of trauma, Chassot's model gives much prominence to the status of trauma at a cultural level, especially in the African American case, by considering the relations among the African diaspora in the Americas. Accordingly, in this second subsection I will explore the developments of the concept of trauma at a collective level and

[11] In his article proposing a revised trauma theory, Joshua Pederson offers a detailed discussion of Richard McNally's *Remembering Trauma* (2003) as a refutation to the notion of traumatic amnesia as discussed by van der Kolk and Caruth. Relying on his studies on trauma and memory, the psychologist argues for a differentiation between the inability and the unwillingness of the victim to remember (in fact, and contrary to the thesis of amnesia, McNally argues that, in some cases, the traumatic memory can be enhanced), which he expands to the issue of expression where the victim's reluctance to speak about the trauma cannot be equated to incapability (Pederson 337–338). In close connection to this formal reconsideration of traumatic narratives, Naomi Mandel opposes this paradigm of what she calls the unspeakable—"the rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehensions, representation and thought on the one hand, and a deferential gesture towards atrocity, trauma, horror and pain on the other" (4)—claiming that conflating the unspeakable nature of the atrocity with the ethical or representational aim to keep it so is a counter-productive movement because it obscures the referent, and renders the subject passive when confronted with the idea that there will be no possibility of fully conveying it (208). Considering the specific case of African American literature, she proposes the valuable insight that engaging with the unspeakable may have, inasmuch as it would bring to light the disruption caused by trauma, and from this point the ability to articulate an identity anew. As she argues, "language *must* fail, its limits must be evoked in order to open the possibility for the articulation of identities or histories hereto unconceived" (Mandel 211).

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how this can be applied to subjects who belong to marginal groups. In the collection that settled the basis for trauma studies, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), edited by Caruth, Laura Brown proposed a feminist revision of the term that advocated for a greater focus on the "so many walking wounded" produced by Western culture: women, people of color, lesbians and gays, the poor, and the disabled (102–103). In this light, Brown anticipates the project of decolonization when she advocates for understanding trauma along a continuum (111), rather than isolated cases defined by unexpected psychological violence. This approach, together with Dominick LaCapra's study of trauma along historical lines, echoes the aforementioned shift that will take place within the field from more individualistic conceptions of the phenomenon to a special focus on how it is developed at a collective level. Parallel to the studies developed by Caruth, LaCapra engaged in a profound consideration of trauma and its aftereffects, especially regarding the conception of history. Cardinal to his thesis is the distinction between absence and loss; for him the former is situated in a transhistorical level, while the latter is historically specific and may be constituent of trauma. As he explains, "Loss is situated on a historical level and it is the consequence of particular events. The nature of losses varies with the nature of events and responses to them. Some losses may be traumatic while others are not, and there are variations in the intensity or devastating impact of trauma" (LaCapra 64). On the grounds of this basic distinction, he contrasts structural trauma—common to all societies and generations—and historical trauma—specific to certain people or groups of people and associated to particular events that involve losses (77–80). In his view, some historical traumas may achieve the status of founding trauma, one defined by the paradoxical fact that turns it into the basis for a collective identity (81). Applying LaCapra's theory to the particular case of the African American context, slavery could be understood as the founding trauma that will prompt the development of a collective identity that is culturally transmitted from survivors to upcoming generations. Given that this identity is rooted in historical events—the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery carried out by Western capitalist powers since the seventeenth century—it does not exclusively apply to the case of African Americans in the United States, but it is shared by the vast African diaspora scattered along the American coast due to a process of forced migration and reproduction. It is regarding the communal experience of those millions of humans who forged a new identity, a synthesis of the roots they were forced to abandon and the extraordinary circumstances that befell them, that one may talk about the existence of a communal diasporic identity.

The notion of a collective identity is crucial for the development of the collective conception of trauma. Within this sphere it is necessary to distinguish two different approaches: on the one hand, along the lines of Brown's critique, Kai Erikson advocates first for a broader understanding of trauma that includes violence that is not singular but rather a persistent condition, claiming that "Trauma can issue from a sustained exposure to battle as well as from a moment of numbing shock, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single searing assault, from a period of severe attenuation and erosion as well as from a sudden flash of fear" (185). Erikson's model—developed in relation to natural catastrophes—transposes the characteristics of individual trauma to communities, and he describes it as

possessing both centripetal and centrifugal forces that draw individuals away from the group, at the same time that they are brought back to it, a communality based on estrangement, "a gathering of the wounded" (186). Thus, although his understanding of collective trauma focuses mostly on the negative effects that may end up damaging the tissues that hold human groups together, another option that he contemplates, however, is the idea that the traumatic event shared among members of a group may come to define that group. As he argues, "traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to one another," to the extent of becoming "a common culture, a sense of kinship" (Erikson 190).

On the other hand, there is a second approach that could be labelled constructivist. This has been put forward primarily by Jeffrey Alexander, Eyerman and Neil Smelser. Eyerman coined the concept of cultural trauma and defined it as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people who has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). Smelser describes the importance of a given (traumatic) memory for the community to the extent that its characteristics become the defining element of the existence of cultural trauma. In his view, this phenomenon would be based on "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (44). J. Alexander further emphasizes that this is a form of trauma that does not simply affect survivors but is projected onto future generations that share a collective identity. For him, cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1).

The intervention that the development of cultural trauma entailed for the paradigm of trauma studies was prompted by a reaction against what J. Alexander calls "lay trauma theory," based on what he labels the "naturalistic fallacy"—the idea that trauma emerges when the event interacts with human nature. By opposition, these authors defend that events do not create collective trauma in themselves, but that trauma is a "socially mediated attribution" (8). Thus, for cultural trauma to exist, there must be a socially mediated process through which the actual event is represented and given meaning (J. Alexander 11). This process begins with a "claim making" advanced by groups of individuals[12] who identify as part of a group about a flagrant social reality that is accompanied by a demand for emotional, institutional and symbolic reparation, and developed until trauma reaches the status of a new master narrative (J. Alexander 11–12). In this process J. Alexander singles out four essential factors: the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the victim with the

[12] Alexander uses Max Weber's term "carrier groups" to refer to these groups. They have both material and symbolic interests, they can belong to elites or marginalized groups, they can be generational (younger generations opposing older), national (one's nation against an enemy), or institutional (one particular sector of the society against others) (11).

wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility for the victim's pain (12–13). This process is not straightforward, but there is always a symbolic struggle among different social groups about the meaning of the historical event and how it should be remembered (Smelser 50).[13]

J. Alexander asserts that "The victims of Western traumas have disproportionately been members of subaltern and marginalized groups" (24). This affirmation can be contextualized as part of the aforementioned turn that developed in trauma studies toward a concern with the socio-historical circumstances that affected groups of individuals historically. Eyerman's research develops within this framework, and his seminal work, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001), is an exploration of how slavery as a form of remembrance grounded the identity formation of a group of people (1). Borrowing the concept of "generational memory" from Karl Manheim, he establishes that the event that is formative of group identity—in the case of African Americans, slavery—must be recollected by later generations who have not experienced it directly but continue to feel identified with it (Eyerman 15). As the Civil War unfolded, the racial divisions that marked the constitution of the country became polarized, leading to the creation of two macro collective identities: the dominant white narrative elided class divisions among working and poor whites and the elites, and the bonds among the Black population were entrenched as a form of protection (Eyerman 34–35). Eyerman argues that it was the failures of emancipation and Reconstruction, with its concomitant rethinking of the past, which prompted a transposition of slavery as a social condition into race as a symbolic one, a shift that would ultimately settle the basis for the construction of cultural trauma (36).

There are two important, interconnected elements worth considering within this model that have recurrently appeared in African American history and cultural manifestations. First, the issue of representation: Eyerman explains that once African Americans are conceptualized as sharing a collective identity, their representation will also be produced along these lines, backgrounding the possibility of individual definition (55–56). This fact is doubled-edged, for it accounts on the one hand for the myriad stereotypes produced and perpetuated by the white dominant discourse about Black people that seek to stigmatize and reduce them to stock characters in the grand white historical narrative. This can be seen for instance in the hyper sexualization of Black men and women through the archetypes of the Black beast rapist and the Black seductress or their infantilization and desexualization through the archetypes of the sambo and the mammie. The African American community as a collective will be, for a long time, intent on destroying these images. On the other hand, in this process they will attempt to reverse the mainstream discourse to argue for the positive distinctiveness that emerged out of a state of repression and subordination, "a vibrant culture, a self-help work ethic, and a way to survive, which now in the face of a new wave of separation and marginalization could offer

[13] This model, especially as developed by Eyerman, has been contested by some scholars in the field of collective memory, such as Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck, who indict the vagueness of the concept, the lack of consideration of empirical psychological research and presumable valorization and aesthetization of trauma, high art and philosophy as sites of authenticity (237). Furthermore, they argue that, in particular, media events dealing with slavery far from having a destructive effect, have served to garner social recognition of what happened (235).

an alternative to the 'vulgar materialism' of modern American life" (Eyerman 61). These principles, embodied in the idea of "the New Negro," are not exempt from criticism, but they nonetheless serve as a good example of the ambivalent forces at work in the construction of a collective identity and the consequences it will have in the long term for the African American community. It was within this context that W.E.B. DuBois developed his famous theory of the double consciousness to account for this liminal position of the Black subject as inhabiting at the same time his own body and a body mediated by the white gaze. These ideas would permeate into the cultural and artistic sphere through various means: the church—a key agent of collective identity formation since slavery until the Great Migration when its power waned in northern cities (Eyerman 25)—; vernacular forms such as the blues songs—many of which tackle the issue of violence behind the Great Migration North (Eyerman 154); movements like the Harlem Renaissance; and different media such as Black-oriented radio stations—an important agent of integration through the promotion of consumer culture and the transmission of certain white American cultural values that they combined with a propagation of an inclusionary sense of distinctiveness and racial pride (Eyerman 151)—or Black journals—which boomed after the Second World War and were concerned with the sustained subordination of Blacks in the dominant society (Eyerman 141).

Expanding on this second point, Black communal identity is constituted as a site of resistance, a collective effort to set history right, denounce historical oppressions, restore subjectivity, and value an ancestral history that the dominant white narrative attempted to erase. Thus, the second contribution that this model provides is the delineation of two main narratives developed in the bosom of the African American community aimed at working though the cultural trauma: the progressive narrative and the tragic or redemptive narrative. The first was founded on the reconceptualization of the past as cultural heritage that helps to understand the present and articulate the future, becoming the cornerstone of group identity and collective memory and part of a distinctive aesthetic (Eyerman 90). This narrative, espoused by writers such as Zora Neale Hurston or Langston Hughes, both representatives of the Harlem Renaissance, surmised that an eventual integration into the American society would unfold (Eyerman 92). In opposition to this, the tragic or redemptive narrative, first articulated by Marcus Garvey, cast slavery not as the foundation of a collective evolution, but rather a shattering event that put an end to a people's ties to their own civilization (Eyerman 92). This view is developed from the perspective of an incipient Pan-Africanist Black nationalism that considers slavery alongside other forms of colonial oppression and rejects integration in favor of the restoration of a model prior to slavery (Eyerman 90–92). Eyerman explains that, in spite of their different ways of understanding the future of the African American community, they both valued slavery as a turning point and an indelible element of the collective identity:

> These two narratives formed opposing and often opposed ways of relating the past to the present and the future. United by the primal scene of slavery and the previous generation's attempts to deal with the trauma of rejection, each in its own way served as the basis for collective identity, by linking the

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> individual to the collective through the concept of racial pride and the role of culture in that process. (91)

The advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and its consequent generational change led to the reformulation of these narratives. The tragic or redemptive narrative was deeply influenced by the anti-colonialist movements that developed in Africa after World War II. These offered a model of power relations in which Black subjects could interpret their position in America as an internal colony of an imperialist power (Eyerman 179–180). In addition, the very conception of Africa changed as the views of a primitive land were replaced with an inspirational quality founded on the achievement of national liberation (Eyerman 179–180). In Eyerman's own words, "The African national liberation movements provided not only an emotional source of inspiration, but also a Marxist-inspired theory of colonialism and imperialism, which moved blacks from the margins to the center of world history" (193). These movements were adapted to the American context in political—self-determination takes the shape of direct democracy, grass root organizations, local leadership—and cultural terms—turn to African culture in art or appearances as means of making a symbolic identity statement (Eyerman 193). This reformation of the tragic-redemptive narrative, primarily espoused by Malcolm X, brought with it a return to the consideration of slavery as a determining aspect in the configuration of African American collective identity. The traumatic effects derived from this historical event became foregrounded as a determining force in the lives of African Americans that affects them both economically and culturally long after emancipation. In this view slavery is "forever present," something "lived and living" whose effect can only be overcome by "rediscovering one's true past" (Eyerman 188). The progressive narrative was profoundly affected by the dire circumstances of the Black population (Eyerman 175). Martin Luther King Jr. would provide a reformulation founded on collective action and sustained in the values of non-violence and a Christian worldview (Eyerman 208). The main aim of his approach was the inclusion of Black people in American society as full-right citizens, and thus, in his struggle he includes white people willing to "convert" (Eyerman 208). In the narrative espoused by King, the African American congregation becomes the central element through which to explore the concept of community: "The basis of this community is the congregation, but its roots are wider, reaching back to slavery and to an ascribed racial identity, that is, to the historically reflective process of collective memory and to cultural trauma" (Eyerman 208).

Eyerman argues that, to this day, the meaning and memory of slavery are still "unresolved," largely because the historical event is the cornerstone for the foundation of the collective identity and one that will be called upon each time the group is questioned (221). I would argue, however, that this lack of resolution is more related with two other factors that directly implicate race relations between the dominant society and the African American community. First, despite the historical relevance of slavery for the nation, its memory has not been publicly acknowledged and memorialized, not to mention the lack of economic reparations, a controversial topic of debate in the country. Second, the haunting legacy of slavery continues to burden, even after the gains of the civil rights movement, the lives of Black people. Patricia San José Rico has employed the term "concatenation of traumas" that

is useful to grasp the impact that the iteration of different forms of violence has for the possibility of working through the trauma. Using as an example the different traumatic experiences of the African American group as a collective (from forced estrangement from their homes to slavery, Jim Crow repression, northern ghettoization and structural racism), she explains that:

> Admitting that non-survivors can experience the collective trauma of their parents—or at least carry the recollection of it—while at the same time being themselves confronted by a new traumatic situation inflicted upon their community, they are theoretically liable to transmit the memory of their collective trauma attached to and modified—even magnified—by the previous one to their descendants. (San José Rico 25–26)

This concept is pertinent to account for the current circumstances that besiege the African American community that Michelle Alexander has called the New Jim Crow. This state of dispossession, which I will discuss in the analysis of contemporary forms of spectrality, is defined by a transposition of the legal prosecution and stigmatization of the post-bellum era that is progressively eroding the civil rights conquests, chiefly epitomized in mass incarceration, voter suppression and a dangerous racial stigmatization that functions more insidiously through the façade of color-blindness.

A crucial aspect to all these explorations of trauma is memory. Apart from the more direct relevance of memory in the creation of traumatic recollections, for this analysis memory is especially relevant as a collective element. Chassot's approach, like that of other contemporary critics, conceives of memory as an alternative paradigm to history, one in which the voice of the subaltern finds a space that has been denied in official narratives. However, to fully grasp the importance of this concept, it is necessary first to consider that the concept of collective memory (*mémoire collective*) is a relatively recent notion, coined by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925 to establish the idea that individual memories are inherently shaped by socio-cultural contexts or frameworks (Erll 8). This initial idea led to the development of the concept of "cultural memory" that began to gain importance in the decade of the 1980s. Astrid Erll explains that cultural memory can be seen as an umbrella term that includes three main dimension of memory—a social (social relations and institutions), a material (artifacts and other media of transmission such as literature) and a mental one (psychological and neuro–scientific aspects)—and transcends the boundaries among them (4).The use of memory in the context of African American trauma is relevant at two different levels: first, in the consideration of the space, or rather the lack thereof, that it occupies in the United States, and second, the relevance of cultural memory for the settlement of a cultural identity that transcends geographical boundaries. It is evident that in the United States there has not been a truthful and profound reckoning with racial history. National historical narratives, even when they acknowledge the realities of slavery, obscure the ways in which the structures of slavery were painfully transformed in an apparently color-blind legal apparatus and the stereotypical distortions were incorporated into defining biological and cultural fallacies adopted for coercive legal ends for most of the twentieth century. These gaps

and omissions in the incorporation of a substantial and determining part of the nation's past to American collective memory, not only denote the inability of the nation to come to terms with a past that lurks beneath a supposedly post-racial era, but more tragically, it shows a veiled and long-standing effort to keep these memories, which in themselves form a powerful counter-narrative, at bay. In other words, the dominant national discourse seems intent on forgetting, for an honest exercise of memory would imply not only the recognition of past atrocities that went beyond physical exploitation to dehumanization and de-subjectification, but, more importantly, it would reveal the imperative need for revision and transformation of the oppressive mechanisms at work today. In tension with this national impulse toward forgetting is the African American community, which in the field of memory is fighting a battle for remembrance as a form affirmation and reclamation of cultural identity.

Memory is thus presented as a constructive element where the individual, integrated in a larger group, actively takes part in a process of construction of a shared memory that to a great extent will define their collective identity.[14] San José Rico, who has extensively treated the connections among trauma, memory and identity in the African American context, claims that "a shared knowledge of the community's past, and most importantly, the particular ways in which that past is represented, recreated and remembered are crucially important to determine how the members of a community regard themselves and their fellow individuals within that collective" (3). Using the idea of a transgenerational transmission of trauma to account for the construction of memory, San José Rico defends that later generations of the group who have not been directly affected by the traumatic event of relevance for the community may claim its remembrance as their own (60) and use it as a socio-political tool through which to articulate the demands of a collective (47). The thesis defended by this scholar stresses the double dimension of historical trauma as one that is both individually perceived, inasmuch as it affects directly the victim, and collectively constructed, inasmuch as it is a culturally and politically negotiated trauma that serves to "join together the members of a community with the aim of gaining visibility and political agency" (6). For her, nonetheless, the difference between both dimensions lies in the fact that the latter allows for a public mediation that can be productive for the reformation and reworking of collective memory (21). The symbolic aspect of this construction is the one that is most relevant for this study, for it directly engages literature as a privileged medium to reconstruct a shared past. Anne Rigney explains that these literary texts which engage with cultural memory are built as "textual monuments" that are being continuously adapted directly and indirectly in other cultural products (349). Exploring this dynamics of remembrance, Rigney explains how the role of literature in regard to the transmission of memory is a complex and multifaceted one: these texts not only disseminate and circulate memories, but they also configure these

[14] Michael Rothberg espouses this constructivist approach to the topic by coining the term "multidirectional memory," with which he seeks to emphasize the nature of memory born of "ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing," which is productive, rather than privative, as conceptualized in the "competitive memory" to which he opposes this view (*Multidirectional* 3). His model of memory, therefore, is intimately linked with the development of a collective conscience though which not only different groups can articulate their positions but they themselves are formed in the negotiation with others (*Multidirectional* 4-5).

memories in a cultural frame to be later adapted or used in other media. They, furthermore, recuperate new topics that had not been brought to public attention and can also destabilize the dominant narrative by enacting processes of revision (350–352).

Following these tenets, a recurrent invocation for many critics working in this field is of literary works acting as *lieux de mèmoire.* This concept, put forward by the French historian Pierre Nora, designates those sites "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 284). It recuperates the opposition between memory—"life, borne by living societies" (285)—and history—"the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (285)—and draws attention to the fact that they emerge to replace the *mileux de mémoire*, the real environments of memory that have disappeared in the unforgiving advent of modernity and the passage of time. Defined as they are by Nora as "fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (289), critics such as San José Rico argue for an understanding of literature as one of these special sites of memory (34–35). The trauma fiction that has proliferated in the recent decades grapples at its very core with the memory that forces itself out, and for this author its function is not psychological healing, but a struggle against forgetting that can be recuperated for an intervention in the present, "keeping the memories of the real traumas of the past alive […] in order for that writing to perform a variety of tasks in the present that range from giving voice to those traumas to using awareness of them to further certain socio-political agendas" (San José Rico 35).

This process of active remembering, of turning the gaze back to recuperate the (hi)stories of these people from among the ruins of history, necessarily implies a transcendence of geographical boundaries and a process of building bridges among the different regions of the diaspora that share a common experience of forced estrangement from the motherland and of vicious oppression. In the fiction analyzed in the corpus of this dissertation, the memorial effort is inextricably linked to a process of cultural reclamation of Africa, the real continent and the imagined construction forged by those who were forced to abandon it and thus re-imagine it for their descendants. If the violence torn a people apart from each other and their culture, a recuperation of that past through memory is what may bring those scattered along the American continent together in their differences and similarities. In this respect, Sarah Kaplan has coined the term "diasporic melancholia," a notion that rewrites pathological understandings of melancholia derived from the psychoanalytical accounts, to describe a collective practice with an important political power to denounce grievances across time and space (513). Kaplan emphasizes that this phenomenon, developed within the paradigm of racial melancholia, not only seeks to account for past events, but rather it advocates for understanding different forms of "black unfreedom," which are also part of our times as "integral to the production of liberal ideologies of white freedom" (514). Kaplan's approach manifests the current relevance of the racial debate, and it reveals the diasporic dimension that Chassot's model also puts forward. As an example, Kaplan mentions the inheritance of Afro-syncretic cosmologies that continue to be part of the African American tradition. In her view, these build a "transgenerational diasporic community" where the living and the dead, the lost and the forgotten, commune and thus provide an alternative history and a symbolic source of

cultural identity. As she argues, "each [of these African based cosmologies] was forged within the context of racial subjugation, bodily exploitation, and abject dehumanization, to which each seeks to respond through the embodied elaboration of an alternative system of spiritual, political, and ethical beliefs" (515). Cultural manifestations and artifacts in this context are thus fundamental devices for recollection and identity construction, and it is within this framework that the function of spectrality as an Africanist element and a vehicle for the reclamation of cultural identity will be explored in the second chapter.

1.3 TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

'Your love is too thick' […]
'Too thick?[…] Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.' — Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Any inquiry into spectrality must necessarily begin with Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved*, which since its publication in 1987 has become the cornerstone of literary criticism within this field of study. The author found the source of her inspiration in a newspaper clipping that told the story of Margaret Garner. This slave woman ran away with her children from a plantation in Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, and when, on the 28th of January, 1856, her former master found her and claimed her and her offspring back on the grounds of the Fugitive Slave Law, she decided to kill her children rather than submit them to bondage. She only succeeded in killing her youngest daughter before they apprehended her and the rest of the family and they were forced to return to the slave plantation. In her neoslave narrative, Morrison resurrects the presence of the murdered daughter whose return prompts a confrontation with a past that reaches beyond the individual to the collective history of African Americans. With her narrative Morrison sets out to explore those aspects that the slave accounts veiled or left out, being paramount for her project the pieces of individual and collective memory transformed through the imaginative act: "There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours" (Morrison, "An Interview" 224–225). The analysis of Morrison's novel has been central for the development of previously discussed theories of haunting and spectrality as well as trauma. This final section intends to provide a brief discussion of Morrison's novel along the lines established in the introduction, which will serve as a preliminary approach to the analysis that will be expanded through the discussion of other works in upcoming chapters. With this purpose, Beloved's ghost will be examined in relation to the traumatic past of the Middle Passage and slavery, as well as an Africanist element. This reading will, furthermore, pay special attention to the temporal setting of the novel, as well as to the date of publication, in order to shed light on the revisionist dimension of the work and to account for the African American adoption of the spectral since the late 1980s.

The house on 124 Bluestone Road is home to a haint, and its haunting is one of epic proportions for it speaks about the history of both an entire community and an entire country. Its spectral nature blurs the limits of the ordinary, and the racial scope introduces "the revelatory possibilities of historical narration when the body-mind, subject-object, past-

present oppositions, viewed through the lens of race, collapse and become seamless" (Morrison, "Race" 137). Sethe gets up every day intent on "the serious work of beating up the past" (86),[15] a past made of fragments—stolen milk, a buttered face, chokeberry trees inscribed in skin, a wide-brimmed hat and a bloody salvation—and hers is an experience repeated and expanded by those who constitute this town's Black community: the losses of sons and daughters, of mothers and fathers, of love and friendship, of life and selfhood to an unforgiving institution based on racism turned into the economic engine of a new historical era. When that invisible specter takes the body of an eighteen-year-old girl—the age that Sethe's crawling-already baby would be if she had not perished—the force of her haunting becomes ineluctable. In this sense, Beloved functions like a "catalyst" (Morrison, "Toni" 106) that forces the characters into a necessary reckoning with the past. This reckoning, as an extension of the character itself, invokes an individual and a collective dimension: being the reincarnation of Sethe's daughter, the most direct referent of her haunting is her own murder at the hands of her mother as a consequence of the slavery system. However, Beloved's identity is duplicitous, as her broken speech is also a testimony of a survivor of the Middle Passage. In an interview with Marsha Darling following the publication of the novel, Morrison herself echoes this duality: "She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her children returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship" (Morrison, "In the Realm" 247). In this sense, as Linda Krumholz explains, her haunting extends to the whole community: "Beloved is the incarnation of Sethe's baby girl and of her most painful memory—the murder of her daughter to protect her children from slavery. […] But Beloved is also everyone else's ghost" (400). Although this apparently irreconcilable duality in her identity has been object of scholarly debate, following many of the contemporary approaches to the novel I would argue that it is an aspect that must remain unresolved. It is precisely the spectral ontology of the character that allows for the ambivalent time frames in which she moves, and for that multiplicity of identities she accommodates. This could ultimately be understood as a structural characteristic of the novel played out through the multiple tensions and ambiguities present in the narrative that contribute to the destabilization of given models of knowledge and narration.

A dual understanding of spectrality is already present in the two foundational works of spectrality studies. Gordon's examination of Beloved's character lays bare the historical materiality of spectrality: through this ghost Morrison draws attention, simultaneously, to different historical moments. At the core of the novel is the inhumanity of slavery, but Beloved's complex identity harbors also the experience of the Middle Passage. At the same time, the novel is set after slavery has been legally abolished and the enslaved people have been made nominally free, and, thus, Beloved's return, a period of supposed new beginnings and new opportunities for the Black population, reveals instead the failure of Emancipation and Reconstruction (Gordon 72) as tools to give sovereign power to Black subjects. Her homecoming disrupts the space of 124 Bluestone Road and time itself, as the traumatic

[15] Toni Morrison. *Beloved.* 1987. Vintage, 2010. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

memories of slavery flood the narrative. Furthermore, the character's strengthening haunting over Sethe and the community as a whole is symptomatic of a continuing oppression and state of injustice. In analyzing Beloved, Gordon also shows the many layers found in haunting: in addition to the aforementioned dual individual and collective dimension, Beloved is at the same time agent and object of haunting as she haunts her family and the community to face the events of the past, but she herself is also haunted by the experience of the Middle Passage (Gordon 139). In this frame of a metaphorical reading of the ghost, Gordon signals the proliferation of spectrality and a condition of haunting as ingrained in the very circumstances of Black existence, a consciousness developed by people "who are not graciously permitted to amend the past, or control the often barely visible structuring forces of everyday life, or who do not even secure the moderate gains from the routine amnesia, that state of temporary memory loss that feels permanent and that we all need to get through the days" (151).

In one of the most quoted excerpts of the novel, characterized by its fragmentary narrative style, the reader has full access to Beloved's perspective through an interior monologue:

> the men without skin bring their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears (248)

The lack of conventional punctuation mirrors the stream of consciousness, the physical gaps and the short direct sentences contribute to the rendition of the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage that overtakes the limits of conventional narration. While it is difficult to ascertain how many people were taken from Africa, transported through the Atlantic and perished or arrived in the American coast, there is more information regarding the characteristics of this terrible voyage. The Royal African Company created in 1672 by King Charles II had the monopoly on the English trade to Africa that reached its peak between 1675 and 1725 (Smallwood 3–4). Those sold into slavery were conceptualized in terms of death; in fact, Stephanie Smallwood has referred to the reality of those transported in the slave ships as a state of "living death"—a notion adopted by Chassot in her study and one that is used as well to refer to the life of these people under slavery, as explained by Patterson—to convey their commodification. Would-be slaves were transported in specific spaces of ships called "slave holds" that had shackles and bolts and that, generally, had the capacity to accumulate up to three hundred people. However, slave traders crowded the ships beyond measure to increase their profitability (69–70), which led to an absolutely unbearable environment where many of the captives died and were thrown overboard.[16] Smallwood argues that the slave ship is the space where this figurative death of the captives was effected:

[16] Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) provides a fictionalized account of the Zong massacre in which more than a hundred African captives were thrown overboard and a compensation claimed to the insurance company for the loss of valuable cargo. The events, which took place in 1781 and inspired one of J.M.W. Turner's most famous paintings, are

> On the ship at sea the logic of commodification reached its nadir. It was here, on the ocean crossing, that the practices of commodification most effectively muted the agency of the African subject and thereby produced their desired object: an African body fully alienated and available for exploitation in the American marketplace. (122)

According to this view, these ships were constituted as graves; in fact, in the Angolan trade of the eighteenth century they were called "tumbeiros," a name that has been translated by historians as "floating tombs" or "undertakers" (Smallwood 139). This is an association that Morrison thoroughly emphasizes in the novel and that becomes evident in the convergence of Beloved's identities. As she says about Beloved, "Her language fits into their [Sethe and Denver's] conception of life after death. And since it was a death, a grave, a dying place, I wanted the association between the physical journey on the slave ships and the grave to be very strong" (Morrison, "Toni" 107). Beloved's testimony, or rather, her very existence goes beyond a portrait and denunciation of the brutality of the Middle Passage to engage with the question of physical and metaphorical death. Beyond the liminal state of living-death of those captives at sea, the physical death of many others had strong cultural and symbolic implications. Smallwood explains that this death had a traumatic effect at different levels: for the deceased and their kinship, a community bond with the land of the ancestors was forever lost, and the rest of the captives were besieged by the burden of a wandering soul deprived from fulfilling its cycle of life and symbolic closure (141). In this sense, Beloved's reincarnation is an embodiment of this reality, a brutalized and wandering soul looking for a closure that the novel works to provide, but never straightforwardly attains. Morrison, who famously dedicated her novel "to the sixty million and more" in allusion to those who were victims of the transatlantic slave trade, emphasizes the centrality of this voyage in the novel. In this respect, Anissa Wardi argues that Beloved herself becomes a bridge between the Middle Passage and the African American community around Bluestone Road (48). In light of the blatant omission of this event from historical accounts and especially by considering the ending, Morrison's novel could be considered one of those *lieux de mémoire* or, in Wardi's view, a gravestone, with "visible markers that provide a resting place for the ancestors" (51). Morrison, who wrote extensively about the topic of historical amnesia, favors this reading when she asserts that "Millions of people disappeared without a trace and there is not one monument, anywhere, to pay homage to them because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea. A nameless, violent extermination" (Morrison, "Toni" 107).

While the Middle Passage was an event of special historical relevance due to its omission, the novel also engages with slavery as an institution that the dominant white discourse has tried to overlook or attempted to recast it in a benign light. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison talks about a "national amnesia" that ails the United States, and

rendered in a novel that foregrounds the experience of one of these enslaved women, Mintah. Believed drowned, she returns to the ship to become the haunting voice of history in a significant mobilization of the spectral metaphor as means to dramatize the ontological living-deadness derived from the commodification of humans.

which overlooks or erases the events associated with that dark part of the country's history ("The Pain" 257). Whereas for the dominant sectors of the society this is a willful omission that often tries to accommodate the historical events to a preconceived ideal of America, for the Black community it can be best understood as reluctance based on the lingering traumatic effect of shame. Taking this into consideration, *Beloved* effects a historical revision intended as means of communal healing. This revision that Morrison forges is developed in relation to the inner life of the former slaves, their interpersonal relations and especially the psychological effects that bondage had on them. The crux around which these topics are developed is the theme of motherhood, more specifically, the distortion of motherhood as the epitome of the poisonous tentacles of an institution that thrived on the dehumanization and transformation of people into profitable assets. The attitudes of slave owners and the fallacies on which they based their domination are best represented in the novel through the character of Schoolteacher, who studies the slaves of the Sweet Home plantation and teaches his pupils their human and animal characteristics. Terry Otten points out how the scientific racism that he represents is one that has marked Western culture, and he emphasizes its perniciousness by asserting that it is "the more threatening because it is not insane or barbaric or uncivil, the more frightening because it operates with the approval of a culture well able to guard its innocence under the guise of reason" (86). Schoolteacher's approach is epitomized in a lesson he inscribes with lashes into his slaves' bodies, the point being "that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (225). Definition and constituency of the self are central questions that the novel examines in relation to the victims of slavery. As we will see, Morrison's exploration inevitably tackles issues of selfhood and subject construction, and how the alienating influence of slavery affects them. In this regard it is also worth considering the juxtaposition between Mr. Garner and the Schoolteacher; while their superficial difference lies in the fact that the former is not so physically violent with his slaves, the rule he enforces over them is equally terrible. Scrutinizing the views of Garner, a man who prided himself on calling his slaves "men" but who, nonetheless, continued to exploit them like beasts and consider them as such, serves to indict any benign conception of slavery with which white planters tried to rewrite history.

Beloved exists because Sethe killed her daughter and in the world she inhabited her act was, for some, a political statement, for others, a destruction of private property, and, only for her, a desperate act of love. As the author said in an interview, "The woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied. She would not see them hurt. She would rather kill them, have them die" (Morrison, "A Conversation" 207–208). In addition to the physical exploitation for labor, the sexual exploitation of slave women by the master was a form of domination that, whenever it resulted in pregnancy, produced prospective new hands to work the fields. This was also the rationale whenever masters compelled two slaves to have sexual intercourse in the interest of increasing the slave population. Rape and violence were part of the daily lives of these men and women and the novel is a test testament to that through the testimonies of characters like Ella—a fellow Black woman who helps Sethe settle after escaping and who leads her rescue—who was the sexual slave of a father and a son who kept her captive. The novel

evidences also the economic basis of the institution: the capitalist market of slavery is the soil where the American economy bloomed, and with it, paradoxically, the ideal of American freedom. Thus, by crudely depicting this commerce in bodies, the narrative ultimately indicts the capitalist system, "a market whose exchange relations continue to transform the living into the dead, a system of social relations that fundamentally objectifies and dominates in a putatively free society" (Gordon 169).

Seen as merely working and economic assets, slaves were considered in terms of profitability and, as such, their masters looked to advance their gains either through violence and torture or by selling them to another plantation. The impact that this rupture from kinship had for them is explored in the novel through the consideration of various maternal-filial relations that culminate with Sethe's decision. Baby Suggs sees how her seven children are one after another sold or killed, leaving her only with Halle, the child she thought she could never keep but who ultimately bought her out of slavery. The novel portrays how it is in this precise moment of freedom that Baby Suggs—a name that she chooses for herself to replace the one given by the master—is able to rename herself and claim each part of her body—her hands and "her own heartbeat" (166)—as belonging to her own self. After Baby Suggs is settled in the neighborhood, she progressively becomes the carrier of a distinctive form of spirituality that embraces the whole community. In Krumholz's words, she becomes "the moral and spiritual backbone" of the novel (398). As an unofficial priestess, she preaches a new religion aimed at bringing the whole community together to heal the festering wounds of slavery; amid her people in the Clearing she harangues them toward catharsis:

> She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. [...]
> 'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do no love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!*' (103–104)

This address to the community evokes the practice of call and response imported to the Americas by slaves from different African traditions, which La Vinia Delois Jennings describes as "an oral exchange originating in West African ancestral practice and surviving in modern sacred and secular African-American discursive forms" (164). The previous fragment illustrates the core of Baby Suggs' philosophy: the need to value all that was denigrated by the slave masters with a special emphasis on corporeality that critics such as Jennings have interpreted as a return to syncretic African religions like Vodoun, characterized by the inseparability of flesh and spirit and the refusal of the subordination of the former to the latter (165). In Baby Suggs' religious paradigm, we can perceive a revision of the dominant Christian discourse that was also used to justify and support slavery. According to Tuire

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Valkeakari, this revision makes use of African philosophical models that provide an alternative to this religious discourse. This critic also highlights the establishment of a continuum between body and mind which becomes essential for the healing of the community, by arguing that "she [Morrison] repeatedly stresses Africanist spirituality's embrace of bodily existence as a fundamental constituent of humanity that is ontologically inseparable from the soul/spirit/mind" (Valkeakari 161). The transcendence of the dichotomy of the body and the mind becomes essential in the process of healing, because it implies a rewriting of the theses of scientific racism that used physical difference to articulate a fallacious discourse on intellectual inferiority and immorality.

Another mother-daughter relationship that is central to the novel is Sethe's, through which the author explores the perspective of the child who suffers a maternal abandonment prompted by the conditions of slavery. Sethe's mother, who experienced in her own flesh the tribulations of the Middle Passage, stuck to Sethe as the only baby she had that was not the product of the rape by the crew and named her after her African father. The evanescing memories that Sethe has of her mother are a testimony to the separation from their children to which slave women were forced. Thus, Sethe tells Beloved that "By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks—that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (72). In this scenario, the only bond between mother and daughter is that of mutual recognition, unsanctioned by the institution that compels the mother to identify herself to her daughter through the enslaver's mark on her breast. However, this is of little use to Sethe when she seeks her mother among the hanged slaves left to rot in the sun for attempting to run away. For Sethe, the lack of a relationship with her mother and the suspicion that she would have escaped without her largely determine her behavior toward her children. Morrison explains that, within this context, the act of claiming oneself as a mother is a highly subversive one:

> Suppose having children, being called a mother, was the supreme act of freedom—not its opposite? Suppose instead of being required to have children (because of gender, slave status, and profit) one chose to be responsible for them; to claim them as one's own; to be, in other words, not a breeder, but a parent. Under U.S. slavery such a claim was not only socially unacceptable, it was illegal, anarchic. It was also an expression of intolerable female independence. It was freedom. And if the claim extended to infanticide (for whatever reason—noble or crazed) it could and did become politically explosive. (Morrison, "On *Beloved*" 282)

This idea is also echoed by Paul D, who was another direct victim of the atrocities of slavery: "Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it on a croaker sac, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next" (54). Paul D's reflection shows with tragic accuracy the damage that the order of slavery entailed:

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in a reality where human life is reduced through dehumanization and commodification to a mere mechanism for production that thrives on violence, desensitization and detachment may become necessary, if faulted, tools for psychological survival. In fact, Paul D adopts this theory for himself, keeping all his memories "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (86)—a profoundly visual allusion to the repression of his trauma.

Sethe's idea of liberty, and to a great extent the construction of her own identity as a human being—as opposed to the accounts that try to animalize her—is intrinsically linked to her status as a mother and the possibility to provide her children with a life outside the coercive boundaries of slavery. In fact, it is the theft of her milk by the master's nephews, with its deeply symbolic meaning, that functions as the ultimate trigger for her escape, as rendered in the conversation that she and Paul D have upon his arrival at 124 Bluestone Road:

> "[…] those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. […] Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
> "They used cowhide on you?"
> "And they took my milk."
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
> "And they took my milk!" (19–20)

This scene has ample resonances in the novel: it speaks back to Sethe's relationship with her mother and her desperation at the prospective inability to act as a mother herself. Furthermore, it also reveals the profound psychological disruption suffered by slaves through the case of Halle. After witnessing Sethe's violation and paralyzed by his inability to protect her, Halle loses his mind. He never makes it to the meeting point to run away with his family and he is forever lost to them. Halle, the man who had managed to buy his mother's freedom and to make a family even under terrible conditions, is finally defeated by this system in a very similar way Baby Suggs would be when the white men trespassing her yard put an end to the life she built in freedom. In Stamp Paid's words, "The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve nor condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last" (212). Throughout the novel, Morrison masterfully intertwines both dimensions of the violence suffered by Black people in her exploration of the traumatic memories with which the different characters struggle. In them there is a palpable tension between the need to verbalize the abuses, to fill in the gaps and the omissions of the story, and the danger of letting oneself go too far into a past from which it would be impossible to come back. This tension emerges when Paul D feels pressured to tell Sethe about Halle's absence when they run away, but this inevitably implies telling her about the way in which he was being tortured with the bit, something that Sethe has witnessed in the past, but she struggles to keep at bay. She recalls "The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it

was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye" (84). In the novel this mechanism of torture holds a strong symbolic potential not just as epitome of a brutal means of control, but also as a violent form of silencing. In Morrison's own words, it becomes "the signal instrument of silence […] a complete erasure of the language that the victim or the oppressed had" ("Things" 175).

In this violent context, the only thing that Sethe could have done was to run away and not look back. For Sethe, her own liberty can only exist in claiming her children as her own and, when that reality is threatened, she feels compelled to act. In this sense, the infanticide has been read as a subversive act through which she is able to define her own subjectivity and claim an agency denied by the slave system. Sethe's action is straightforward and decisive, and there is no one to which she can explain, if they cannot see and understand it. This is mirrored in narrative terms by the stance of the narrator that suspends any kind of judgment. As Morrison herself explains, it is only the murdered daughter that can judge the mother, so her introduction in the narrative "destabilized everything, reformulated its own history, and then changed language entirely" (Morrison, "The Source" 309). The novel, to a certain extent, could be considered as the dramatization of this judgment, one in which Sethe herself becomes a victim of her own guilt. When Sethe gathers the bits of information that Beloved has given about herself and comes to acknowledge that strange woman who arrived at her doorstep as her own murdered daughter, she finally feels some kind of relief, the opportunity to explain, and the feeling that she can somehow undo the time and return to a state where her daughter would not have to be sacrificed:

> Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. [...] She's my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and get it to her even after they stole it [...] When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head in my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Burglar and Howard and Denver didn't need me, because my mind was homeless then. I couldn't lay down with you then. No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter and she is mine. (236–241)

Sethe's claim to her daughter evokes that language of property that she was forced to speak and to ascertain with actions when menaced. Her easiness does not last, instead she progressively encloses herself in her own home, detached from the external world that continues to be an adverse place. Denver, who was the first to recognize Beloved as her dead sister, to worry about her and to make sure of her safety, becomes alarmed by the fast change that Beloved and Sethe's relation is undergoing. Deborah Horvitz has described this transition as one where a "child's love and hunger for a mother from whom she has long been separated turns into a wish to own Sethe, to possess her, to merge with her and be her" (161). Denver observes this role inversion and distortion and the tragic effects it entails for Sethe:

> Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a

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> corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (295)

Here, Beloved becomes a transposition of Sethe's greedy memory that takes it all in, and the scene captures the traumatic memory that physically takes hold of Sethe and consumes her to utter alienation and de-subjectification.

While the novel dwells on this issue of slavery and the impact this had on the characters, the action is set during the period of Reconstruction. Dramatizing, in a sense, what Baby Suggs knows for a fact—that "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (111–112)—,this temporal frame reveals the difficulty for these characters to conquer real freedom in a society that still sees them as slaves. This new era was intended as a reconstruction not only in a physical or economic sense—as the restoration of cities and towns destroyed by the armed conflict and the development of the industrial fabric throughout the country—, but also in a social and ethical plane—the integration of the freed slaves into the society as citizens of full right. However, it never came to fruition; instead, the former Confederate states mobilized the legal apparatus to solidify the status quo with the perpetuation of the slave-master relation that had defined the antebellum period. Institutions like the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Land that were created to safeguard the rights of the freed people, sponsored instead sharecropping contracts between former masters and slaves that reproduced to a greater extent the dynamics of slavery. As Douglas Blackmon explains, "In the absence of any means to supply freed slaves with land, the Freedmen's Bureau and northern military commanders stationed in the South encouraged blacks to enter into labor contracts with whites. The results were written agreements between whites and black farmhands filled with provisions aimed at restoring the subjugated state of African Americans" (27). Alongside the extension of economic dependency from white landowners, in the aftermath of the Civil War the Black population suffered under what Carol Anderson calls "a reign of terror" (*White* 17). This regime was characterized by the violent legal and extra-legal prosecution of the Black population that would become the first step in a long line of legal reforms that targeted Black people throughout the twentieth and into the twentieth first century. The myriad Black Codes that were enforced by several southern states regulated Black public and private lives, as well as the economic and racial relations between Black and white people, and coerced African Americans into a form of virtual re-enslavement. This period stands as one of the bloodiest in the history of the United States, epitomized by the thousands of lynchings that took place on a regular basis. In *Beloved* this reality is alluded to by Stamp Paid who, when going about the task of helping his fellows to build a new life, witnesses the brutal violence of the lynching mobs:

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> Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in

> Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. [...] But none of that had worn out his marrow. None of that. It was the ribbon. [...] Reaching for it, he thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet wooly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. (212–213)

This extra-legal violence—that was, nonetheless, well-known and condoned by the judicial authorities—complemented the legal prosecution of the Black population that was brought about with practices such as the convict leasing that emerged in this period. This system was founded on the criminalization of routine activities or the breaking of racial etiquette that was codified in the status adopted by each state (Blackmon 67). One of the most common offenses of this kind was the charge of vagrancy—a penalty based on not being able to prove at a given moment that one is employed (Blackmon 1)—that, targeting almost exclusively Black people, was turned into a legal offense with the passing of the Vagrancy Acts in several states during Reconstruction. With this practice, mostly Black men were arrested and auctioned in the county jails to work for landlords or big companies as a punishment for their supposed offenses. This new system of involuntary servitude was legally sanctioned by appealing to a clause of the Thirteenth Amendment that banned slavery "except as a punishment for a crime" and took advantage of it for economic and social purposes. Blackmon explains how the conditions of the prisoners under this system—the disproportionate targeting of Black people as well as the starvation and brutalization intended to increase productivity that led to a death range of 20–45 percent by the late 1870s—reveal the true nature of this penal measure as a form of neoslavery (57). Through this legal loophole many freed men ended up becoming *de facto* slaves of the state, their labor exploited for private and public profit and their personal relations and identities destroyed. Against the accounts that cast this practice as a "precapitalist" intervention, historian Alex Lichtenstein, in his inquiry into the economic impact of convict leasing, states that it functioned, rather, "as a new forced-labor system wholly compatible with regional industrial development and the continuation of racial domination" (13). Lichtenstein explains how the "extraordinary" industrialization of the post-bellum South actually relied to a great extent on this system: the disproportionate arrest of Blacks for misdemeanors, which whites could easily avoid by paying a fine, kept a steady flow of labor to such key industries as those of coal and iron, thus annulling the problems of labor shortage or strikes, and increasing productivity through violence (83).

Paul D's story in the novel becomes a channel for the exploration of the circumstances that would befall many Black men within this system. After the failed attempt to escape from Sweet Home, he is sold to a new master whom he attempts to kill. As a punishment, he is sent to Alfred, Georgia as a prisoner in a chain gang with other forty-six Black men. Although in the novel his experience of incarceration predates Reconstruction, it foreshadows the aforementioned punitive mechanisms that were advanced in that period. Dennis Childs argues

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that Morrison uses a kind of *"strategic anachronism"*—"her intentional placement of a punitive regime normally associated with the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century into the context of the antebellum period" (40)—that reinforces the entrapment to which Black people were subjected beyond slavery. In the transhistorical inquiry into Black incarceration that this critic develops in *Slaves of the State,* he puts forward an understanding of the Middle Passage as a precursor of subsequent carceral modes which reproduce its temporal and spatial entrapment, one of these being the chain gang to which Paul D is condemned (35). In these circumstances, Paul D and the rest of the prisoners confront death when the "grave calling itself quarters" (125) is flooded and many of them perish in their effort to survive. Not only slavery, but especially this experience in Georgia will scar Paul D for the rest of his life:

> After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things—with a little work and a little sex thrown in—he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle's face and Sixo laughing. To recall trembling in a box built into the ground. Grateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands. The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind. (49)

The traumatic effects manifest physically, but what is revealed in greater detail through Morrison's rendition of her character's mental state is the psychological burden that drowns him. Outwardly Paul D opts for the silence about what he had to endure until he set foot on Sethe's home; however, the ruminations about his identity keep surfacing when he shares his story with her. In Paul D's reflections, questions about freedom and manhood coalesce as he dwells on the emasculating character of the submission to which he was victim:

> Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? […] It was schoolteacher who taught them otherwise. A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded work horses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke. His strength had lain in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered. (147–148)

In his study of the character, Aaron N. Oforlea considers Paul D's reflection and states that if freedom is indeed synonymous with integration into society, Paul D will never achieve it, since his past as a slave will always define him (58), especially in a social order that has not made any effort toward integration. For this author, Paul D "symbolizes the redefinition of male subjectivity in the face of the systematic annihilation of culture and family, and he represents the cruel extent to which manhood can be denied, defined, and redefined in the context of slavery" (Oforlea 47). After Beloved establishes herself in 124 Bluestone Road, she works as a memory catalyst for him too, and he feels progressively displaced from the home

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he shared with Sethe and Denver in large part because he cannot come to terms with the reality she represents. As such, when he is confronted with the intimate touch of Beloved the only words that come to his mouth are "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (138), that heart which, together with his memories and part of his own self, have been buried by trauma in the tobacco tin.

In the previous pages spectrality has been analyzed in connection to trauma and historical revision, two ideas that will become central at the end of *Beloved*. However, before moving to the conclusion, it is imperative to consider the bonds established in the narrative with spectrality as an Africanist element. Although Gordon devotes most of her analysis to the first reading, she already points out the influence of the African tradition on the importance of ghosts and "spirit work" in African-American culture (151). It is my contention that a reading of these elements in Africanist terms denotes the conscious establishment of a link between the African American community forged in the diaspora as a result of forced migration and enslavement, and their heterogeneous African origins as a form of claiming and mantaining that heritage for the articulation of a cultural identity in a society polarized along racial categories. Furthermore, the employment of these elements contributes to the revisionist aim of the work since it provides different perspectives that counteract the imposition of Western epistemologies. Morrison herself acknowledged her reliance on these sources and the influence they had on her oeuvre: "If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' or 'sentiment'" (Morrison, "The Writer" 267).

Morrison's desire to echo these elements in her work suffuses the structure of the novel, where orality plays a central role. Jennings claims that Morrison's texts "display surviving Africanims in social roles, behaviours, rituals and cosmologies embedded in what Wade W. Noble calls African American's 'experiential communality,' the sharing of particular experiences by a particular group of people through time and space" (4). This not only influences the language chosen where she opts for the variety of African American Vernacular English, but acquires a structural nuance where the text both formally and thematically seems to lean toward the spoken word. Hannes Bergthaller claims that throughout the narrative orality is emphasized in opposition to the written word, arguing that in this process the Western notion of language as a superior form of expression is undone (132). One needs only to consider how the relation between Sethe and Beloved unfolds through storytelling, how they discover each other in the stories of their past, how the trauma of the past manifests in Denver through the inability to utter a word—something that relegates her for a long time to the margins of a story that she wishes to build and in which she wants to partake—how the voices of the "black and angry dead" (234) deafen Stamp Paid when he tries to move near 124 Bluestone Road, how Baby Suggs attempts to heal her community with words of self-love and kindness, and how, ultimately, Sethe is saved from the claws of the past and brought back to reality with the united chants of the community's women. Furthermore, this primacy of the oral over the written complies with a central objective that

Morrison set for her work, which is to involve the reader in the process of narration. She actually acknowledges that "What I want my fiction to do is to urge the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text" (Morrison, "The Writer" 264). Bergthaller emphasizes that with this move the reader is confronted with slavery as a deeply personal experience where humanity is put on the balance, an account that rewrites the aseptic record of history annals. As he explains, "what she is aiming at is, in fact, a language that would touch the reader with the same kind of immediacy that she attributes to the 'sound'—a language which would deprive the reader of the possibility to distance himself" (132). In doing that, not only is the reader forced to grapple with the effects of slavery in the lives of people, but speech and orality are given a new value that helps deconstruct aforementioned Western hierarchies.

The novel presents some references to African culture that are explored through the figure of Sethe's mother and Nan, another slave woman who acted as Sethe's surrogate mother. In Sethe's evanescing memories remains the dance of the antelope that slaves reproduced, as well as the vestiges of a different language that Sethe can no longer speak. The duplicity of Beloved's identity is connected with her individual and collective dimension whereby she comes to occupy as well a dual space "inhabit[ing] both west African and American cultural spaces; she is at once found and then lost, visible and then invisible, tangibly alive and then a part of language, emblematic of both African survival and American loss" (Handley 679). As such, she will become a central vehicle in the exploration of the meaning of spectrality from this viewpoint. Drawing on different African traditions, the identity of Beloved in these terms has been analyzed from a number of perspectives. One of the most common readings connects the character with the notion of ancestry. The belief in the afterlife and the communion between the realm of the living and the dead seems to be a tenet common among various African philosophies that was part of the captives' understanding of the world. In this light, the spectral is constructed as a space of identity affirmation that, by bringing to the fore a given belief system, as well as the possibility of reuniting past and present, can help heal that rupture of biological and cultural ties of kinship that the Middle Passage and slavery necessarily entailed. In this way, this novel would address "the African-American socio-psychological disconnect brought about by the Middle Passage and an American slavery that prohibited New World Africans from knowing the names of their living-dead kin and from continuing their responsibility of reciprocity to them in the circle of life" (Jennings 9–10).

As Jennings claims in her analysis of Africanist elements in Morrison's fiction, "Those who arrived on the shores of the American South as human cargo during the transatlantic slave trade brought with them many individual and collective beliefs of reciprocity between the living-dead and the living who thrived despite familiar dispersion and erasure" (86). Indeed, ghosts have come to populate the collective imaginary of African Americans, and this tendency that goes beyond the representation of trauma and dispossession discussed in the first part of this analysis, can also be understood as a means to reconnect with the cultural origins of the enslaved population. Maggie A. Bowers explains that these revenants are deeply associated with the African American belief in the presence of a guiding ancestor in the

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present and a testament to how distinctive aspects of an African American cultural identity were retained (21). Although Beloved cannot be said to be an ancestor, her ontology has been apprehended as a composite of beliefs that imply the convergence of the world of the dead and the living. In this vein, Therese Higgins, in her inquiry into the influence of African folklore on the novels of Morrison, claims that Beloved could be understood by appealing to different beliefs from the cultures of the Mande or the Akan. According to the former's cosmology, Beloved would be seen as something in between the categories of ancestral spirits, that belong to former living members of the community, and non-ancestral living spirits. Both occupy an intermediate position with the realm of a supreme force or god and are more directly accessible to people (30). According to Higgins, the latter harbor a belief in the possible return of the lonely dead who long for company (33). Following this line of inquiry, Holland reads Beloved as sharing traits of a *bakulu*, the spirit of the deceased that come back and direct the lives of the living, and the *orisha Oshun*, a Yoruban divinity of water (54–55), an element of great symbolic potential in the novel that is directly associated to the experience of the Middle Passage that pervades it. In turn, Jennings considers that in Beloved there is a merging of both positive and negative dimensions present in these traditions: on the one hand, the living dead ghostly spirit akin to the Ibo *gbanje* or the Yoruba *abiko*, a spirit child who reincarnates in human form to be with its mother; and on the other, a living, witchy entity akin to both the Dahomean or Haitian *Erzulie*—"the loa of boundless emotion and ambivalent sexual morality" (63)—or the Kongo *ndokia kia dia*—"soul/psyche eating witch" (68). Notwithstanding the reading adopted, the idea that becomes evident through this discussion is that Morrison was making a conscious attempt to include a different kind of epistemology that offers an alternative option to the paradigm of Western rationalism and scientific materialism, one in which ghosts are part of the world of the living.

If ambivalence and multiplicity are the defining characteristics of *Beloved*, the conclusion of the novel offers one last return to ambiguity as a productive site of narration. The ending of the novel could be said to develop in two acts, the exorcism and the coda, where the ghostly presence progressively evanesces to leave in its wake a haunting legacy. In what we may call the first act of the story's denouement, the community is finally confronted with the mysterious presence of Beloved, who has adopted the shape of a pregnant woman. In the novel, the community is a pervasive presence that to a great extent determines the fate of individuals like Sethe. In fact, K. Sumana claims that, considering that in the novel different forms of isolation are detrimental for individuals, "the stress on shared relationships, community and race responsibility—the traditional African principle of collectivism—is the dominant theme of the novel" (120–121). Founded by freed people who come together amid the devastation of racial violence, they are constituted like a unit where they work together to provide new opportunities for former slaves. The distance that is established between Sethe and her neighbors has its origins in the excess these people identified in the party that Baby Suggs threw to celebrate the safe return of her grandchildren and her daughter-in-law, which, to some extent, transgresses the boundaries of the acceptable for the group. This first distancing has tragic consequences for the women living on 124 Bluestone Road, since nobody warns them of the arrival of white men looking for Sethe until it is too late. However,

Sethe's eventual isolation of herself and her daughter is accounted for by a pride that "outstripped" even her "staggering" crime (302). Notwithstanding this ostracism, when the women of the community learn about Sethe's downfall at the hands of Beloved, they come to her rescue. Joining their voices in unison, these women perform a sort of exorcism that expels Beloved from the community. Krumholz reads this first ending as the climax of Sethe's healing, which for her constitutes the focus of this novel (402). For this author, after an initial stage of memory repression and the subsequent stage of memory confrontation, in this last stage dramatized at the end of the chapter, the traumatic scene of infanticide is reproduced in Sethe's hallucinatory mind, but this time it is modified as she directs her rage at Mr. Bodwin—the white abolitionist tenant—whom she mistakes for Schoolteacher (396). This works as a form of rewriting supported by the presence of the community that should ultimately lead to a rebirth.

This process of renewal is what concludes the first act, and while the focus is on Sethe, it unfolds to implicate both Paul D and Denver, who themselves experience a profound transformation. The possibility of healing is offered through the reconstitution of a family that is articulated around three elements: Sethe's revaluing of her own self and her life, Paul D's revision and adaptation of his identity and stance by "questioning the models of manhood that he has come to accept as normal and desirable" and reassessing them (Carden 419), and Denver, who is posited as the bridge between the past and the future as she displays a new maturity and confidence, "taking on adult responsibilities in familial, social and economic spheres" (Carden 418). The final scene that reunites Paul D and Sethe has strong evocations of that traumatic fragmentation that defines the whole novel. This is transposed into images of bodily deconstruction that emerge when Sethe wonders whether each of the parts that form her will hold, once Paul D bathes her in sections. However, this closing dialogue between both characters foregrounds the possibility of articulating a future that transcends their respective pasts, but that necessarily entails a process of rescuing the self, of building a denied selfhood:

> 'Sethe,' he [Paul D] says, 'me and you, we go more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.'
> He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are' His holding fingers are holding hers.
> 'Me? Me?' (322)

Following the established tendency of the novel, Morrison resists a categorical answer that would bring about a straightforward closure and, instead, Sethe's response abounds in that ambivalence: hers is not a promise or a denial, but a question charged with the fear of an irremediable past with which she struggles.

This communal exorcism that the community's women perform has collective implications as well. Mary P. Carden states that "Beloved's simultaneous presence and absence figures the ache of the concealed wound of the past throbbing at the edge of awareness and articulation, a wound that, if 'touched,' would overwhelm the present and dismantle possibilities for the future" (423). Taking into consideration the collective

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dimension of Beloved and what she represents for the community—that shared dimension of the traumatic wound that lays the grounds for the collective construction of cultural trauma—this act renders the collective approach toward the past that is voiced by Ella: "the past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it" (302). Thus, the meaning of the exorcism is complicated in the narrative when the impulse to work through with the trauma and the need to move beyond it are confronted. This confrontation is pulsating in the second act of the novel's denouement, the coda which, according to Morrison, ascertains the haunting and magnifies it: "The extranarrative activity is the re-establishment of the haunting—larger now than what it was assumed to be and what it was limited to in the beginning" (Morrison, "Literature" 101). This tension between necessary remembrance and the survivalist desire to forget is played out through the entire work and epitomized through Sethe's theory of rememory, which Morrison describes in the following manner: "Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative" (Morrison, "Rememory" 324). The words that best embody this complex stance are undoubtedly the mantra around which the coda is articulated: "This is not a story to pass on" (323–324). This assertion, which Krumholz reads as "recapitulat[ing] the tension between repression and rememory featured throughout the novel" (407), has been generally understood to have a double meaning: while it could be read as an invitation to forget and move on, it speaks at the same time of the inability to do so and the dangers of overlooking that story.

In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison evokes this complex stance: "There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember" ("In the Realm" 247–248). Through her concept of cultural haunting, Brogan approaches the novel as a form of secondary burial. In her view, the work, which bears the emblem of a tombstone as its title, is read as an exhumation of the victims of the slave trade, to be properly reburied in the novel's narrative tomb (*Cultural* 27), a way for Morrison to fulfill her "responsibility" toward the "unceremoniously buried" (Morrison, "A Conversation" 209). This literary recovery or exhumation is intended primarily as an act of communal mourning that speaks to the necessity of integrating the dead within the realm of the living, in order to avoid a perpetual haunting (Brogan, *Cultural* 67). Thus, in spite of the character's ambivalence, the very existence of Morrison's novel works against the possibility of oblivion by introducing a text as means to bear witness to the tension between remembering and forgetting. Brogan accounts for this paradox by focusing on the effects of traumatic memory: on the one hand, memory is an essential component of historical consciousness and one of the elements that defines the African American collective identity. On the other, the characters struggle with the effects of that traumatic memory in their lives, as well as with the problems of representation. As she explains, "Haunting in *Beloved* signals the return of a past that can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten. The novel records a battle between anamnesis and amnesia, the desire to account for the dead struggling against the need to

obliterate them" (*Cultural* 63). In connection to the concept of cultural haunting, Brogan also explores the centrality of commemoration by stressing how literary memorializing can be understood as the performance of a group identity (*Cultural* 22). As the novel weaves the past and the present, the individual and the collective, this dimension is explored and it also becomes a monument. As such, the narrative is written against the erasure of the African American community, "responding directly and critically to the erasure of blacks in the monumentalizing of a reunited white national collective," and it uses the absent present figure of the ghost which Morrison assigns to memorial spaces, to summon presences and recollect absences (Brogan, *Cultural* 133).

In a now famous interview given to *The World,* upon the publication of the novel, Morrison made this assessment about the work of memory in the United States:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of these who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no three-hundred-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. ("A Bench" 44).

Morrison's words appeal directly to the historical stance of the United States toward the memorialization of slavery. This lack of a profound reflection and acknowledgement of the atrocities of slavery, and how these were perpetuated in different forms throughout the twentieth century, is especially problematic regarding its consequences for the collective memory of the country that is manifested in the continuing racial dynamics unfolded in the present. Morrison wrote more than a hundred years after the abolition of slavery, and yet the discrimination and oppression of the Black population continued unabated. In his analysis of the novel, R. Clifton Spargo reads the ending as denoting "the endurance of Morrison's suspicion of our cultural narratives of progress." *Beloved* was published at the end of the 1980s, a moment when the entire nation was slowly undoing many of the advances gained by the civil rights movement. This period is characterized by its political and economic conservatism: the consolidation of big fortunes was sponsored by cutting taxes, while social programs for low and middle classes were drastically reduced (Kendi, *Stamped* 431). Ibram X. Kendi explains that these measures affected the lower social strata, and especially some minorities: "During Reagan's first year in office, the median income of Black families declined by 5.2 percent" (*Stamped* 431), with an unprecedented rate of Black youth unemployment which quadrupled that of 1954 (*Stamped* 434). However, the policy that would have the most lasting impact on racial matters in the country was the War on Drugs announced in 1982 and implemented through with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986. These measures, put forward through a false colorblind rhetoric, settled the basis for the mass incarceration that disproportionally affects Black men and advanced on the pseudo-scientific

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discourse on racism through the pathologization of Black life and social interactions, which will be explored in greater detail in the third chapter. James Berger claims that the novel's inquiry into the oppressive mechanisms at work in the constitution of the United States directly engages in a debate with the neoconservative policies of Reagan's presidency, during which the social measures to counteract decades of discrimination were replaced by an advocacy toward self-responsibility and a delineation of a biological "underclass." As a reaction to this, Morrison's novel "shows that violence within the African American community cannot be understood without the recognition that law and science, power and official knowledge continue to violate African American lives" (411). Taking this into consideration, the specter of racial oppression raised in *Beloved* can be seen as denouncing the conditions that the African American community continued to endure decades after slavery, Reconstruction and segregation. It is, therefore, through the figure of a ghost that cannot be reduced or contained that the racial debate at the end of the twentieth century comes to occupy a central space. In this respect, Berger points out that the novel places historical trauma at the center of American race relations and revises traditional liberalism by underscoring African American personal and cultural agency (414–415). Spectrality in this sense is mobilized first to indict the nation's historical erasure and omission of the Middle Passage, slavery, and Reconstruction, but also to unveil how the discourses forged in these periods are perpetuated in new configurations and built into the structural racism of the nation. Furthermore, in as much as spectrality is configured as an Africanist element that evokes the shared bonds on which the African American community is erected, it offers an opportunity to claim that identity as a site of resistance that transgresses reductive accounts of Black subjectivity. These central tenets instantiated through *Beloved* will be further developed in the chapters that follow by considering a number of texts that stretch from Morrison's period to the contemporary scene where spectrality features prominently.

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2. THE AFRICANIST DIMENSION OF SPECTRALITY: ASSIMILATION, RESISTANCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

From the Reconstruction period depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to the historical moment in which the novels under analysis in this chapter, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) by Paule Marshall and *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor, take place, the African American community in the United States went through turbulent times. As the works that constitute the corpus of this dissertation will unveil, the moderate social and economic conquests of the collective were, unexceptionally, answered back with a violent backlash. While the specific socio-historical circumstances are duly discussed within the analysis of each work, it is important to consider two temporal axes that shed light on the function and relevance of ghosts when analyzing this set of works. Together, the novels cover the period that goes from the 1950s to the 1980s, the latter being the decade in which they were published. The profound retrospective force found in each of the narratives will, however, work toward the juxtaposition of those that could be considered the foundational traumas of African American cultural identity—namely, the transatlantic slave trade and the period of slavery—with the experiences of the community along the twentieth century. The failure of Reconstruction was reflected in the legal implementation of an apartheid system through landmark Supreme Court decisions such as Plessy v. Fergusson (1896) that condoned segregation as a constitutional practice.[17] The set of so-called Jim Crow Laws came to regulate public and private life in the country since the end of Reconstruction until the civil rights movement, well into the twentieth century. Deprived of legal protection and sieged by violence, the southern Black population started an exodus toward northern cities which reached its apex in the Great Migration of 1910, when northern industries demanded workers to supply First World War efforts. However, the segregationist codes spread throughout the North and the South alike, profoundly limiting the lives of African Americans in aspects such as job opportunities, access to education, physical and social mobility, interpersonal relations as well as fundamental citizen rights, such as voting. In broad terms, these functioned as gatekeepers of white privilege and mechanisms through which to relegate Blacks to a perpetual state of

[17] The case is named after Homer Plessy, a mixed-race citizen who purposely broke Louisiana's Separate Car Act, whereby accommodations in public transport was segregated, to demonstrate the unconstitutionality of the "separate but equal" doctrine that nourished Jim Crow Laws. However, the Supreme Court decision maintained that the practice was constitutional and therefore upheld segregation.

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second-class citizenship. These tensions led to multiple conflicts and race riots that spread throughout northern cities, of which the Red Summer of 1919 is a paradigmatic example, ending with seventy-eight lynchings and a man burnt at the stake (C. Anderson, *White* 55).

In cultural terms, within the African American community, there were different movements that developed simultaneously, and that carried with them a particular conception of race and race relations. The first Black intellectuals adopted, to a certain extent, an assimilationist rhetoric that placed much emphasis on the personal responsibility of Black individuals, downsizing the structural issues at work. In this respect, Ibram X. Kendi's survey of racist ideas in America along segregationist, antiracist, and assimilationist stances provides a useful account of how a number of preconceived beliefs about Black people from the times of slavery were adapted through time. This is the case of uplift suasion, "the idea that White people could be persuaded away from their racist ideas if they saw Black people improving their behavior, uplifting themselves from their low station in American society" (Kendi, *Stamped* 124). The basic tenet behind this idea is at work, for instance, in the rhetoric embraced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his early period, before he moved toward antiracist views. The fundamental problem of this approach, as explored in the novels in this section, will be the flawed reasoning whereby racism was thought to derive from Black behavior (Kendi, *Stamped* 124–125), rather than from a structural implementation of white privilege. The interventions of these Black elite intellectuals were carried out, furthermore, at the same time that scientific racism and the eugenics movement expanded and were embraced by sectors of the white population, thus manifesting the fundamental schism between both groups. In the 1920s, however, the Harlem Renaissance flourished as an artistic and cultural movement of unprecedented force, based on the concept of the New Negro. In an eponymous essay published in 1925, Alain Locke put forward a conception of an emerging Black subject as defined by "self-respect" and "self-dependence" (4), an overcoming of history and projection of these values into the future, the demand for a full integration into American institutions and democracy, racial pride and the imperative of racial cooperation and collective effort. Despite being grouped under the same label, the various intellectuals and artists (among whom the presence of authors such as Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay or Langston Hughes was especially notable) formed a heterogeneous group with diverse views that they explored in their multifaceted works.

Another important trait of the period was the emerging consideration of the relation of African Americans to Africa and to other peoples suffering anti-Black violence around the globe. At this moment the centrality of Africa for certain sectors of the Black population (both African Americans and other Black migrants from the Caribbean) was epitomized in the foundation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by the Jamaican leader Marcus Garvey. This Afrocentrist association founded in 1914, presented itself in diametrical opposition to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) of which Du Bois had become the director, advocating for racial pride and self-determination. The existence of a Pan-Africanist rhetoric in the social debate is of special relevance because it introduces the seeds for the configuration of a diasporic dimension in African American identity and cultural manifestations that will be evoked in the novels discussed here.

Furthermore, this tendency highlights the connections between the evolution of the racial struggle in America and in colonial states, locating its cultural movement in international terms. As such, far from standing isolated, the racial theories, socio-political organizations and art forms of this period will developed in symbiosis to other historical processes (namely, the decolonization of the African continent during the 1950s) and cultural currents (such as the Négritude in the 1930s, which was directly impacted by the Harlem Renaissance) that were part of the reclamation of subjecthood along racial lines. The connections that were thus drawn among the different diasporic societies that emerged as a consequence of imperial colonization would become a permanent presence in African American political life and in much of its literature, actualized, in these narratives, through the trope of the ghost.

Parallel to these external liberation processes, race relations in the United States seemingly came to a turning point with the civil rights movement in the decade of the 1960s. This was launched with another landmark Supreme Court decision, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954),[18] which ruled racial segregation unconstitutional. This was received with great resistance on the part of the white majority, and it led to a decade of further racial confrontation. African Americans organized mostly peaceful protests where they reclaimed their right to occupy the public space (the sit-ins, the bus boycotts) and their citizen's rights (the March on Washington [1963] or the Selma to Montgomery March [1965]). The movement was divided between the two leaders: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X, who, while sharing the objective of ending racial oppression, differed in the means and scope of the fight, with the latter's Pan-Africanist views and consideration of violence as a self-defense mechanism. The white supremacist majority and the institutions were widely resistant to desegregation; this unchained a violent response of which the brutal lynching of Emmett Till became a paradigmatic example and set a pattern that has since been tragically iterated. The body of the fourteen-year-old boy was found tortured and mutilated after the alleged crime of whistling to a white woman in the town of Money, Mississippi, where he was spending his vacation in the summer of 1955. His violent murder would move thousands of African Americans to activism and his story was to live on as a spectral presence in the African American collective psyche. The struggles of this period led to the greatest advancement in decades, epitomized in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned racial, sexual or religious discrimination, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that prohibited racial discrimination in the ballot.

In spite of the betterment entailed by these pieces of legislation, this was not to be the end of the racial struggle for African Americans. As pointed out in the analysis of *Beloved*, the conquests of African Americans were never consolidated and within the subsequent conservative administrations there would be an important regression in social aspects such as economic opportunity, access to education and health and wealth, not to mention the targeted use of the criminal justice system for the repression of the Black population, all elements that will be duly considered in the next chapter. The decade of the 1980s, when most of the works

[18] In this case the Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of public schools was unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. This decision put an end to the "separate but equal" doctrine and became the basis for the demolition of *de jure* segregation in the country.

studied in this dissertation were published, is one marked by conflict at two levels: the Black community will attend the paradoxical national rhetoric that put forward an attempted erasure of their history through the promulgation of a color-blind society, with a parallel reinforcement of the racial divide in their quotidian lives. Furthermore, within the community itself there will be a critical revision of the past in terms of gender aimed at bringing to the fore the situation of women and other marginalized groups within the African American community that often suffer the effects of intersectional discrimination. The so-called womanist perspective (a term coined by author Alice Walker, one of its foremost examples), as seen in the novels analyzed, revolves around the experience of Black women from different social strata in a white supremacist and patriarchal social order, exploring their subjectivity and agency, and tracing a line that unites them to their female foremothers and the rest of the women in their group. This view problematizes the androcentric articulation that dominated much of the civil rights rhetoric and obscured the role of women, and it draws attention to the inner conflicts and challenges that the community needs to overcome to claim full equality.

It is in this context of an African American subjectivity deeply marked by the struggle to overcome their status as second-class citizens in the United States, and the awareness of analogous racial dynamics along the African diaspora in the Americas, that I would like to put forth my contention. In *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Mama Day*, spectrality appears, first and foremost, as an Africanist component; that is to say, as an element that is either a borrowing from African philosophy, belief system or culture, extrapolated in the consideration of the African continent as a cultural referent for the construction of the African American diasporic identity; or an African retention present in the African American culture within the U.S. from the times of slavery, and that can be alluded to directly (references to gods or ritual practices) or appear indirectly (subsumed as characteristics of integral parts of other seemingly transparent elements such as orality). I further argue that, within this Africanist conception, the ghost presents a dual function: first, by underlining the extant African spiritual retentions, these authors effect a reclamation of the African heritage that works against the erasure of the memory of slavery and, especially, of the acts of resistance of enslaved people. Second, these Africanist retentions are used to problematize the process of assimilation into the mainstream white society, to the detriment of the African roots, offering, in turn, a viable means through which to articulate a symbolic identity along diasporic lines. However, while these will be the primary areas of influence of spectrality in these two narratives, the function of the spectral as a vehicle for the articulation of a critical social comment is present, although in a secondary plane. These contentions are intrinsically linked with key theories of spectrality discussed in the introductory chapter, especially Brogan's theory of cultural haunting as constitutive of ethnic identity and Chassot's introduction of the diasporic dimension as a fundamental pillar in the mobilization of the spectral trope. Beyond that, the use of African syncretic forms has been accounted for by a number of critics whose works emphasize its different facets. As such, within the previously discussed project of decolonizing trauma studies, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens analyze the different representational techniques found in postcolonial novels that engage colonial trauma and identify, in the use of these forms, what they call "indigenous literary practices," "a deliberate

eschewal of the Western discourse of unspeakability, recourse to which is seen as politically debilitating" (5).[19]

Following this, the deployment of Africanisms in these texts will be posited as a means to highlight the existence of a collective memory and enable the construction of a subsequent narrative that competes with official historical accounts. More specifically, the works of Bonnie Winsbro and Maha Marouan tackle this phenomenon within American ethnic literature and the Black diaspora, respectively. Exploring several works from the late 1970s and 1980s authored by women writers belonging to different ethnic groups, the former argues that since the 1960s there has been a reaction against the national tendency to alienate marginal groups, "rendering them powerless by erasing the ethnic differences and destroying group identity under the guise of promoting American unity and homogeneity" (Winsbro 18). According to this critic, in many of these interventions the foregrounding of ethnicity has been used to claim a differential identity in a process of self-definition where beliefs about the supernatural are central (Winsbro 10). Being placed at the crossroads between its community and the hegemonic culture, in most cases, the group's own culture and social constructs are instrumental for the reclamation of the self. As Winsbro explains, "Such an experience of individuation, if completed successfully, instills personal power, a power that in some cases is supplemented by a belief in an alternative reality, one that acknowledges the existence of those sprits, deities, and empowered humans who are celebrated and remembered in culturally specific folklore, myths and region" (5–6). If Winsbro's thesis provides an insight into the African American use of spiritual forms for the construction of an ethnic identity within a pan-ethnical context, Marouan offers a perspective that emphasizes the diasporic dimension in the use of Africanist religious systems. Analyzing three narratives by Black women writers from the Caribbean and the United States that belong to the late twentieth century, she focuses on the role of religion as a major means of "preserving a historical and cultural link with the African past" and the overall use of tradition in this literature to "articulate a diasporic consciousness and vision" (Marouan 4).[20]

Before moving to the critical analysis of the works, it is essential to offer a general overview of those Africanist elements or conceptions that are crucial to understand this analytical approach. This brief examination will consider mainly three aspects—namely the status of afterlife, the belief in ghosts or presences, and other specific figures from these societies—that are of greatest relevance for the study. John S. Mbiti's seminal work *African Religions and Philosphy* (1969) provides a detailed account of African cosmologies. It is

[19] In this regard, Ishmael Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" (1970) echoes the reclamation and currency of references to African-based syncretic practices that had been discredited during slavery in the post-civil rights period. In his experimental essay, he denounces the lack of critical attention to these practices in relation to the marginalization of the Black community and coins the term Neo-HooDoo to comment on the influence of these practices and their attendant worldview in the process of forging a vernacular African American culture where they can be traced by assessing not only diverse forms of spirituality, but also in myriad cultural manifestations, especially music (2297–2301).

[20] Complimentarily to this, in her elaboration of the concept of "(black) diasporic melancholia," referenced in the first chapter, Sara Kaplan highlights the fundamental unyielding force behind the Afro-syncretic cosmologies such as Vodou, Candoblé or Santería that the enslaved population preserved, and that remains present in the reclamation of these practices decades after emancipation (515).

important to note that the information referenced in what follows considers traditional African religions, that is, the belief systems of the people who were captured and enslaved, rather than the religious conceptions present in different African countries today. Likewise, the label "African" in itself, attempts to encompass common characteristics shared by the different communities of the continent, without the intention of obscuring the particularities that these presented. Having clarified these two points, the term "religious" that has been used throughout this introduction is interchangeable with other more general concepts such as belief systems, but it is used following Mbiti's assertion that, in these societies, religion was an inseparable facet of being, what he calls a "religious ontology," in the sense that "the whole existence is a religious phenomenon" (19–20). Concerning the first point, the possibility of an afterlife is intrinsically linked to the conception of time present in these cosmologies, which differs greatly from the Western one. Mbiti chooses two Swahili words to account for the system: *Sasa* is akin to the "now period" that covers in itself a broad span: "its own short future, a dynamic present and an experienced past" (28). The *Zamani*, in turn, transcends the Western notion of the past; it is a realm constituted by the events that were once experienced as part of the *Sasa* but have moved to a different dimension. If the *Sasa* covers the present as well as proximal past and immediate future, the "micro time," the *Zamani* holds these structures at a macro level that approximates it to a "period beyond which nothing can go" (Mbiti 29). In this context, death does not imply finality but, rather, a change of state. As Mbiti explains, "the only major change is the decay of physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of experience" (205).

Actually, the issue of the ghosts and whether they are a part of this model provides an instance that clarifies these notions. In these paradigms, human beings inhabit the *Sasa*, even after death, as long as there are family members who remember and are able to name them; these become the living-dead (Mbiti 32). It is only after long periods of time that the living-dead complete their process of death and become part of the *Zamani*, but even then, they are not vanished, but join instead a different realm characterized by "collective immortality" (Mbiti 33). Within this model, those who have no relatives to remember them are "vanish[ed] out of human existence", hence the imperative to marry and have offspring to carry on their memory (Mbiti 33). Thus, within this cosmology, the figures that are closer to the Western conception of the ghost are the living-dead. Mbiti describes them as "bilingual," a term with which he tries to account for their liminal position between their living relatives and the world of spiritual beings (lower deities); they become the channel through which the spiritual realm becomes accessible and personal for each living individual, and they communicate with the older members to inquire them about the welfare of the group, warn them about impeding danger or rebuke them for failing to follow instructions (Mbiti 108). As outlined in the previous description, memory is a foundational element of this model: remembrance is the force that keeps the individual alive in a different plane of existence, and the lack thereof condemns them to eternal non-existence. This sheds new light on the importance of intergenerational ties in the novels under analysis, as well as on the relevance of ritual as a form of remembering. As Mbiti explains, these were a central part of the relation between the living and the living-dead. Functioning as actualizations of memorial bonds, the practice of

offering food and other items, as well as libation and different rites, complete the union between the two groups (213). Finally, there is a set of figures that could be understood as the referents of the healers and conjure women that appear in African American texts. Particularly relevant for this inquiry are the medicine men and women, as well as the mediums or diviners. The conception of magic found in traditional African American societies derives from the belief in mystical power that is present in everyday life and can be used in a positive manner, to help or heal; or negatively, to harm (Mbiti 258–260). Departing from this notion, the role of medicine men and women was to help the community cure physical diseases, but also to aid people believed to be under the effects of witchcraft (Mbiti 221). In addition, some trained medicine men and women may work as mediums between the living-dead or the spirits and the human beings or performing acts of divination (Mbiti 224). These are one of the most misunderstood figures in Western culture, but in these works their reclamation is embedded within a larger process of rewriting where their value is contrasted with the discrediting process to which this epistemology has been subject.

In 1990 Joseph E. Holloway edited the volume *Africanisms in American Culture*, a collection of essays that explored African retentions in the specific case of the United States. These cover such varied spheres as language, religion, music, art and folklore; specific places that range from New Orleans to Florida and the Sea Islands (a space of reference for both works discussed); and even the influence of these forms in white America. In the preface, the editor tackles the so-called Herskovitz-Frazier debate that was the epitome of the controversy that surrounded the topic in the country. This revolved around the contention about whether remnants of African cultures could be identified in America: in his *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Melville J. Herskovitz had offered a catalogue of African contributions to American culture, whereas E. Franklin Frazier, in his *The Negro Church in America* (1963), defended the thesis that the impact of slavery on the life of the slaves had annihilated the African heritage, with African American culture developing independently from African traditions, and deeply influenced by white culture (J. Holloway ix–x). In the 1940s Herskovitz's model was still in an incipient state, with its concomitant limitations; however, posterior works developed in this line have determined the African imprint in African American cultural and spiritual forms. From Newbell Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926) to Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black Culture* (1987), scholars of the field have advanced the initial premise to encompass the heterogeneous and multifaceted dimensions of the traditional African societies' impact on African American culture, and its present retentions. J. Holloway singles out Winifred Vass as a pioneer of the "Bantu thesis" that argued for the preeminence of the Bantu substratum in African American culture, due to the fact that this group possessed the largest homogeneous culture among the imported Africans (J. Holloway 2). This thesis would be adopted by subsequent researchers in the field.

One of these is Robert Farris Thompson, whose *Flash of the Spirit* (1984) offers a survey of African art and philosophy and traces the influence of the main African cultures—Yoruba, Kongo-Dahomean, Mande and Ejagham—on African American communities along the Atlantic. Of special relevance for this inquiry is the information provided about the existence

of particular figures and practices associated to these cosmologies. In this respect, within the Yoruban pantheon of gods (one constituted by figures related through human-like ties of familial kinship and operating in relation to four areas of action: war, wealth, nature and healing) appears the mythical figure of Eshu-Elegbara. Originally depicted as a deity that gained the favor of a supreme god that was transformed into an example of righteous living, this figure was transplanted into the collective African American imaginary as "the embodiment of the crossroads" and the "messenger of the gods" (R. Thompson 19). This will be alluded to in the discussion of Lebert Joseph, in Paule Marshall's novel. Another culture that had an important influence on the Americas, including the South of the United States, was the Kongo-Dahomean (R. Thompson 104). The Bakongo possessed a "complex system of *minkisi* (sacred medicines)" believed to be given to mankind by god (R. Thompson 107). The figures that will become the conjurer or root worker in African American culture, were here the ones in charge of healing, either through magic or with natural remedies, divining and worshiping (R. Thompson 107). Together with this, other three areas where the Bakongo influence can be identified in the Americas are, according to this author, first, the symbol of the Kongo cosmogram (similar to a Greek cross in its most basic format) that unites God, the living and the dead and is written in the ground to make oaths or in initiation ceremonies, which is drawn by performers of ring shouts or mourning circles in Central and South America (R. Thompson 108–111). In addition to this, a derived practice that is directly linked to Bakongo beliefs in the United States is the decoration of graves. According to R. Thompson, this directly implies continuity, and thus the existence of an afterlife: "The continuity might be characterized as a reinstatement of the Kongo notion of the tomb as a charm for the persistence of the spirit" (132). Likewise, R. Thompson argues that the trees planted on the graves found in African American graveyards have a similarly Bakongo precedence, expressing "the immortal presence of the spirit" (139). Within the works analyzed, this can be best seen in Gloria Naylor's emphasis on the careful caretaking of the graves in the "the other place," and later in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* with Mam's planting of a tree for her deceased son. A third related practice mentioned by the author is that of "bottle trees," that is, "trees garlanded with bottles, vessels, and other objects for protecting the household through invocation of the dead" (R. Thompson 142). This sight, which can also be appreciated throughout the South, implicitly asserts the belief in the presence of the dead far beyond the moment of physical perishing. Finally, there are other important retentions that emerged from the fusion of different African cultures with the Western one, and R. Thompson singles out the case of Voudou as "one of the signal achievements of people of African descent in the western hemisphere: a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism" (163). Associated preeminently to Haiti, Voudou's place of origin, derived practices were also present among the African American community in the U.S. and appear in Naylor's novel subsumed under conjure.

These ideas will be further detailed and illustrated in connection to the deployment of the spectral as another of these Africanist elements in the analyses that follow. The novels featured in this chapter share a multitude of elements that range from the setting and

analogous characters to a decidedly womanist focus and revisionist dimension. The first section deals with Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, a novel that focuses on the process of assimilation as uprooting and the regaining of an African American diasporic consciousness. Through the discussion of its three spectral passages, Africanist elements that range from gods and spiritual beings to the practices embedded at the core of the fictionalized Sea Islands draw a cartography of African imprints across the Caribbean and America where the spectral acquires a multilayered relevance. Naylor's *Mama Day*, published five years later, delves into a revisiting to the U.S. Sea Islands through the crafting of a fictional locus dominated by African-inflected cosmologies. The women in the extended line of the Day family function as transmitters of a heritage that enables survival and nurtures life. The nature of the narrative is profoundly marked by the islands' society where Africanist retentions configure the dynamics of everyday life.

2.2 PAULE MARSHALL'S *PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*

> *History has been hidden from us, especially in the Western hemisphere. I feel we have to go back and recreate the past so that we can use the lessons from that to aid us in the present struggle.* — Paule Marshall

Praisesong for the Widow, published in 1983, is the fifth novel by Paule Marshall (née Valenza Pauline Burke). She was born in 1929 in a humble family of Caribbean immigrants settled in Brooklyn, New York. Although she was raised in America, the Barbadian roots of her family were a powerful influence to which she would return time and again in her fiction. Aged seven, she spent a whole year in the isle with her mother and grandmother Alberta Jane Clement (affectionately called "Da-duh"), to whom Marshall dedicates this story. As the author recounts, these two strong female figures instilled in her a sense of place and a love for the poetic word that would end up shaping her life and profession. Her well-known essay, "From the Poets in the Kitchen," which appeared the same year as the novel under analysis, explores precisely the intersection of race, gender and class as rendered through the conversation of a group of West Indian women sharing similar living and working conditions in the United States. These unlikely poets exchanged their views on the major political and cultural issues of their time, their motherland and their experiences in America as a country ravaged by anti-Black racism; for the author their reunions functioned as group therapy where women spoke about their marginal condition as lower-class, Black immigrants inhabiting the gears of a predatory capitalist system in development. About them, Marshall writes:

> You might say that they suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners. They really didn't count in American society except as a source of cheap labor. But given the kind of women they were, they couldn't tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word. ("From Poets" 630)

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These concerns were to be foundational pillars of the author's writing that started to develop alongside her work as a journalist for the African American magazine *Our World*, after

earning a BA in English from Brooklyn College in 1953, the same year her first short story, "The Valley Between," came to light. It was not until 1959, however, that her first full-fledged novel appeared, *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* a work that directly engages the experience of immigration through the life of a young Barbadian woman in America. Although the book was not a commercial success, it was well-received by the critics who heralded it as a "pivotal text in the development of minority literature," due to its focus on the subjectivity of the immigrants in relation to the assertion of their ethnic identity and the articulation of a social critique (Hawthorne 3). This would lead to an eventual re-issue of the novel by the Feminist Press two decades later, as well as to the award of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961, when she published her second work *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, a collection of novellas. Subsequent grants and awards allowed Marshall to continue her job as a writer in different places. It was in Grenada that she produced *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) and *Praisesong for the Widow*, the last of which came to light the same year as her second collection of stories *Reena and Other Stories* (1983). She continued her career as a writer publishing *Daughters* (1991) and *The Fisher King* (2000), her last novel, at the same time that she was involved in different Black arts movements that took her to Europe and Africa, experiences she recounts in her 2009 memoir *Triangular Road*. In addition to this, the author also held a position as a literature professor at the Virginia Commonwealth University that made her move to Richmond, where she died in 2019.

It is in this memoir that Marshall expands on her relation to the Caribbean and the importance that this place holds in her life and her writing. The author referred in multiple occasions to that forked identity: being a West Indian by origin and cultural transmission, and a Black American by birth and socialization. Whereas the literature on her works echoes this duality, with research that explores her works from the Black Caribbean and the African American background, respectively, the stories that she builds often transcend one-dimensional paradigms and draw a common line that unites different places under the shared experience of the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath. In her own words, "This is what my work is about: to bring about a synthesis of the two cultures and, in addition, to connect them up with the African experience" (Marshall, "Re-Creating" 37). Even though the relation between both communities was not harmonious, due to conflicts stemming from a need to differentiate themselves from the lowest social caste on the part of the West Indians, and the interpretation of this attitude in terms of superiority and ambition, on the part of African Americans, there was also the maturing of a Pan-Africanist movement consolidating in the decade of the sixties which the author identifies as influential in her life and work (Marshall, "The Art" 185). Marshall opts for turning herself into a "bridge" that spans a hemispheric of "black that goes from Brazil to Brooklyn" (Marshall, "Interview" 79). The novel studied in this chapter is a great exponent of the author's artistic view.

Praisesong for the Widow is structured around the journey on which the middle-aged widow Avey Johnson embarks, which is supposed to take her from the coast of her native New York to the Caribbean and back. The trope of the journey is essential for a novel that develops through displacement and changing temporal frames and locations. Far from the simple premise on which the narrative is built, the journey turns into one where physical

movement anchors inner change and the life cycle is stretched to harbor a glimpse of an alternative world. Marshall places a middle-class African American woman at the center of her narrative set in the mid-1970s, something that allows her to explore in a truly womanist fashion the intersections of race, class, gender and age. This (self-)exploration of the subject entails a social examination as well, bringing together the individual and the collective dimension in a story about discovering intra- and inter-national diasporic bonds where the community plays a central role. While some critics have deemed the novel too much of a simplistic or essentialist intervention, the large number of readings that the work has inspired from its publication (not to mention that it has seen yet another reprint in 2021, with an introduction by the critically-acclaimed Jamaican poet Opal Palmer Adisa) demonstrate that the terms on which the author develops this process are indeed worth considering.[21] The novel tackles many of the concerns that were of central importance for African Americans in the period—chiefly social mobility, the effects of materialism and consumerism as well as the effacement of cultural roots—and it offers a model of cultural identity based on the recuperation of the past and the construction of a diasporic identity. In fact, for Eugenia Collier the novel becomes "the last step in the process of integrating the divided self, of spiritually coming home" (310), as it carries out the complex task of providing a venue for the integration of the self.

For this purpose, the novel is divided into different parts that guide us through the process of attaching meaning to each of the small rituals that the protagonist takes part in during her journey. As such, the first part is entitled "Runagate" and opens with two epigraphs from poems by Robert Hayden and Amiri Baraka that speak of a runaway slave and the hold of the ancestors on the communal psyche of African Americans during the twentieth century, respectively. This evokes Avey Johnson's flight prompted by her ancestor, her great-aunt Cuney who stalks her in dreams. Following this, the second section, entitled "Sleeper's Wake," was aptly described by Barbara Christian as "a wake for the past, as well as awakening from the past" (77), and it revolves around the figure of Avey's husband: Jerome Johnson. The oneiric encounter between husband and wife four years after the former's death becomes the vehicle through which we can access the humble origins of the couple, as well as the sinister economic progression that utterly transformed them. If the first part was meant as a recuperation of the deep past, the second gives further meaning to that forsaken paradise that is childhood, embodied in the location of Tatem Island, and puts in perspective the progressive uprooting of the protagonist by retelling the physical and metaphorical movement from the rundown apartment on Halsey Street to the North White Plains residency. The third and fourth parts of the novel are linked by a continuum in the temporal and spatial settings: Avey's reckoning with her dreams in Grenada and the participation in an excursion to the neighboring island of Carriacou, to partake in a diasporic ritual honoring the ancestors. In the background of the Caribbean setting, the third part of the novel opens with a reference to Voudou which anticipates the central role of spirituality in Avey's journey. The figure that

[21] The most recent of these critical readings is Janelle Rodriques' (2017) Afrofuturist approach to the narrative that highlights the use of African cosmology in the shaping of an alternative spatial-temporal paradigm, with the consequent potential to reconstruct the diasporic self.

dominates this part has been considered a second ancestral guide: Lebert Joseph, a local rum shop owner who arranges everything to take the protagonist on the final part of her trip to Carriacou. Within the progression in which the protagonist is immersed, in this part she builds a new paradigm through which to understand her feelings of inadequacy and displacement, as well as to recuperate and re-signify on the events that configured her childhood and her adult life. This final part, entitled "The Beg Pardon," narrates the rebirth of Avey Johnson as Avatara, a process that is rooted in her re-evaluation and claiming of roots, and the projection of this awareness into the future upon her return to New York. The structure crafted by Marshall accounts for the development of the protagonist's journey and the integration of the different locales into a hemispheric continuum of the diasporic experience; however, in what follows I propose a complementary division intended to provide a clear analysis of the key functions of spectrality in the novel.

2.2.1. Spectral Passages in *Praisesong for the Widow*

With the exception of Brogan's and Chassot's analyses of the seminal texts discussed in the introductory chapter, there are few references to spectrality in the extensive literature about Marshall's novel. Following the premise of this chapter, this section is devoted to the consideration of the spectral elements that figure in the novel *vis-à-vis* an Africanist reading. This claim is founded on the fact that within the extant corpus of African American novels where spectrality features prominently, *Praisesong for the Widow* is perhaps the one that concentrates the most references to African-based folklore, religion and belief systems. Precisely because of their fundamental role, these elements fulfill a pragmatic function enabling the completion of Avey's inner journey, inasmuch as they turn into the staples of a forgotten tradition that anchor the reclamation of a new life within parameters different from the Western, capitalist society in which the protagonist is embedded. In addition, they acquire the status of structural devices through which the narrative is assembled together, as the intra-textual references to ritual allow for the development of a process of re-signification. In the introduction, I claim that, in the novels analyzed in the second and third sections of this chapter, spectrality appears mainly as an Africanist element based on the belief in spirits in African religions brought across the Atlantic during the slave trade. I further argue that this denotes anxiety about the assimilation into the white culture and the progressive displacement of the African American heritage. Both these arguments follow Brogan's differentiation between two kinds of spectrality present in the narrative: "ghostliness associated with *paleness* connotes the assumption by Blacks of white mainstream culture's materialist values, while the ghostly light that comes from *darkness* signals the presence of African ancestral sprits among their new-world descendants" (*Cultural* 145). Taking into consideration the latency of these two dimensions throughout the novel, I will establish three *spectral passages* through which to apprehend the significance of the spectral in the novel.

Unlike in other works that are part of this corpus, such as *Mama Day* or *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the spectral figures that appear in Marshall's narrative are not literally referred to as such, even when their mobilization in the story and the effects they have on the protagonist demonstrate a process of haunting. Instead, as Keith Sandiford notes, "Marshall conjoins the

living and the dead, the past and the present by a series of strategic interactions—dreams, memories, hallucinations, rituals, and ceremonies—interactions that derive from religious beliefs and traditional practices of African societies" (375). Since in this novel the spectral is mixed with the oneiric (especially in the first two instances discussed), it could be argued that the realm of dreams is the space where Avey confronts her ghosts, notwithstanding the fact that these dreams have a profound effect on her waking life. In this context, with the usage of the term *passage* I intend to capture the idea of movement and transition, which is also inherent to the central trope of the journey, as well as a sense of progression, an advancement in the process of personal discovery that is prompted by the exchange with ancestors. I further contend that in this novel we can identify three spectral passages associated to three different locations. This spatial mobility is meaningful in the narrative due to its dramatization of the different stages of the protagonist's progression: the confrontation with Aunt Cuney that takes her back to Tatem Island; Jerome Johnson's apparition through which the opposition between Halsey Street and North White Plains emerges to unveil a tale of upward social mobility; and, finally, the ancestral spirits that make their invisible appearance in the ceremony of the Beg Pardon that takes place in Carriacou.

2.2.1.1 Spectral Roots: Aunt Cuney's Ghost

Praisesong begins *in medias res* when a sleepless Avey Johnson makes the decision to abandon the luxurious cruise named the *Bianca Pride* on which she has embarked with her two friends, Thomasina Moore and Clarice, to return home to New York. Her decision is received with utter surprise by her companions who are unable to understand how she is acting so out of character. Indeed, the rationale behind her behavior escapes Avey herself—"It was just that something—she couldn't say what—had come over her the past couple of days. She couldn't explain it. She could make no sense of it" (28)[22]—who is desperately looking for an alternative to the feeling of restlessness that has progressively seized her and that she seems unable to do away with. Even though she will take some time to acknowledge it, the source of her uneasiness is prompted by a recent dream where her deceased great-aunt Cuney violently confronts her the same night that she drops to sleep exhausted after an excursion to the island of Martinique. The subject of their confrontation is the old woman's desire for her grandniece to return to the Ibo Landing in Tatem Island, as when she was a child, and the latter's refusal to do so. For this refusal, Avey adduces a number of reasons that implicitly address issues of social status that differ greatly from what we will later learn about her childhood, namely the inadequacy of her clothes and a prior compromise to attend a luncheon in honor of her husband where they would be finally seated in the restaurant's dais after the latter had been named a master mason: "Did she really expect her to go walking over to the Landing dressed as she was? In the new spring suit she had just put on to wear to the annual luncheon at the Statler given by Jerome Johnson's lodge? [...] With her hat and gloves on? And her fur stole draped over her arm? Avey Johnson could have laughed, the idea was so ridiculous" (40).

[22] Paule Marshall. *Praisesong for the Widow.* 1983. Plume, 1992. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

The confrontation is revealing, not only because it provides a contrasting picture between the protagonist's present and past into which the second dream further delves, but also because it draws attention toward the physical and the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse in which she is inscribed. Throughout the novel, Avey's body, the body of a middle-aged African American woman, is posed as the locus of a racial performance, alienation, transformation and reconquest. The dream also hints at the racial division latent in society; as the story progresses, racial discrimination and structural racism are outlined as the catalysts behind the transformation that the married couple undergoes; but at this point, racial tensions are echoed in what Pascha Stevenson terms "spectacular anxiety," the idea that "when the black figure becomes the conventional object of white gaze (that is, as some sort of an exotic or primate amusement), there is likely something inherently racist and imperialistic in the interaction" (151). What mortifies Avey is not the desperation of her aunt, but the fact that the few white people who remain in the upper-class Black neighborhood are observing the exchange that will define her precisely as that from which she had tried to escape. The vision of the dream attests to this anxiety: "Worse, among the black faces looking on scandalized, there could be seen the Archers with their blue-eyed, tow-headed children, and the Weinsteins. The only ones for blocks around who had not sold and fled. An uncharitable thought surfaced amid the shame flooding her. Could it be they had stayed on in hope of one day being treated to a spectacle such as this" (45).

Aunt Cuney, thus, is the first spectral figure with which Avey must reckon. Her status as a ghost can be apprehended from two interconnecting venues: Sandiford argues that Cuney is inscribed in an African cosmology wherein the temporal paradigm differs from the linearity of Western conceptions. Adopting the aforementioned theory by Mbiti, Sandiford claims that Cuney is in the *sasa* of her life cycle (375), like the rest of the spirits who are still remembered, and as such she appears to her grandniece in dreams. Complementarily, Brogan describes her as a ghost embodying the "return of the culturally repressed" (*Cultural* 145), the past and the community from which the protagonist has tried to separate herself. What I propose is an understanding of Aunt Cuney that considers these two readings alongside each other: the great-aunt's communication with Avey as a living-dead to call attention over the life she is leading. Her insistence on Avey's comeback to the site of Ibo Landing metaphorically begs for a return to the roots from which she has strayed to the point of absolute alienation from her origins and her community. Considering both the temporal framework of the novel and the date of publication, this becomes an imperative return to and reconsideration of the past in a post-civil rights society where integration becomes synonymous with assimilation. The figure of Aunt Cuney and the exchange with the grandniece are the cornerstone on which the present reading of the novel develops because through them we access the cultural background that the latter has been intent on erasing.

Place is exceptionally important, since it is bound to specific cultural coordinates deeply influenced by African cosmology that configure the initiating point of Avey's journey and, subsequently, draw a continuum with the transformation she undergoes at the end of the novel with the crafting of a collective diasporic conscience. In this first section of the novel, she is transported by her great-aunt's specter to the fictional island of Tatem, which would be part of

the South Carolina Sea Islands. Sent there to spend the month of August from the age of seven, Avey had known the island and its folklore as a second home to which she kept returning even as a married woman until these trips, like the many other rituals she and her husband had, were displaced by the agony of work and progress. The Sea Islands are constituted by approximately a thousand enclaves, varying in size and population density, that extend over the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Due to its strategic location, they were a common port of arrival for slave ships and a point from which enslaved people were either transported to the mainland or left behind to work on the indigo and cotton plantations that dominated the islands' landscape. In their ethnographic studies of these islands, Juanita Jackson, Sabra Slaughter and J. Herman Blake (33), and, later, Patricia Jones-Jackson (1987) have highlighted how the relative isolation of the isles, together with the clear majority of Black population contributed to the development of a specific Black culture defined by a higher retention of African elements, one that extends to the language, customs and beliefs commonly known as Gullah or Geechee.[23] Of special interest for this inquiry are the religious and spiritual retentions that have survived from the antebellum period. In this respect, Jones-Jackson mentions three elements that have a direct correlate in the novel, reinforcing the importance of an Africanist reading: the ritual of the Ring Shout, a tripartite conception of being, and the belief in Voudou (24–31). The first appears in the novel as a religious ritual, described by Paulette Brown-Hinds in the following manner: "During the Shout, the participants, bodies positioned in the form of a ring, moved rhythmically in a counter-clockwise direction, singing spirituals. It was performed in a variety of settings, and the dancing and singing were directed toward the ancestors or gods" (109). In addition to describing a cultural practice widely different from Christian ones that denotes a clear African influence, this tradition is relevant in Avey's journey for two further reasons: first, what she remembers in relation to the Ring Shout is how her great-aunt had been banned from partaking in the circle for one night because she broke the fundamental rule of lifting the feet from the ground. From that night onward, the old woman had refused to join her fellow community members in the Ring Shout ever again. As a child, she was mesmerized by the circle of men and women shouting, but the possibility of taking part in the ritual is frustrated by her great-aunt's detachment from the group. However, she will apply that knowledge near the end of the novel when she joins the Carriacou Tramp never lifting her soles from the ground and symbolically joining a transfigured Ring Shout.

The second venue through which the Ring Shout is worth considering approximates it to the other two aforementioned retentions that feature in this part of the narrative and is based on the idea of possession, which is implicitly alluded to throughout the novel, acquiring special relevance in the final part. Jones-Jackson defines the Ring Shout within the framework

[23] Regarding the context of the Sea Islands and the Gullah culture, a commonly analyzed work alongside Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* is Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), the first widely-distributed full-length film by an African American woman, which revolves around the local Peazant family and their migration to the mainland. The author has publicly spoken about how the material relating to the Ibo Landing from the novel was employed in the film (Marshall, "Meditations" 136). Likewise, Dash was aided in the filmmaking process by Toni Cade Bambara, a contemporary of Marshall's, with whom she later published a book about the film co-authored by bell hooks.

of "'shouting' styles of singing spirituals, in which the African religious phenomenon of spirit possession remained vividly linked with prayer, music, and bodily movement" (xii). This reading acknowledges the existence of spirits within the cosmology of those inhabiting the islands. This stems from the conception of the human being divided into body, soul and spirit, and the latter "remaining on earth and able to influence the living" (Jones-Jackson 24). In her contribution to the edited collection mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, entitled "Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death," Margaret Washington Creel points out that an Africanist presence was especially pronounced in areas related to death and afterlife. According to her, this is derived from the centrality of the belief in afterlife present in traditional African religion: "Death was a journey into the spirit world, not a break with life or earthly beings. The idea of the perpetuity of life through time, space, and circumstance was common to African religious culture" (Creel 81).[24] This belief underlies the narrative and, I would argue, furthermore, that it also articulates it since, after all, it is the spirit of Aunt Cuney, the protagonist's ancestor, that sets in motion the trip on which she embarks. The existence of "ghosts or haunts—the spirits of the dead—returned from time to time to trouble the living" (Jones-Jackson xii), like the belief in voodoo or hoodoo based on the conjuration of spirits to perform good or bad deeds and the endorsement of the sprit ancestors for protection (Jones-Jackson 25), and the practice of the Ring Shout serve a dual purpose in the novel. First, they set a collective imaginary that differs greatly from Western paradigms, simultaneously valuing and legitimizing alternative conceptions of the self and the world, and providing a new framework through which to fully apprehend the events narrated in the story. These transcend anecdotal ethnographic accounts to speak about the self's journey toward cultural connection in a society marked by individualism and alienation. The fact that Avey's quest is profoundly mediated by African American history does not invalidate its universal undertone but, rather, it emphasizes how the collective memory of a group offers a valuable resource of identity affirmation amid the master narratives that seek to standardize through erasure. It is in this light that the second function emerges: the reduplication of elements that she associates to the Sea Islands in the setting of Carriacou seeks to emphasize precisely the threads that unite communities with a shared background across national borders.

When Aunt Cuney forsook the institutionalized rituals of the community, she chose to make "the Landing her religion" (34). Ibo Landing designates a place as well as a tale, and it is, undoubtedly, the central piece of this first spectral passage, one through which Marshall deploys African American cultural elements that retain a palpable African influence with which she effects yet another "reclamation of African cosmology in the Americas" (Rodriques 8). In fact, the author considered this place to be the seed of the novel; according to her own account, she first learned about this in the book *Drums and Shadows: Survival*

[24] In the referenced chapter, Creel also depicts the "seeker's journey" in Gullah religion. Elizabeth McNeil has provided a reading of Avey's journey in these terms, arguing that the different phases delineated in Creel's model can account for her transformation "from a state of deadened, materialistic individualism to a mature self realized in dynamic relation to the community" (186–187). These phases would be the initial decision to embark on a process of "seeking," prompted partly by community pressure, the choosing of a female elder that appears in a dream as spiritual guidance, as well as the journey and the eventual return to the world of the ancestors, which in this case will correspond with the trip to Carriacou and her participation in the Big Drum (McNeil 188–190).

Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes—a collection with interviews and folk tales gathered by the Georgia Writers' Project and published by Mary Granger in 1940. The place and the concomitant legend had a great impact on the writer, who stated: "I came to understand that the Ibos spoke to something deep within me, a question that I'd always been putting to myself: 'How do I, as a woman and a writer, a black woman and a black writer, live in a society that daily undercuts my sense of self?'" (Marshall, "Holding" 24). The story of the Ibos is connected with the widespread legend of the "The Flying Africans" that appears also in Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean communities, signaling a collective diasporic mythology (Walters 4).[25] This version works under the same premise: upon arriving in American territory and divining their future in the new land, a group of African captives turned around and returned to Africa by magical means. The origin of this folktale in the American case, however, is believed to be connected to a much somber event: the mass suicide committed by a group of Ibo captives who decided to throw themselves overboard in the coast of Georgia in 1803. Although the implications of such a terrible occurrence are seemingly difficult to connect to an idea of resistance, Jonathan Howard proposes a reading worth considering:

> The Ibo Landing story, as a portrait of black life or the lived experience of blackness, is beautiful in this way. Not because it is a flight of fantasy from the reality of the historical events that inspired it, but precisely because it isn't. The story, I argue, is terribly aware of the brutal history of the drowned, and yet still insists on the co-presence of the beautiful. And the beautiful keeps the brutal from having the final word because its sheer being there is a mystery that is itself beautiful. In this way, beauty can't help but finish brutality's sentences. (902)

This reading is of special relevance in the research at hand because it designates a shift that the spectral also effects: an element that bears witness to the trauma and simultaneously appropriates the symbolic power to articulate resistance. This tension is one that underlies the workings of the spectral metaphor in the different novels under analysis in this dissertation and that accounts, to a great extent, for the resurgence of spectrality in connection to the reclamation of African-based folklore.

In *Praisesong*, Ibo Landing is brought back to Avey through the figure of her great-aunt who insists on her comeback. While the core events are similar to other versions of the legend—a group of captives arriving at Tatem Island and deciding to return to Africa defying the laws of physics and walking on water—there are different aspects this account stresses. It is first necessary to mention that the story is framed by two different narrators; even though Cuney is the one who tells Avey, the story has previously been told to her by her own grandmother, a former slave woman named Avatara. The information about this slave ancestor is minimal, but it works in outlining a strong connection between her and Avey that

[25] In her *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (2017), Michelle Commander traces the imprint of this legend in the configuration of speculative fiction through different works of diasporic writers across the American continent.

was established even before the latter's birth: "There was the story of how she [Aunt Cuney] had sent word months before her birth that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her grandmother, who had come to her in a dream with the news: 'It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl'" (42). Throughout the narrative, Avey's name is of the utmost relevance because its different variants encapsulate her different personas: she spent most of her childhood being called Avey, a name she recognized as the shorter version of her true name: Avatara. However, the transformation that both her and Jay undergo is also reflected in her name as she begins to recognize herself only through the appellation of Avey Johnson, a depersonalization mechanism on which she starts reflecting after the specters of her aunt and her husband siege her: "The names 'Avey' and 'Avatara' were those of someone who was no longer present, and she had become Avey Johnson even in her thoughts, a woman whose face, reflected in a window or mirror, she sometimes failed to recognize" (141). It will not be until the very end of the novel that she will reclaim "Avey, short for Avatara," thus demonstrating a renewed awareness and re-valuation of her past. In the narrative, the slave woman Avatara is the first-person witness of a terrible event reconfigured as a narrative of resistance. Like Cuney, she makes a spectral appearance to awaken her granddaughter to a new life coming, their next generational link. She is the ghost of both a traumatic past with which Avey has to contend and, at the same time, the symbol of a community that, like her name, she will need to reclaim to guide her steps in a different and yet still challenging moment for African American women.

Avatara is only directly mentioned once more as means of closing the legend of the Ibos with their successful escape walking on water: "They sounded like they was having such a good time my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos…" (37–39). If the myth in itself manages to bring together the brutal and the beautiful, the solemn words with which Marshall chooses to finish the Ibos' account expand on this effect. These draw a picture of a young slave woman forever trapped in an unknown land, physically and sexually exploited, who witnesses once and again the arrival and fate of others like her, until a group of them choose differently and, at this point, what matters is not whether they perished or survived, but the fact that they were able to choose. Taking them as inspiration, she also decides that the chains that confine her body shall never imprison her mind and builds from these scraps a story of resistance that is to serve future generations, turning into the representation of "the spiritual agency that still remained strong in African Americans, in spite of their physical confinement" (C. T. Smith 716). This split between body and mind is a common motif in narratives of slavery where dislocation serves as a survival strategy. In her analysis of *Praisesong,* Christian also emphasizes this idea and explains how this division reflects the subversion of an imposed displacement into a productive space of identity formation: "The recurring motif throughout the novel, that the body might be in one place and the mind in another, is characterized not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom, stemming from a history of the forced displacement of blacks in the West" (75).

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In addition to this frame narrator, in the retelling of Ibo Landing there is a great emphasis on sight, more specifically, on the ability of the Ibos to see beyond the materiality of the present:

> And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. *A good long look*. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it.
> *And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see, 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead.* [...] And when they got through sizing up the place real good and seen what was to come, they turned, my gran' said, and *looked at the white folks what brought 'em here. Took their time again and gived them the same long hard look. Tell you the truth, I don't know how those white folks stood it. I know I wouldn't have wanted 'em looking at me that way.* And when they got through studying 'em when they know just from looking at 'em how those folks was gonna do, do you know what the Ibos did? […] They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em—[…] and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. […] They just kept walking right on out over the river. […] Besides they had all that iron on 'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round they necks like a dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. And chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. (37–39; emphasis added)

This excerpt renders Ibo *seeing* as an ability linked to a specific cultural conception of time where the strict division between past, present and future is replaced by a temporal continuum in which events take place simultaneously. This conception, thus, partly resembles haunting (inasmuch as the present is disrupted by the past) and partly builds on a distinct understanding of time featured in several narratives of spectrality. Furthermore, their sight extends over events, and people, a point that Cuney makes sure to emphasize when referring to the judgmental look the captives direct toward the slave traders. An almost literal interpretation would lend itself to the idea that, in considering the people who receive them in Tatem, the Ibo are literally able to *see through* them, that is, through the schemes and the rhetoric that is going to be perpetuated once and again through each and every one of the historical moments that Cuney enumerates: from the Civil War and Emancipation to their present moment. These different nuances render Ibo Landing, and more specifically, the sight of the Ibos an anticipatory element that Avey will come to witness later on in Carriacou, in the shape of that second sight called *li gain conaissance.* Regarding Avey, for her this will be translated into an emerging awareness of the significance that Ibo Landing and Aunt Cuney had had for her all along. Toward the end of the novel, she will come to *see* with renewed eyes her own self and her place within the tradition to which she belongs.

In close relation to the depiction of Ibo Landing that Cuney offers her niece is the latter's response, which puts the deed in question by asking her great-aunt how it was possible that

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they did not drown. Cuney's answer renders the centrality of the myth in her conception of the self and the community:

> Slowly, standing on the *consecrated ground*, her height almost matching her shadow which the afternoon sun had drawn out over the water at their feet, her great aunt had turned and regarded her in silence for the longest time. *It was to take Avey years to forget the look on the face under the field hat, the disappointment and sadness there.* [...] *'Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?'* (39–40; emphasis added)

Cuney's reply is important at different levels: first, because it makes apparent the religious and foundational character she attributes to the legend of Ibo Landing. Like her grandmother Avatara, she chooses to believe and transforms the story of the Ibos and what they represent into her religion, turning her pilgrimage there into a "militant act" that is reinforced by the symbols in which she is vested: the double belting and the men's shoes that evoke the garments of a soldier (Sandiford 376). The sacredness of this place is further emphasized with the question that Cuney poses to Avey, which gives the Ibos the same status as Jesus. This equivalence has been the object of some debate among critics concerning the position of Cuney regarding Christianity. In this respect, it is especially relevant to consider two points: in the first place, the introduction of this Christian reference to the miracles under the assumption of a common acceptance points out the differing status granted to the similar beliefs depending on the group that holds them and the dominant ideology. As Keith Cartwright explains, the narrative subtly criticizes a double standard whereby "Christian miracles are accepted because they are scriptural, sanctioned by canonical texts, while the collective memory of Afro-creole tales faces dismissal as folklore or fantasy" (133). In the second place, it is important to emphasize that Cuney never discredits the Christian values on which her grandniece is educated. Instead, following a principle of synthesis found in African American religious manifestations at large, she opts for what Shanna Benjamin calls a "both/and approach to this [...] mythical tale" based on the consideration of different systems of thought and belief on equal grounds to each other, which contravenes the Western tendency to displace Otherness by vesting its own values with a shroud of universalism (58). This critic further argues that this attitude has a projection for the future and claims that "Cuney provides Avey with an epistemological touchstone to which she can return when she is ready to reorient herself with her life's purpose and become a bridge builder between generations" (Benjamin 58). In relation to this, another level at which Cuney's response is telling is through the dramatization of how the question affects her. This sadness and disappointment that Avey identified emerge from Cuney's fear that she may grow up alien to the family and community's (his)tories. This same look is evoked in the dream where Aunt Cuney's ghost appears, and it will haunt the protagonist until she is able to come to terms with the mission of remembrance and transmission that her great-aunt had entrusted her. Taking this into consideration, Cuney will be outlined as one of the ancestral spirits that remain with the living in order to aid them in their path on earth, thus turning into "the first Elegba guide" that will help Avey complete the mission of "returning and sustaining what is most valuable about

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black life—not forgetting the tremendous power of our ancestors, not squandering or living meaninglessly, and always knowing that the source of the power the Ibos had resides in her, in all of us" (Adisa 11).

The centrality of this dream within this first spectral passage goes beyond the people, places and events that Avey witnesses. On equal grounds to this recovery process stands the effect that it has on her life. When she wakes up from the turbulent night, Avey tries to forget about it, but that seed of anguish grows into different shapes that become obstacles in her path of wishful amnesia. The first of these appears when she is about to enjoy a delicious parfait after a rich meal in the Versailles Room. The narrative describes how her heart started "beating thickly" and "her entire midsection felt odd," building up to a "vaguely bloated feeling she could in no way account for" (50–52). Both the scene and the symptoms are highly symbolic: the Versailles room epitomizes everything the cruise represents and against which Marion, Avey's youngest daughter, had persuaded her mother. In the novel, this character stands for the critical view on respectability politics and bourgeois values that her mother unsuccessfully wanted to silence (hence, the symbolic reading on the insistence of aborting her and the inability to do so), but she will also come to represent a cultural connectedness to her roots that was absent in her before the trip. As Stelamaris Coser points out, "Marion belongs to a different generation weary of the manipulation of history and the traps of assimilation" (4). The relationship between the cruise ship and a specific social, cultural and racial status is explicitly emphasized through the name, the *Bianca Pride* (which holds ineluctable racial overtones), and implicitly through the assessment that Avey makes of the arrogant or condescending attitudes of the mostly white passengers to whom she and her Black friends seem invisible. She recalls how, "As usual, even those who sat directly facing her at the nearby tables somehow gave the impression of having their backs turned to her and her companions. It had to do with the expression in their eyes, which seemed to pass cleanly through them whenever they glanced across, and even, ironically with the quick strained smiles some of them occasionally flashed their ways" (47). She perceives this attitude as a constant reminder of their lack of belonging, their appearance or wealth notwithstanding. This is an idea that is likewise reiterated through the connotations that a place like Versailles has in historical and cultural terms as epitome of the European empires developed on the basis of colonization and slave trade, and presented as the apex of civilization. The fact that she chooses to repeat her journey several times may be read as implying her willingness to make use of a much fought-for economic privilege, but it also reveals a tragic misplacement on Avey's part when she considers this space to be the objective marker of her personal value. Furthermore, as Coser claims, the "ship allows its passengers a safe distance from the land; the economic, historical, and cultural dilemmas of the region bear no relevance for the happy cruisers" (62). This choice of absolute evasion on the part of Avey would indicate her willing dismissal of the reality surrounding her, a numbness from which the oneiric encounter forces her to awake with a physical rejection that precedes and signals the change that is to come. In this light, the feeling of bloatedness can be read as an incipient rejection of everything that surrounds her: the material and symbolic values that she has accumulated, a "subconscious dissatisfaction with a life overloaded with materialism and luxury but lacking spiritual

sustenance, especially that which a reconnection with her ancestral past could bring her" (Lock 114).

Complementary to the physical effects, the narrative also explores the mental consequences that the dream has, which are akin to the bloatedness. The first of these is embodied in the hallucinations Avey starts to experience, which are prompted by the sudden memory of a police abuse that she and Jay had witnessed from the window of their crumbling Halsey Street apartment: "The car he had been yanked from for what might have been a minor traffic violation stood pulled over at the curb, its door sprawling open. Under the rain of blows the man finally sank screaming to his knees, his blood a lurid red against his blackness in the light of the streetlamp overhead" (56). This scene contrasts with the atmosphere of bourgeois refinement of the cruise, bringing to the fore an unfortunately familiar reality that many prefer to ignore. Similarly to the dream, it contributes to Avey's progressive re-gaining of awareness. However, it also seems to function as a distorting lens on which the set of visions are hinged: from this moment onward, she will come to interpret the ship as a profoundly hostile environment. The visions begin with a subtle sensation that she is being followed, and this incipient paranoia acquires hyperbolic dimensions with the transformation of everyday occurrences into somber scenes of violence: the thud of hempen rings from a game sound to her like "some blunt instrument repeatedly striking human flesh and bone" (56); the old white man who offers a sit next to him in the pool becomes a skeleton lasciviously approaching her with the words "You look as if you need to sit someplace for a while. C'mon, I won't mind" (59); and she sees her own self reflected in the bird that is shot midflight. This uncanny transformation the ship undergoes is defined by the spectral transposition of all the beings surrounding her into what could have been past versions of themselves. As such, without ever explicitly alluding to them, the images she sees create a picture of enslavement and oppression: the sound she hears is that of the lash torturing human flesh, the advances of the old man are reminiscent of the sexual exploitation of the Black female body by white men, and the fact that it is inscribed in the space of the pool—a profoundly marked setting during segregation—speaks of a continuity that goes beyond the times of slavery. Finally, she sees herself in the bird, one that if caged is robbed of its freedom, and if free, is killed for fun.

These hallucinations develop parallel to the aforementioned feeling of dissociation which is part of the extrapolation process carried out by Avey with regards to her dream. When she catches her glimpse in the mirror, she has trouble locating her own self:

> But for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls seated with them. This wasn't the first time it happened. On occasion, shopping in her favorite department store she would notice a black woman of above average height with a full-figure yet compact body coming toward her amid the floor-length mirrors down the aisle. And in the way she always did she would quickly note the stranger's clothes. The well-cut suit, coat or ensemble depending on the season. The carefully coordinated accessories. The muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age. [...] But more than the woman's clothes or figure or

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> face was her bearing as she made her way along the aisle. Her Marian Anderson poise and reserve. The look of acceptability about her. She would never be sent to eat in the kitchen when company came!—*I am the darker brother/ They send me to eat in the kitchen/When company comes...*—lines from the poem Jay used to recite to her and Sis on Sunday mornings in Halsey Street would come to mind. (48–49)

The previous fragment depicts at length the phenomenon of dissociation, that lack of recognition of the self that she has already suffered on multiple occasions, and which directly connects with identity. It is worth noting the detailed attention that is placed on external appearance: the expensive fabric of the clothes, each of the pieces that make up her outfit and how each of them was carefully selected to craft an alternative persona that would fit the standards of elegance and respectability determined by bourgeois, white norms. In this regard, Eugenia DeLamotte argues that "it is not merely that Avey sees herself with the eyes of the (white) other but that she has been refashioned, even her face with its now 'permanent' strain, so that she *is* other" (*Places* 91). As if the superimposition of the clothes and accessories erased the Blackness of her skin, she implicitly compares herself with fellow Black men and women, the proverbial "darker brother" of Langston Hughes' lines, and sets herself apart from them. In Dorothy Denniston's words, "The mirror image comes to represent a distancing, a lack of recognition or identification with the African-American woman who is Avey herself" (132). The juxtaposition of Avey's present views and the memories of a time where Black poetry was a source of identification and spiritual sustenance reveals the schism that exists between the two versions of her life. Nonetheless, assessing the effect that the dream has in making her stop to consider how she no longer sees herself reflected in the mirror, DeLamotte identifies a "hopeful sign" of an "imminent self-recovery, especially the recovery of her body, which has been appropriated by a culture that devalues it" (*Places* 91).

It is after these turbulent feelings of bloatedness, hallucinations and dissociation, in addition to the hold that the strange dream continues to have on her, that Avey decides to abandon the cruise. Thus, the spectral figure that dominates this initial passage, Aunt Cuney, becomes what Joyce Pettis terms "the catalyst" (121) for her confrontation with the past and its many physical and metaphorical ghosts. Although this may be read, at first, in individual terms, as in the rest of the works under analysis in this dissertation, Avey's quest accommodates, as well, a collective dimension of which she will become aware in Carriacou. In this sense, the protagonist's journey is twofold, inasmuch as it implies a growing awareness of her own self as a Black woman and of her place within an extended African diasporic community along the American coast. At this point in the narrative, she has been re-initiated into a different kind of consciousness, and has been granted a vision, one that is still "beyond her comprehension" (83). She has been set on the tracks to decipher its meaning, but before that she must go through a process of mourning for the persons she and her husband were, and for a life that was lost.

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2.2.1.2 The Specter of Progress: Jerome Johnson

Avey abandons the cruise intent on returning to the comfort of the house in New York, but she has to spend a night in a Grenadian hotel. As soon as she sets foot on land, Avey begins to discover a landscape much different from the one she had imagined on board: the port is full of people moving in a hurry to a destination that she cannot grasp. In contrast to the kind and welcoming attitude of the islanders she encounters, she is afraid of being dragged by the crowd and feels awestruck that they do not realize that she, dressed in her finest clothes and with a six-piece matching luggage, is a tourist in the island. Their attitude in seeing her as one of their own (emphasized by the fact that a man confuses her with a fellow islander, claiming "is twins if I ever saw it" [72]), contrasts with her resistance and insistence on setting herself apart from them. Relieved to find a taxi that takes her to the hotel, during the commute the driver briefs her on the Carriacou excursion that takes place yearly and that accounts for the uproar of the port. The taxi driver's characterization is brief but telling: he uncritically accepts the touristification of the island for his own economic advantage, and leans toward a neo-imperialist view with the dismissal of the island's culture and roots (see for instance the allusion to the patois as "some African mix-up something" that is no longer spoken, except for the Carriacouans who choose it in spite of being able to speak the "King's English" [75–76]). The hotel he selects is a luxurious "towering structure of stark white concrete and glass" (80), but as the protagonist approaches it, the initial relief is disrupted by the now familiar feeling of bloatedness that she experienced onboard.

The foreshadowing bloatedness is only the tip of the iceberg that is the sensation that will take hold of her later that night, when the second ghost makes it appearance. This time, the familiar specter is no other than her deceased husband, Jerome Johnson, who comes to accuse her of wasting their hard-earned money by leaving the cruise before time. While the first specter was introduced within the dream, the abruptness of this second ghost's manifestation, which pierces Avey's consciousness alongside the narrative structure with the words "What the devil's gotten into you, woman?" (87), draws an unequivocal image of Jerome as an "angry ghost" (Busia 202) and emphasizes the power of its haunting. This inaugural outburst is followed by a sequence of rhetorical questions—"Do you know what you're playing around with? [...] You must want to wind up back where we started" (87–88)—that she soon understands as alluding to the wealth and the economic status the married couple were able to garner. These aspects that are indirectly alluded to as means of introduction in the first part, are brought to a new level of complexity in this second passage where the spectral figure of Jerome Johnson becomes the conduit through which their shared lives are scrutinized. By becoming a spectator of her husband's ghost, Avey is forced to confront the painful memories of how their early moments together, plagued by economic difficulties and yet surrounded by a truthful love, were slowly replaced by the anguish of a progress that left a vacuous wasteland in their place.

In the same way that the space of Tatem Island dominated the first spectral passage, Halsey Street and the Johnsons' humble apartment dominate this second one, with a force that approximates it to a traumatic spectral haunting, especially for Jerome. In the long flashback that besieges Avey's wake on the balcony of the lavish hotel room, Halsey Street is inextricably linked to the memories of her and her husband's old selves, and the narrative

oscillates between two polar opposites: a retrospective of the best moments they spent together as a couple, and the economic hardships that darkened their relationship. Halsey Street becomes the canvas for the depiction of the social landscape of the mid-twentieth-century big cities in the North that had been receiving a continuous influx of Black population in successive waves of internal migration from the South, prompted by racial prosecution and the scarcity of opportunities (in the novel, Jay's parents are part of this exodus). Pettis has, in fact, described it as "a metaphor for hundreds of similar streets in hundreds of cities where economic deprivation dominates; [...] where hopelessness and defeat threaten to complete the ravaging of the black psyche" (123). The narrative invokes red-lining[26] and ghettoization by depicting the cold, rundown, small flat where Avey and Jerome lived with their two daughters and awaiting a third one, and opposes it to other parts of the city reserved to whites and the emerging upper-middle class Black neighborhoods, like the one they will end up at. The segregation of the job market and the low-paying positions occupied by Black workers reveal the labor exploitation to which they were subjected. As Jay furiously retorts to his wife: "Go on there and see how you like working for some red-faced Irishman who sits on his can all day laughing to himself at the colored boy he's got doing everything" (105).

In addition to this, Avey's fears also offer an interesting reflection on racism, as shown when she imagines that Jay may be cheating on her: she first thinks of a white woman, but in the same stride she tries to talk herself out of this idea, wondering whether he would risk "finding himself down at the bottom of the East River tied to a ton of concrete when her father or older brother found out", since "Brooklyn might be the North but it wasn't all that different from Kansas (he had been born and raised there) when it came to such matters and there were more ways to lynch a colored man other than from a tree" (96). Focusing on the status and consequences of interracial relations, her rumination is a testament to the segregation laws that ruled public and private life for the most part of the twentieth century, and it stresses the range of operation of the racial etiquette, working against the notion of the North as a realm of freedom where slavery had not left its imprint. Together with this, this reminiscing also brings to the fore a less openly treated topic: the intersection of gender, race and class in the field of health. She first explains all the different traditional remedies she employed to get rid of her third child due to their economic situation. When all of these fail, she considers paying for a clandestine cheap abortion out of desperation but remains hesitant and eventually decides against it after learning that an acquaintance had died from the hemorrhage. She then remembers in terror her previous experience in the delivery room with her arms "bound at her sides," "left to lie for hours screaming" and with the nurse appearing only to "chide her about the noise" (101). As a lower-class Black woman, Avey provides two accounts that constitute an early incursion on the topic of medical racism whereby Black women are the victims of a harsher treatment, as they are presupposed a higher pain threshold

[26] This refers to the extended discriminatory practice of setting impediments for African Americans to access mortgages, housing or other services. In their seminal work, *American Apartheid*, Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton tackle the issues of racial segregation and ghetto formation in connection to criminalization and perpetuation of poverty. They argue that "Residential segregation is the principal organizational feature of American society that is responsible for the creation of the urban underclass" (9).

and suffer more medical negligence (Villarosa 318). This resonates more specifically in the reproductive sphere, where African American women have historically been victims of procedures that sought to limit their reproductive rights. As Melissa Harris-Perry recounts, "through the twentieth century the sate employed involuntary sterilization, pressure to submit to long-term birth control, and restriction of state benefits for large families as a way to control black women's reproduction" (68).

These circumstances end up irremediably damaging the relationship between Avey and Jay: she starts fabricating a story in her mind about her husband having an affair, when, in reality, as she deep down acknowledges, he is only working long hours to make ends meet. Trapped by the lack of opportunities that hinders the amelioration of their conditions, petrified by the fear of what is to come, and anxious about their future in a society that actively marginalizes them, something shatters in her mind, as if "the china bowl which held her sanity and trust fell from its shelf in her mind and broke" (91). Thus, on "a Tuesday evening in the winter of '47" (89) she confronts Jay on his supposed unfaithfulness, something which leads to the worst fight they have ever had, one that will change the course of their lives forever. Their dispute reaches the apex when Avey is figuratively transposed into the unnamed "Halsey Street woman," perpetually hollering at her husband on the street for draining the week's pay on alcohol. In this context, this anonymous woman is yet another brush-stroke on a landscape of desolation, one where women had the worst part as they were often in the position of caretakers and administrators of the few resources available and, sometimes, the victims of sexist violence. As the narrative allows, this woman's rage "spoke not only for herself but for the thousands like her for blocks around, lying sleepless in the cold-water flats and one-room kitchenettes, [...] waiting, all of them, for some fool to come home with his sodden breath and half his pay envelope gone" (108). Making hers the Halsey Street woman's words, she storms at her husband shouting "*Goddam you, nigger, I'll take my babies and go!*" (106). Shocked by the outburst, Jay responds with the question that will haunt him to his very death: "'Do you know who you sound like,' he whispered, choked, appalled, 'who you even look like?'" (106). These words will come to encapsulate the trauma that Halsey Street represents for Jay, that of inhabiting a second-class citizenship. In their exchange however, it is easy to discern the seed of something that will be developed as the couple gains some social status: that inherent need to set themselves apart from others in the community which, like the anonymous woman, represent the doomed fates of Blacks in America. As Susana Morris points out, "although they listen to the blues and recite African American poetry, they also distance themselves from other Blacks that they perceive as lower class, despite (or perhaps because of) their own tenuous class status" (27). Therefore, at this point already, the logic upon which their transformation will take place is marked as profoundly flawed: no matter how much they struggle to differentiate themselves, in the American society they will always be regarded as inferior. Their choice to remain and move forward together is a small victory in the face of so great an adversity; their tragedy resides in the fact that even when they are able to identify the forces that are against them—described in an almost naturalistic fashion that evokes social determinism: "the real villain whom they couldn't talk about, who stood cooly waiting for them amid the spreading light of Halsey

Street below. And there didn't seem to be any escaping him" (97)—they choose an enterprise destined to failure: individual prosperity through assimilation.

The individual transformation of Avey and Jay and their joint transformation as a couple is the axis on which her spiritual journey is articulated. From that "fateful night" (99) onward, their lives steer in a new direction, with the single objective of escaping Halsey Street and never looking back. Jay starts working two, and at times three, jobs, he completes several courses on accounting, devours books devoted to success and self-growth and eventually enrolls at Long Island University to get a degree. The description of the character perfectly captures his entrance in a full-fledged capitalist system, where he not only has to keep up with the laws that regulate the job market, but must make up for his skin color with innumerable qualifications:

> He went about those years like a runner in the heat of a long and punishing marathon, his every muscle tensed and straining, his body being pushed to its limits; and on his face a clenched and dogged look that was to become almost his sole expression over the years. He ran as though he had put on blinders to shut out anything around him that might prove distracting, and thus cause him, if only momentarily, to break the stride. Even things that had once been important to him, that he needed, such as the music, the old blues records that had restored him at the end of the day, found themselves abandoned on the sidelines, out of his line of vision. (115)

This excerpt dramatizes the agonizing process on which the couple embarks to achieve the desired goal of a better social status. Indeed, after twelve years of this excruciating struggle, the Johnsons finally move from Halsey Street: Jay is able to rent desk space in a lawyer's office in Fulton Street (the same street to where Marshall's family had moved) to carry out his business of insurance and real state, and they buy the house on North White Plains, an originally white neighborhood that is being increasingly populated by middle-class Blacks. This change can be best accounted for by taking into consideration two interrelated concepts that Morris employs in her discussion of the novel: politics of respectability and kyriarchy. While the former designates the adoption of the hegemonic ideology on the part of different sets of minorities (either in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation or sexual identity), the latter emphasizes how members of minorities can apply these norms to fellow members of marginalized groups to have power over them. As Morris explains, "[...] kyriarchy foregrounds the ways in which individuals with differing levels of power can exert (or attempt to exert) power over others in order to increase their own social or political standing" (28).

The combination of these ideas offers an accurate explanation for the transformation undergone by the Johnsons which the novel seeks to criticize. This is reflected, for instance, in Jay's adoption of the white racist rhetoric that blames Black people for their own circumstances and accuses them of depending on white people's generosity, instead of taking a proactive stance, a "harsh and joyless ethic" (131) that perjures against the music that had given him nurturance claiming, "If it was left to me I'd close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That's the only way these Negroes out here'll begin making any

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progress" (132). The disturbing transformation that his words denote is reinforced in the narrative by other symbolic changes that the fragment hints at, which make him look, in Avey's view, as if someone "had slipped in when he wasn't looking and had taken up residency behind his dark skin" (131). In this respect, one element that holds a powerful symbolic relevance is his shaving off the moustache which had been described as holding a multi-layered significance as a tribute to his father, his only sign of vanity and a means of diverting attention from his gaze that transpired an intelligence and assertiveness not approved of in Black men, as well as a screen showing that he was a private person (93). When Jay shaves his moustache, because the "damn thing was getting to be a nuisance" (130), Avey finds that he has lost his distinctiveness, and also a "necessary shield" without which he was "as exposed and vulnerable suddenly as a prizefighter who had foolishly let drop his guard" (131). The compelling selection of the war imagery demonstrates a clear-sightedness that contrasts with her behavior and yet shows the ways in which her transformation differs from Jay's, inasmuch as hers retains a distance and suspicion with which she follows the process of returning to her roots. The shaving of the moustache can be read metaphorically as the abandonment of the familiar connections and by extension the roots symbolized by the father, but also a loss of the sense of self-value that his vanity covertly conveyed, to focus instead on unveiling the assertiveness and intelligence that is paramount to enter into the predatory and alienating capitalist system.

There are yet two other interconnected elements that symbolically signal Jay's metamorphosis. The first of them has to do with a strange phenomenon that Avey conceptualizes as the superimposition of a different person's face onto Jay's, a white mask:

> On occasion, glancing at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague, *pale outline* of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure. It was the most fleeting of impressions, something imagined rather than seen, and she always promptly dismissed it. Nonetheless, there it was every so often, *this strange pallid face*, whose expression was even more severe and driven than Jay's, looming up from a subliminal moment over his familiar features. (131; emphasis added)

In the previous description the focus is placed on the whiteness of the mask, and Jay is not simply overtaken by another self, but rather by a *white* self. This has led to the inevitable reading of this passage in light of Frantz Fanon's seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this study, the West Indian psychiatrist traces the effects of colonization on the Black population of the Antilles, where the hegemonic standard of whiteness constructs Blackness as an Otherness against which intellectual supremacy, economic progress and moral superiority are defined. The subject of this inquiry is relevant for the novel both locally and culturally for, not only it is part of the novel set in the same spaces that Fanon analyzes, but its discussion of assimilation constitutes the core of the narrative. It is precisely for the latter that he employs the image of the mask, a way of visualizing the progressive adoption of white standards by the Black population in a futile attempt to garner the material grounds that would enable economic, cultural and psychological independence from the colonizer. Fanon

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talks of the mask as a tool employed to overcome the dilemma at the core of the colonizer-colonized relation: "turn white or disappear" (Fanon 100). It is precisely this emphasis on the relation between the psychological and the material drawn by this author that Chassot finds relevant for Marshall's use of the image of the mask. As she explains, "Avey and Jay's transformation—their putting on white masks—is not, at least not originally, motivated by a desire to be white. [...] However, these constant rejections and the economic insecurity in which they lock the family compel the Johnsons to progressively take their distance from the community and culture in which they used to find support" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 127–128). In the novel this visual marker of change is accentuated by a second element: the name. About this, the narrator states: "While continuing to call him Jay to his face, she [Avey] gradually found herself referring to him as Jerome Johnson in her thoughts" (132). This change of name, that duplicates Avey's, marks the transformation of the loving Jay—a character that Denniston has described as "the most positive male figure" (134) of Marshall's oeuvre—, a man rooted in the tradition of the African America community through music, poetry and the trust on the collective knowledge (epitomized by his belief in the legend of the Ibos), into a distant and cold man who condemns his brothers and sisters and is moved only by the desperate need to move upward.

The virtual creation of a new persona out of Jay's body and soul is further stressed in the scene of his death, which foregrounds, first, the traumatic resonances of the social conditions and the discussion that prompted such a colossal change in their lives. As the final stroke seizes him, he repeats the words with which he assaulted Avey that night, "haunted up to the moment of his death by the memory of Halsey Street" (132). Second, his death and wake are also the occasion for her to witness the taking over of her husband's body by that other, pale self which she tried to dismiss:

> And there it had been, as she had feared, staring up at her from Jerome Johnson's sealed face: that other face with the tight joyless look which she had surprised from time to time over the years. Jerome Johnson was dead, but it was still alive; in the midst of his immutable silence, the sound of its mirthless, triumphant laughter could be heard ringing through the high nave of the church. (133)

The sight that Avey has at this moment of the wake anticipates what she experiences with the second dream when the ghost of Jerome Johnson rebukes her, invoking again the memory of Halsey Street. This may allow us to consider a new level of spectrality within the figure of Jay, in this case one that is imminently metaphorical, for it correlates to the state of living-deadness in which he spent the last years of his life. Devoting most of his time to work and to fulfill the rituals of honorary whiteness, a part of his self seemingly died that night in Halsey Street and, ever since, his body was immersed in a living-deadness that ended up physically transforming him. Chassot accounts for this phenomenon using the lens of zombification—a metaphor that is widely current as well in the accounting of the alienation between body and mind of enslaved people—and says that "Jay's transformation is indeed an extreme example of the fragmentation of the self" (*Ghosts* 126). In a manner, it could be said that he becomes a

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transposition of his ancestors, a *slave* of the system, a system where notwithstanding his personal and working value, he will always be displaced and marginalized due to his skin color. This new added dimension of spectrality can be comprehended within the duality pointed out by Brogan at the beginning of this analysis: in *Praisesong* ghosts denote a cultural tradition and they also reflect on the legacies of slavery in pre-civil rights America.

This scene of Jay being overtaken by Jerome Johnson even in death is not only relevant for the study of his character, but it also becomes an avenue to explore Avey's own transformation—her status as a widow is, after all, what designates her in the title of the novel. In this regard, it is important to note, if only succinctly, the issue of gender, for in Jay's transformation there is also a move toward the consolidation of the strict gender standards held within the white patriarchal society. As Morris points out, Jay is intent on "prov[ing] himself as a modern-day patriarch" (29–30). As such, he bears the burden of demonstrating his value both as a Black person, in terms of race, and as a man, in terms of gender. The narrative emphasizes how the conditions and circumstances that led the married couple to this situation are shared; however, the effects of such transformation are rendered differently for each character. While Jay plunges himself into work in order to bring prosperity for the family, always with his eyes set solely on transcending the circumstances of Halsey Street, Avey's stance is analogous only partially. Indeed, hand in hand with her husband, she puts all of her effort into achieving economic success by combining her own work with the upbringing of their three children. Nonetheless, she preserves an awareness that something is failing: she witnesses how the rituals they shared as a couple progressively efface, how the poetry readings, the music and the lovemaking that had nurtured them, "provid[ing] the nourishment for her down-trodden spirit and the healing of Jay's broken soul" (Brown-Hinds 111), are replaced by a vacuous pragmatism. In this respect, an especially significant case for consideration is found in the couple's sexual encounters about which Avey reminisces during this second spectral passage. She remembers their lovemaking in the crumbled Halsey Street apartment as a physical encounter where they were truly themselves, where the "scandalous talk" led to a profound moment of communion in which her body became for Jay a temple presided by African deities ("Erzulie with her jewels and grossamer veils, Yemoja to whom the rivers and seas are sacred; Oya, first wife of the thunder god and herself in charge of winds and rains..." [127]). Finally, a point "which was strictly a private matter" when Avey experienced the fullness of her own body and the barest expression of the self: "She slipped free of it all: the bed, the narrow hallway bedroom, the house, Halsey Street, her job, Jay, the children, and the child who might come of this embrace. She gave the slip to her ordinary, everyday self. And for a long pulsing moment she was pure self, being, the embodiment of pleasure" (128).

This sensual exploration of physicality has a dual function at this point in the narrative: for one, it foreshadows the importance that the body is going to play in the third spectral passage, when it is turned into a vehicle to reclaim a diasporic identity. In addition, it works as another marker of the alienation that takes hold of the couple as she compares it with their later sexual encounters:

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> Jay's touch increasingly became that of a man whose thoughts were elsewhere, and whose body, even while merged with hers, felt impatient to leave and join them. Sometimes, lying there with her body left abandoned far short of the crested wave, she wanted to shove him over to his side of the bed or to hit him with her fist as he fell into a dead sleep still clinging to her. But then she would think of his shoulders collapsed from the weight of the heavy sample cases when he came in from the futile search on a Monday and of the harried, bloodshot eyes that met hers whenever he glanced up briefly form the manual or textbook he was studying, and then not only would she hold him as tightly, she would want to take to the streets with an avenging sword. (129)

The juxtaposition of these two scenes illuminates how these characters are impacted by the circumstances that surround them and the decisions they made. The body becomes the canvas through which alienation is expressed: consumed by the efforts of being immersed in a never-ending obstacle race, Jay has lost all touch with his wife and his own self. Avey, in turn, shows a critical distance from the turn their life has taken as she can see right through their countless efforts the same enemy that stalked them in Halsey Street, but she feels powerless to make any change. Thus, despite a truth that reveals itself more clearly the longer she ponders, she opts for the strategies of willful ignorance and silence aimed at hushing an inner voice that only finds expression in her indulgence on nostalgic bouts about Halsey Street, ones that she considered "a betrayal," "a sin against the long, twelve-year struggle" (122).

This silence to which the protagonist subjects her conscience speaks of a larger process which DeLamotte has described as a progressive loss of multiple Black voices, including their own, their ancestors' and those of African American artists: "All these losses are forms of repression [...]. This disremembering, which superimposed a white ideology on his own knowledge, was also a dismemberment, a cutting-off of his connections with his community and a mutilation of his personality" (*Places* 87). These are the traces that define Avey too at the beginning and thus her physical and spiritual journey will be aimed at redressing them. As such, the novel puts forward a strong criticism of the social conditions that have taken these two characters to abandon their roots and part of themselves in an attempt to garner validation from the hegemonic society that would allow them to live, and not simply survive, in America. The key point of this is not directed at the desire of achieving a middle-class status, but rather at the changes that the members of the African American community must bring about to even consider the possibility of upward mobility. As Susan Rogers explains, the novel "does not offer a critique of material advancement in itself, but rather when it exists at the expense of cultural identity" (84). In this regard, the concept of "racechange" used by Susan Gubar to analyze colonial relations offers a profoundly accurate insight into the workings of the system in the cases of internal colonization that, as we have seen, are evoked in the text. She explains that "racial impersonation and masquerading are a destiny imposed on colonized Black people who must wear the white mask—of customs and values, of norms and languages, of aesthetic standards and religious ideologies—created and enforced by an alien civilization" (qtd. in Rogers 83). The social comment drawn by the narrative, therefore, considers different aspects of the racial dynamics that were emerging in the period where the

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action is set, but that will continue to be relevant at the time of publication, when a renewed focus is placed on the role of roots and heritage, in a society that is set on proclaiming color-blindness. By questioning what Morris has termed the "myopia of respectability politics" (30), the novel does not simply condemn economic aspirations but, as Christian points out, it explores the complex interrelatedness of economic and spiritual survival by rendering the "tension between black people's need to survive and develop in America, and their even more important need to sustain themselves" (76).

This second spectral passage is the one that most directly tackles the understanding of spectrality as a vehicle through which to articulate a social criticism of a racial violence that, far from disappearing, takes new shapes throughout history. If, in the first passage, Avey was forced to heed her Aunt Cuney and re-member her childhood memories, in this second instance she must fully confront the underside of the life she and her husband built, the one she continues to live. In this part she is revealed no longer as the superficial middle-class African American matron, but as a Black woman who has chosen silence and a façade of imperviousness as tools to cope with trauma. DeLamotte has perfectly captured this stance with her assessment of the character at the beginning of the narrative. As she explains, "The materialism that imprisons Avey in silence and stasis by the time of her third Caribbean cruise on the *Bianca Pride* is not a sin but a form of violence a racist economy has inflicted on her, first through poverty and then through the fierce struggle against it that deadened her husband with self-alienating work" (DeLamotte, *Places* 82). In this manner, the first passage creates an atemporal space that pulls Avey from her deadening routine and directs her gaze to knowledge that lies buried within herself, and the second opens up that space for her to finally come to terms with that incipient awareness, that distance she always maintained but chose to ignore. This forceful insight to which she is prompted by the ghosts culminates with "a cry that startled the darkness holding the wake with her on the balcony" (142). This duplicate of the section's title ("Sleeper's Wake") reinforces a reading of the whole passage as a wake that enables the process of mourning, described by Brogan as "a way of remembering that brings into relief a break in continuity" (*Cultural* 145), that dominates the first two parts of the novel. After four years, she is finally able to open herself viscerally, to occupy her space as a widow and mourn "the rigid and compulsive Jerome," "the more sensitive and culturally attuned Jay" and "her own cultural loss" (Denniston 136). The litany that incessantly bursts from her lips, "Too much! Too much!" (138ff.), assesses the sacrifices that the couple made: the surrender of her husband's true self; the small rituals of "pretend dances in the living room," their Sunday mornings spent "listening to gospels and reciting fragments of old poems while eating coffee cake" or the "ride on a Jim Crow bus each summer to visit the site of an unrecorded, uncanonized miracle" (136), and the connectedness with the rest of the community that these had implied; as well as the willful distancing from their fellow African Americans, epitomized in their lack of racial solidarity. As Avey acknowledges, "Hadn't she lived through most of the sixties and the early seventies as if Watts and Selma and the tanks and Stoner guns in the streets of Detroit somehow did not pertain to her, denying her rage, and carefully effacing any dream that might have come to her during the night by the time she awoke the next morning" (140).

This process seems to give Avey not just the full clear-sightedness that she needed, but most importantly, the acknowledgement and acceptance of a truth and a feeling that she had harbored, silenced within herself. This renewed awareness sows the seeds of the possibility of change that is first instantiated through a reconsideration of what it would have taken for her and Jay to prosper without giving themselves up in the process:

> Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! They could have done both, it suddenly seemed to her, bowed over in tears there in the hotel balcony. She and Jay could have managed both. […] Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own. And strength. It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. To take only what was needed and to run. And distance. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and the heart had been absolutely essential. (139)

This excerpt epitomizes Avey's regained awareness and hints at the change that is to overcome her in the final section of the novel. The initial part dramatizes the crossroads in which she and her husband where placed and acknowledges the high price that they have paid for the decisions they made, losing in the process what they should have valued the most in themselves. In the second part of the fragment, however, what seemed a rhetorical question is given a practical answer: she is no longer wondering, but she feels confident that another way is possible. In the alternative way that she delineates, she foregrounds the value of Black life and the resistance of assimilation into the white, capitalist society that is presented like a trap. This view has sometimes been seen as naïve; however, at this point in the narrative the exercise of searching for alternatives and the certainty that they are viable is what will prompt her, inadvertently, toward the last phase of her journey, one where she will have to consider the role that the extended community has in providing a support network that can help those who share a similar enterprise.

2.2.1.3 The Ghosts of Diaspora: Ancestral Spirits

This second confrontation of Avey with a ghost from her past ends up effecting an important change in her path. The events that take place after the symbolic wake that the protagonist experiences in the presence of her husband's specter are developed in the third and fourth parts of the novel, and they constitute a fundamental prelude to understand the reach of the third spectral passage. The third part, entitled "Lavé Tête" in allusion to Voudou rituals, opens with a third and final dream. Unlike in the previous cases, this time Avey is not accosted by haints, but, instead, the blur in which she finds herself is dominated by the whiff of a soiled

baby which is, at first, confused with one of her children, only to eventually realize that the smell, in fact, comes from "the staleness of her own flesh in the slept-in clothes" (150). If the previous dreams were characterized by bringing the past into the present, this third instance works in reverse, functioning as an anticipatory element. In this new trip in which the protagonist is about to embark, she metaphorically becomes the soiled baby that needs to be tended to in a scene that acquires the symbolic relevance of rebirth. This process could be said to begin when she decides to abandon the hotel and explore by herself the isle of Grenada; what begins as a harmless walk turns into a suffocating quest that will change her fate. After spending hours walking aimlessly under the hot sun, Avey tries to procure help to return to the hotel in a small rum shop she encounters along the way. Its owner, Lebert Joseph, becomes a key figure in the journey that Avey is about to begin. The relevance of this character lies in the multi-dimensionality embedded in his identity: most critics agree that his physical characterization as a "stoop-shouldered old man with one leg shorter than the other" (160) approximates him to an embodiment of Legba, an African deity that appears in diasporic folktales. As Janelle Rodriques explains, this retention figures prominently in different Afro-Caribbean cultures depicting a liminal being that exists between the realm of the human and the gods, as well as among the demarcated axes of time:

> […] the aged Haitian avatar of Esu Eleggua, the Yoruban god of the crossroads, who became infirm during the Middle Passage. Esu/Legba is known throughout the African diaspora as the messenger of the gods. He speaks all languages, and guards all knowledge. He is the first of the Haitian lwa, and all invocations must go through him, all ceremonies must begin with him. In Cuban Santería, Elegguá represents the beginning and end of life (and time)—he guards the thresholds between past, present and future. The Yoruba recognize Eshu, with his slippery interdimensional movements, as a trickster. He delights in pranks that disrupt order and rend social fabric, if only to mend it again. (12)

This interpretation of Lebert Joseph falls in line with the broader use of Africanist elements deployed by Marshall and it is reinforced indirectly by the allusions to Voudou practices as an example of the retentions and transformation of African belief systems in the New World. These are referenced in the epigraphs which open this part of the narrative: "Papa Legba, ouvri barriére pou' mwê," according to the author a Voudou Introit from Haiti, and a quote from Randall Jarrell which seems to function as a translation: "Oh, Bars of my … body, open, open!" (148). These anticipate the role that Lebert Joseph is going to play in Avey's life. Before her, he appears as a familiar atemporal entity who harbors within himself a struggle that transcends the individual and engages history:

> He was one of those old people who give the impression of having undergone a lifetime trial by fire which they somehow managed to turn to their own good in the end; using the fire to burn away everything in them that could possibly decay, everything mortal. So that what remains finally are only their cast-iron hearts, the few muscles and bones tempered to the consistency of steel needed

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> to move them about, the black skin annealed long ago by the sun's blaze and thus impervious to all other fires; and hidden deep within, out of harm's way, the indestructible will: old people who have the essentials to go on forever. (161)

In this description the real and the mythical are blended, thus drawing the picture of a man shaped by contemporary history and powerfully connected to an unreachable past. As a link between these two realities, Lebert Joseph turns into a living ancestor for Avey, working analogously to Aunt Cuney by adopting the attributes of a memory repository and guide. As Pettis argues, "because Aunt Cuney is dead, the process of Avey's regeneration demands a live ancestor for its completion. In many ways Lebert Joseph becomes Aunt Cuney's live counterpart. Like her, he is androgynous, spiritually attuned to his heritage and fitted with superhuman knowledge" (121).

Indeed, this first encounter between Avey and Lebert is instrumental in actualizing the former's awakening, and, at the same time, it definitely moves her away from the individual self to not just the proximity of the African American community in the U.S., but to the larger African diaspora in the Americas. Lebert provides her with the inside view about the excursion to Carriacou that she had witnessed upon leaving the cruise; he talks about the annual tradition in which the natives of the island return to see the family, relax, and most importantly, to pay homage to the Old Parents with different rituals that range from food offerings and libation to the central ceremony of the Beg Pardon. Demonstrating a knowledge that transcends the limits of human possibilities and certainties, he stresses the imperativeness of this tradition:

> "The Long-time People. Each year this time they does look for us to come and give them their remembrance. I tell you, you best remember them!" he cried, *fixing Avey Johnson with a gaze that was slowly turning inward.* "If not, they'll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute, you know." (165; emphasis added)

These words directly appeal to her as they turn into an apt account of the events that befell her from the beginning of the narrative and that have left her in the present sate. That fixing gaze that turns inwards attempts to remove her conscience, to implicitly state that he knows what she has been through, that he understands because, like the proverbial Ibos, he has the gift of sight. Furthermore, this acknowledgement aims to prepare Avey for the critical question that Lebert poses next: "And what you is? […] What is your nation?" (166–167). This brief and direct address constitutes an unsuspected turning point in the narration, for it offers Avey the opportunity for redemption. She is forced to confront the question of her origins, those roots that she has made an effort to forget and that were brought back by the ghost of her great-aunt; she tries to shield herself in ignorance and misunderstanding, claiming "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone from around here, or from one of the other islands… who might know that you're talking about. I'm from the States. New York…" (168). Lebert Joseph, however, is not willing to exempt her, and he responds to that attempt at elusion by identifying Avey's uprootedness and comparing it with that of his youngest descendants. It is

because he can see right through her, because he possesses what she later identifies as "ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (*Li gain connaissance*)" (172), that she will come to experience another of the many catharses in her journey. As if propelled by the urgency to save herself, and possessed by something that she cannot name with words, she starts telling the old man about her odyssey and the circumstances that led her there.

As he witnesses Avey's rendition of her own life, Lebert experiences a change that goes unnoticed by the protagonist—"From the moment she started recounting the dream his head had come up, his eyes had opened and he had begun quietly studying her from beneath his lowered brow. His gaze never left her face. Intense, probing, it was like a jeweler's loupe he might have fitted into his eye to get at her inner workings" (171)—but that will mark several other moments when the figure of the old, limping man seems to transform into a younger version of himself, or even a woman dancing the *juba*. These conversions reinforce the dimension of Legba as a trickster, and Isaiah Lavender provides a reading of Lebert Joseph along the trickster paradigm that accurately accounts for the events that follow Avey's confession. He argues that in African American narratives the trickster figure has come to symbolize an identity crisis emerging from "the psychological conflict that characters suffer through because they wish to escape memories of their past, deny their heritage, or have forgotten it altogether" (109). As such he has a positive and negative valence since he represents the crisis in itself, but also provides any necessary means to overcome it, in Avey's case by turning into a guide that may thoroughly direct her toward a rejection of her "middle class ideals" and materialism, "reestablishing her cultural heritage instead" (Lavender 113). For this purpose, Avey needs to embark on the excursion to Carriacou, and Lebert does everything in his power to turn odds in his favor. After listening to her, he offers her a drink of rum and coconut water that seems to have a specially strong effect, in spite of her familiarity with the beverage; he tells her about the Nation Dances, especially the Bongo song and dance, whose lyrics stand as a testament to the horrors of slavery regarding the separation of families; and concludes by demonstrating the *juba* dance. Under the effects of the drink, she now witnesses firsthand the transformation undergone by the old trickster:

> At first, the dance had clearly been too much for him. And he had had to force his lame, aged body through the strenuous movements. But gradually, as he kept on, the strain and stiffness became less apparent. His stooped shoulders appeared to come into line. The foreshortened left leg seemed to grow with each step until it was the same length as his right. He once again looked tall enough to reach up and easily touch the thatch overhead. One by one his defects and the wear and tear of his eighty- or perhaps even ninety-odd years fell away and he was dancing after a time with the strength and agility of someone half his age. (179)

Avey is mesmerized and yet, when Lebert makes the formal proposition for her to accompany him in the annual trip to Carriacou, she makes excuses not to go, with the ensuing verbal combat between them which closely resembles her fight with Aunt Cuney and leaves her

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exhausted. Unlike with Cuney, however, Avey soon recognizes that Lebert has the upper hand since her own decision not to follow the old man and return to New York instead brings back the "peculiar clogged and bloated feeling in her stomach" (181). With words exhausted, each of the parties remains seated at the rum shop table contemplating each other, Lebert with a conveniently developed nervous tic that softly rocks his head side-to-side resembling a movement as "strictly timed as the want on a metronome or the pendulum of an old-fashioned clock" (182). Following Lavender's interpretation, the whole scene and these apparently anecdotal details—first the drink and later this mysterious movement—are part of an "elaborate trap" set by the trickster to nudge Avey in the right direction whereby the drink functions, in fact, as a purgative that will have its effects during the trip, and the nervous tic a hypnotic technique of sorts (116–117). Notwithstanding the extent to which Lebert Joseph may have acted physically to direct her path, his influence on her decision to pursue the awareness she had gained in the first two spectral passages is undeniable.

The excursion to Carriacou dramatizes Avey's coming to terms with the experiences and knowledge that emerged from the prior spectral passages, as well as with the encounter with diaspora, and it develops in three parts. The first of this is constituted by the journey itself that transports her from Grenada to the smaller island of Carriacou. The trope of the journey that dominates the novel acquires new layers of meaning here, not only because it implies a spiritual journey in which she encounters a part of herself that was seemingly lost, but also because it traces the collective history that she must reclaim for herself. As Rodriques explains, "Avey's journey is a retracing, to some extent, of these journeys of estrangement from self and community, and it is no accident that Marshall's narrative takes place mostly at sea, or on shores—in liminal spaces forever marked by transatlantic slavery and black suffering" (5). These will be the background of the trip, as from the moment that the protagonist embarks on the *Emmanuel C,* she begins an exercise in memory akin to those prompted by the previous spectral passages, but this time decidedly marked by the force of collectivity. The crowd on the wharf brings memories of yet another trip, one that she used to take with her parents up the Hudson River to the Bear Mountain Park when she was a child. What is particularly relevant about this trip is the feeling of communion that Avey experienced and that she captured symbolically through the image of the threads:

> Sometimes, standing with her family amid the growing crowd on the pier, waiting for the *Robert Fulton* to heave into sight, she would have *the same strange sensation as when she stood beside her great-aunt outside the church in Tatem, watching the elderly folk inside perform the Ring Shout*. As more people arrived to throng the area beside the river and the cool morning air warmed to the greetings and talk, she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of *slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her*. And *the threads went out not only to people she recognized from the neighborhood but to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father*. (191; emphasis added)

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This image speaks directly to the idea of connection, and, in this respect, it is important to consider *when* it appears as well as *who* it involves. The first time she identifies this connection is when watching the Ring Shout, which she sees reduplicated among the Black population that comes together in this trip, and she will later identify it as well among those in the ceremony of the Beg Pardon. In each of these instances the people involved represent different sectors of the Black population: first, the African Americans who remained in the South, then the African Americans who, like her parents, were born in the North as descendants of immigrants, but also different groups of Blacks who migrated from the Caribbean and were living in New York, and, finally, the natives of Carriacou. These, as Benjamin points out, "represent a specific subset of the African American diasporic experience" (60). By merging different social groups along a broad temporal axis that goes from her infant years to her maturity, Avey identifies the collective experience of these groups. Benjamin further delves into the three-fold purpose of these threads, as "they connect Avey with others, stand as tangible symbols of the ancestral connections that she wants to feel, and represent the center of the web of relationships she is forming" (60).[27] This, thus, turns into a powerful symbol that unites different social groups as well as the past, the present and the future.

By the time the boat arrives, the novel registers what could be described as a map of contrasts: Avey is at ease and feels comfortable among the fellow travelers that remind her of the group of women who attended church with her mother, as opposed to her hurried escape from the cruise and the anxiousness that invaded her there. The boat itself is perhaps the greatest opposite: the colossal *Bianca Pride* is replaced by a humble schooner, the *Emmanuel C*, a name that blatantly alludes to the figure of Jesus from the Christian tradition. In fact, the first part of the trip aboard the schooner revolves around Avey's memories of attending church and a voice coming from the pulpit in a sermon about Jesus's sacrifice and the imperativeness of following the Lord's guidance. The Christian symbolism of this initial portion of the trip contrasts with the ceremony that she will be attending in Carriacou. However, the fact that both are embedded within her spiritual journey speaks of the blending of both traditions in the New World. Avey's placid reminiscing is brought to an abrupt end when she starts experiencing what at first seems sea sickness, but that slowly turns into an excruciating purge. She is overtaken by several weaves of nausea and diarrhea, that leave her exhausted body to the care of the women in the boat who hold her through the turbulence. Once again, her corporeality becomes a means through which to embody the shift that the narrative is performing: as if the effects of that bloated feeling were no longer avoidable, she metaphorically expels from her body all that is alien to the new self she is reclaiming. Furthermore, her now stranded and empty body begins to turn into the recipient of history for, in a semi-unconscious state, she seems to experience the Middle Passage in her own flesh:

[27] This critic argues that another possible symbolic interpretation of the threads is an allusion to the Ghanian spider-trickster figure of Kwaku Ananse, who, in the U.S. African American folklore, became Aunt Nancy, a healer or master mediator (Benjamin 49–51). In her view, Marshall reclaims this Africanist element in her novel as a "culturally reconnective force" (Banjamin 49) that can be tracked in the web imagery as well as in the character of Lebert Joseph, where its attributes cohabit with those of Legba (Bejamin 54).

> She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence. (209)

This is a crucial point in the narrative, a moment that Rogers has described as "pivotal in Avey's transition from disavowal to acceptance" (86). It dramatizes her encounter with the traumatic history of forced displacement and enslavement and confronts her with the resonances that this past bears in her own present. This reconnection with her ancestry implies the final severing of the ties she still held with white, middle-class values (Lavender 119), which will be reinforced through the plans she has for a new life informed by the ethical need to bear witness and transmit this knowledge to future generations. This is, at the same time, the first step to reclaim the collective dimension of her identity, a quest that will be fulfilled during her stay in the island.

If the first journey took the protagonist from New York to the Caribbean to confront a past that she had preferred to forget, the second transports her to a place where memory, community and resistance turn into the pillars to build a new future. Similarly to Tatem Island or Halsey Street, Carriacou is a location that holds a special significance for the protagonist's development. As Pettis notes, "Marshall's choice of Carriacou as the site of Avatara's spiritual reintegration is not capricious, for its isolation, particular history, and cultural and social homogeneity, distinguish it from other societies in the British West Indies" (130). The author had, in fact, first-hand knowledge of the island as she visited it in one of her trips to Grenada in 1962. In her memoir she devotes some pages to explaining the trip to this satellite island in a schooner as well as the ritual of the Big Drum that would be represented in *Praisesong*, and she draws a crucial connection between this and the Ring Shout, with the exception of the drums (Marshall, *Triangular* 140–145). In the narrative, the parallelism between Tatem and Carriacou permeates into the features of the island itself as well as its idiosyncrasies. M.G. Smith, in her 1962 monograph *Kinship and Community in Carriacou*, offers a portrait of the isle contemporary to the narrative action. Located northeast of Trinidad, the small island is "almost completely unknown to the outside world" (M.G. Smith 1). M.G. Smith explains that it was the possession of the British and the French alternatively, until in the eighteenth century the former gained control, and the "heavy importation of slaves" (22) fueled the economy of sugar plantations. Similar to what happened in the Sea Islands, the relative isolation and homogeneity in the population allowed for the preservation of African-based beliefs and rituals that were often mixed with the Christian values of the colonizers. Among the former, and especially relevant for our discussion, is the belief in an afterlife where the living and the dead "old parents" may interact through rituals such as food offerings and libation or the Big Drum (M.G. Smith 138). A particularly relevant piece of information gathered by M.G. Smith signals the idea, held among the islanders, that the ancestors may communicate through dreams that are only shared with the living souls that

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belong to the community (141–142). This adds a new layer of significance to the role of dreams in the novel that, at the same time, anticipates and stresses the connection that Avey will eventually draw with this community and, by extension, with the African diaspora, as an honorary member. Taking all of this into consideration, Carriacou could be said to work as a reduplication of Tatem Island, equally holding in itself "the forces of memory, history, and spirit" (Olmsted 259). The divergence in the external setting, by being located in the Caribbean instead of in the United States, introduces the diasporic dimension and reinforces the shared origins of the different groups and positions it as a necessary element of Avey's renewed awareness.

Upon arriving at Carriacou, Avey is taken care of by Lebert Joseph's daughter, Rosalie Parvay. Like Avey, she is a widow and, like her father, she possesses what had been referred to as *li gain conaissance,* the "special powers of seeing and knowing" (218). The fourth part of the novel opens with the detailed description of the washing that Rosalie performs on her, which constitutes the second part of the aforementioned dramatization of the protagonist's contact with diaspora. This healing ritual is described as a "laying on of hands" (217), to emphasize its restorative power that approximates it to an act of rebirth. Brown-Hinds has labeled this a "cathartic bath" that, likewise, functions as a "type of baptism which marks the rebirth of her renewed spirit and functions as a step in her movement towards reconnection" (112). This rendition stresses the centrality of the body in the narrative and provides a detailed account of Avey's response to the intervention:

> She [Rosalie] was oblivious to everything but the sluggish flesh she was working between her hands as if it were the dough of the bread she had baked that morning or clay that had yet to be shaped and fired. Until finally under the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again. [...] The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up though the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (223–224)

This initial symbolism of an object under the hands of the expert artisan is soon replaced by an undivided focus on the materiality of the body. Working as a counterpart to the description of Avey and Jerome's moments of intimacy, this passage depicts her body awakening from a deep numbness derived from the alienation she was suffering from. At this point Avey's body has been stripped of all the emblems of wealth and class status, her nakedness suggests this idea of rebirth, and the façade of appearances has been replaced by a feeling that spreads through her core pulling her out of indifference. This reconnection of Avey with her body and her sexuality runs parallel to the broader reconnection with her origins and with the diasporic community, drawing a connection between the corporeal and the spiritual that is fundamental in an African-derived conception of the self (Christian 81).

The third and final element of this second journey is Avey's attendance at and participation in the annual ceremony of the Big Drum, which gives the title to the final part of the novel. This also constitutes the core of the third spectral passage, one that is deeply marked by a diverse number of Africanist elements. As already mentioned, this third passage differs from the previous ones inasmuch as there is no longer a familiar ghost with whom Avey has an exchange that forces her to confront her past; on this occasion there are a multitude of unidentified spectral figures which are the timeless ancestors of Carriacou and offer her a possibility for the future. Unlike Cuney or Jay, they do not address her directly, but their presence is the fundamental constitutive element of the ceremony she attends, and their metaphorical embrace is the grounds upon which she will reclaim her new diasporic identity. The role that these specters fulfill is similar to the third function delineated by Chassot in her spectrographical model: re-membering diaspora. While a theoretical discussion of the concept of diaspora falls outside the scope of this analysis, I would like to briefly comment on some notions which are of relevance to understand the outcome of the novel. From Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) to Paul Gilroy's seminal monograph *The Black Atlantic* (1993), the debate around the nature and conception of the African diaspora and the implications that it may have for the construction of the identity of the Black subject has been a central issue. *Praisesong* engages with the question of diaspora from the same moment the *Bianca Pride* sets sail to the Caribbean coast, but it becomes more apparent as the protagonist descends from that monstrous ship to a land that, despite her touristic trips, remains a mystery. Locale, as explained so far, is essential in the mapping of an Atlantic connection and, in fact, critics such as Velma Pollard have approached the depiction of diaspora through the concept of "submarine unity," coined by the Barbadian poet and academic Edward Brathwaite, an author known for his studies on the centrality of Africa in Caribbean epistemology. Pollard argues that "In Marshall's novel cultural unity joins the Black people of the Sea Islands of the southern United States to the Black people of the Caribbean and by implication to all diaspora people. The unity is the result of cultural retention from a common ancestor" (286). However, as it will be seen through the discussion of Avey's partaking in the dance, the notion of diaspora that is put forward in the narrative is one that emerges from a deeply constructivist standpoint. Lily Cho's conception of diaspora as a "condition of subjectivity" (14) that Rodriques echoes in her analysis of the novel, is useful to approach the rendition of diasporic bonds in the novel. Cho contends that the diasporic is a state toward which one moves consciously, arguing:

> Blackness is not inherently diasporic. Black diaspora subjectivity emerges in what it means to be black and live through the displacement of slavery and to carry into the future the memory of the losses completed by the legacy of slavery, to be torn by the ambivalences of mourning losses that are both your own and yet not quite your own. Black diasporic subjectivity emerges in relation to other diasporic communities and through the depths of histories that will not rest because they have had no peace. (21)

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The two dimensions implied here—the imprint that the history of slavery and oppression has left in the collective psyche of African descendants in the New World, as well as the way they must struggle with its legacies, and the choice to carry on with those memories—are the two fundamental forces that emerge in Avey's final transformation.

After the ritual bath, Avey is fully recovered, and her sight seems to be sharper than ever: she analyzes the landscape and realizes the parallels between Carriacou and Tatem Island (the place in itself, as well as the belief in afterlife and the subsequent rituals for the dead) and, also, Lebert Joseph's deception that she, nonetheless, forgives and feels grateful for. The food offerings and libation that she had registered upon the tumultuous arrival (a roasted ear of corn on a plate next to a lighted candle and the sprinkling of rum outside the house) or *saraca* are ritual sacrifices to the Old Parents based on the importance of food exchange among the community members that here extends to the spiritual realm (McDaniel 109). These are the preamble for the ceremony of the Big Drum, in Morris's words an epitome of "an ethic of community support and accountability" (39), the key event in the celebration of the ancestors, which is divided in three parts. The ceremony opens with the Beg Pardon in which three drummers accompany Lebert Joseph and his family's interpretation of the song "*Pa'doné mwê*" about the Bongo slave family that was separated by the slave traders, sending the husband to Trinidad and the wife to Haiti and leaving their two orphaned children in Carriacou. This tale encapsulates the collective memory of slavery, and it holds a special place in the folk tradition of the island for, as Lebert Joseph explains, it was passed down through generations as an etiological myth and an imperative to remember: "Both of them cry so that day we say it's their tears whenever there's a big rain. The Bongo man and his wife crying we say. And when they came with the irons to take away the wife she begged a friend of hers named Lidé to grieve for her and to console the children" (176). As its name concedes, this first part of the ritual is the moment when the community asks for the forgiveness of their offenses to their ancestors which are a ghostly presence throughout the entire ritual. A key aspect of this practice is the reinforcement of the collective dimension, which Lebert had anticipated to Avey by telling her: "when you see me down on my knees at the Big Drum, I don't be singing just for me one. Oh, no! Is for *tout moun"*" (175). This comment emphasizes the ties built among the different groups that are part of the diaspora, embedding them in the collective memory. As Collier points out, "the ritual draws together Black people throughout time and space and declares their commonality" (313). This inclusive outlook appeals directly to Avey, whose shift in attitude becomes apparent in her response to the song: "Over by the tree Avey Johnson slowly lifted her head. And for an instant as she raised up it almost seemed to be her great-aunt standing there beside her in the guise of the big-bone maid. *Pa'doné mwê*" (237). The fact that at this moment she seemingly discerns the presence of her Aunt Cuney and asks her for forgiveness finally grants the old woman the status of ancestral guide in the eyes of her grandniece and shows her how far she has come in the reversal of her alienation from her roots and the consolidating embrace of the diasporic culture.

The Beg Pardon is followed by the Nation Dances in which each member of the community provides a representation of their ancestors' nation, which is rendered thus:

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> And one or two or sometimes three old souls whose nation it was would sing their way into the circle and there dance to the extent of their strength. Saluting their nations. Summoning the Old Parents. Inviting them to join them in the circle. And invariably they came. A small land crab might suddenly scuttle past the feet of one of the dancers. A hard-back beetle would be seen zooming drunkenly (from all the Jack Iron imbibed earlier) around their heads. Sometimes it was nothing more than a moth, a fly, a mosquito. In whimsical disguise they made their presence known. (238–239)

This depiction of the nation dances encapsulates the main elements of a spiritual view that owes much to African retentions, at the same time that it speaks of historical gaps. The circle that the dancers create evokes practices like the Ring Shout and it symbolizes a different conception of time, what Sheila McKoy calls "limbo time," which is based on the traditional African religious paradigms where "the relationship of the living with ancestors establishes the pattern of life" ("The Limbo" 212). This author argues that these dances are an example of how this notion of time (one defined by a continuum between life and death, and thus the persistence of the deceased in the world of the living, and epitomized through ritual) replaces the competitive conception of time held in the West. As she explains, in diasporic cultures "temporal notions become set in cultural ritual and culture is defined by the ways in which it resonates with and reenacts the past. Limbo time forces an understanding of cyclical time and assures cultural preservation. Limbo time, then, is referential to both the experience of survival and cultural continuity" (McKoy, "The Limbo" 215). Indeed, the fragment acknowledges the spectral presence of the ancestors that attend the ceremony held in their honor reincarnated in different creatures. Next to this exploration of an alternative conception of time and life, the description implicitly acknowledges an ambivalent historical reality. On the one hand, the existence of some people, even if they are only two or three, who are still able to name their nation and reproduce their dance centuries after the transatlantic slave trade conjures the resistance of the enslaved and their ability to craft and transmit a Creole culture that flourished under terrible conditions, and that will serve to guide their descendants toward spiritual nurturance. Morris highlights the agency behind this cultural forms, claiming that "[...] rather than simply lamenting the destruction that slavery and colonialism have wrought, the nation dances, while certainly not dismissing the violent legacies of these institutions, reflect the resourceful and transgressive ways in which Blacks have formed kinship networks and communities throughout the Diaspora" (40). On the other hand, the reality that the narrative is testament to remains: the exodus of people from these smaller places where a vernacular African American culture was retained for longer toward the city implies the progressive assimilation into the mainstream culture and the loss of connections with the culture of origin that are problematized through the character of Avey.

By witnessing the nation dances Avey becomes even more painfully aware of her own dispossession, and a pressing need to become a part of it emerges in her:

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> All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The

> bare bones. The burnt-out ends. And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself. Thoughts—new thoughts—vague and half-formed slowly beginning to fill the emptiness. (240)

Her turn, however, does not come until the third part of the ceremony, the "Creole dances," which Collier singles out as the "novel's climax" (313), where the young members of the community who cannot name their nations or anyone else who wishes to do so can participate. The preliminary moments to her dance delve into the expansion of Avey's consciousness explored through the acuteness of the senses: her sight seems to clear and, witnessing the fluid identity of Lebert, she finally identifies the symbols which characterize him as Legba: "And what of the cripple dwarf of a thousand years she had seen or perhaps not seen at the crossroads earlier? Not a trace of him was evident. He had been packed away for another time in the trunk containing the man's endless personas" (243). Sight and, more specifically, the ability to see beyond are important elements throughout the narrative that establish a connection across time and space. From the Ibos to Rosalie Parvay, and including the ancestral figures of both communities, Lebert and Cuney, the sense of sight as defined in the novel speaks of *seeing* the past and acknowledging one's roots, of *seeing* how this is an integral part of the future, and of *seeing* others who are part of a broader community that unites Africa with the Caribbean and the United States. Addressing Avey's process of acquiring this second sight, Chassot explains how this superimposition of a spectral image on the reality that she is witnessing contributes to the perceptiveness that she is in the process of achieving: "Double vision, which amounts to a form of re-vision, allows her to see through the veneer of her complacent life and to see it for what it really is: a form of spiritual dispossession that is akin to enslavement" (*Ghosts* 117). Equally important, she also attunes her sense of hearing to this new reality, deciphering in the music emanating from the drum the core of what Carriacou and the community represent for her:

> The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with is trauma and pain out of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still–bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart. (245)

It is through music that Avey finally attributes full meaning to the ritual she is witnessing. She is able to discern how the memory of slavery has shaped the lives of these people, leaving evidence of the discontinuities among the diaspora's heirs. As Pettis points out, this is reproduced through the motifs of psychological dislocation present in the novel: "Fragmentation is located in the historical experiences of black people of the African diaspora, and the fractured psyche is defined as the rending and mutilation of human spirit, a process that represents an unavoidable consequence of traumatic cultural displacement" (3). This view would go more in line with the notion of cultural identity put forward by Hall in

"Cultural Identity and Diaspora," where he advocates for a position that acknowledges the ruptures and discontinuities that affect a cultural identity forged on the process of forced migration and dispersal, at the same time that he underlines how they are subjected to a sustained transformation (225). At the same time, however, she realizes how the community in Carriacou appropriated this and turned it into a celebration that guides the listeners into a collective act of remembrance. Considering these tensions, Carissa Smith claims that although what the islanders have may not be "authentic," these are the fragments that "mark their identity as diasporic," for "Africa as a pure, ancestral place is unreachable, but they have put down roots in the sifting, routed ground of the diasporic place" (720). The whole fragment builds toward the final image of the collective heart which becomes a proxy for diasporic consciousness and, at this point, the tension between trauma and resistance that the whole ceremony evokes is once again reiterated: the scars of that past remain, but living blood still moves that bleeding heart. As Rogers explains, "The text conveys the message that there can never be a return to wholeness that erases knowledge of the divisions encountered along the way" (89). The vision put forward in these pages is not the return to an ideal unity but, rather, the power that memory might have for those living in the wake of slavery.

Having gained sufficient perspective to appreciate the direction of her journey, Avey can no longer remain a silent witness but, instead, she takes an active role in the ceremony and joins the rest of the dancers. As if her body was remembering a long-forgotten self, she begins to dance to the music of the Carriacou Tramp as the childhood memories of her Aunt Cuney and Tatem Island invade her. Defying the ghostly voice of Jerome Johnson lunging at Harlem's dancehalls, she integrates the circle with the rest of the dancers, carefully observing the principle of the Ring Shout and never allowing the soles of her feet to leave the ground and dancing to the movements that posit her as an heir of the Arada nation. A second dimension of spectrality explored in this third passage in connection with this moment, is concerned with the understanding of Avey's state during the dance as one of possession by her ancestral namesake. For Brogan, this possession is instrumental in Avey's reclamation of her diasporic identity: "She embodies her ancestral spirits by commemorating them, becoming black by allowing herself to be possessed, in an entirely positive sense, by (ancestral) ghosts. Only by participating in a ritual of mourning in which she incorporates the sprits of the dead does Avey recuperate a denied past and redefine her own ethnic identity" (*Cultural* 151). A powerful image that accompanies her incorporation to the circle is that of the aforementioned threads uniting her and the rest of the people in the celebration. While as a child her senses had been invaded by an acritical feeling of connection with the Black people surrounding her up the Hudson River, now, being granted second sight, the protagonist sees the symbiosis between the individual and the community and among the multitude of Black communities stemming from the foundational trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. These threads are for Avey the nurturing force that she needs to find in order to consolidate her journey, "[a]nd their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends" (249). As she fully embraces the community by becoming part of that circle that unites the living and the dead in a collective, pulsing heart, the community embraces her with a reverential bow which, initiated by Lebert

Joseph himself, spreads from the youngest to the eldest. This dance, played out before the atemporal eyes of spectral ancestors, prompts recognition at two interconnected levels: Avey's self-recognition, symbolized by the recuperation of the name Avatara, and her recognition as an heir to the diasporic tradition by the fellow members of the community, epitomized in the naming of the Arada as the nation to which she belongs.

2.2.2. Cloncluding Remarks

With the conclusion of the third spectral passage, Avey's spiritual journey comes to an end. The spectral interactions that mark her journey enable a temporal and spatial mobility that allows her to experience what Helen Lock calls the "transformative power of rememory" (113). This active form of remembering is the ground on which her whole metamorphosis is anchored and, as Rogers states, "rememory enables her to reconstruct the past, recover and reconnect with what is important, reject mistakes and injustices, and finally re-make herself differently" (116). After saying her farewells to Lebert and Rosalie and thanking them, she departs from Carriacou to come back to New York. Evoking the circle that unites the living and the dead in the Big Drum, the cyclical structure of *Praisesong* returns Avey to her place of origin. Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego has accounted for the protagonist's inner journey as "a spiritual return to a historical self" (127). For this critic, the conception of return put forward in Marshall's work functions similarly to the aforementioned notion of "rememory," inasmuch as both tackle the dimensions of collective history and spiritual memory and propose a new paradigm of life with "consciousness at its heart" (Castro Borrego 127). As such, Avey incorporates these added dimensions of the self into her life, and projects them onto the future. She sets two purposes for the remainder of her life: to spread the word about what that journey to the heart of history has taught her, and to return to Tatem Island. While this ending has sometimes been read as overly idealistic or naïve, it seems an apt closure that provides an integrative vision of the different issues raised in the novel's pages. For one, following on the relevance of Africanist elements in the narrative, Avey comes in contact with and appropriates this heritage as a powerful source of resistance, claiming for herself the role of the griot—a storyteller bent on telling her friends, acquaintances and even strangers about a different reality from that to which they are subject in the quotidian life. Furthermore, her plans to rebuild the family home in Tatem include adopting the role of her Aunt Cuney and welcoming her grandchildren there to tell them about the Ibo Landing, which is the hopeful prospect with which the narrative ends. Her future plans, thus, demonstrate the influence of the Africanist dimension of spectrality and its function of articulating a stance of resistance.

At the end of the novel, Avey is, in Pettis words, "reborn, then as a griot, an ancestor, a woman confirmed in her displaced African culture" (132). This rebirth that integrates the African tradition can, likewise, shed light on the title of the novel since, in several African cultures, a praisesong is a traditional poem recited in public events of commemoration or sung in rites of passage that marks the transition of a person from one group to the next (Busia 198). The title, thus, merges the griot and her own song as one that speaks of the conditions of being a Black woman, of being plunged into alienation and, ultimately, of claiming the self

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along a community. In addition to this, this ending narrates the outcome of a state of haunting: the familiar and unfamiliar, the individual ghosts of her great-aunt and her husband, and the collective ancestral apparitions of Carriacou that Avey encountered along her path are the instrumental tools that prompted her transformation, and it is these ghosts of the past that she heeds when keeping alive their memory into generations to come. Avey chooses to embark on this project with her youngest daughter, Marion. Through the union of these two figures at the very end, the novel builds a bridge between two different generations—one that embraced assimilation as a road to prosperity, and one that is profoundly disillusioned with the evolution of race relations in the country—that covers the second half of the twentieth century and thus highlights the relevance of the narrative at the time of publication, when the African American community continued to suffer the effects of legally enforced discrimination.

2.3 GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*

> *It* [Mama Day] *offers redemption though holding out the basic tenets that have kept the black community strong, which is a sense of history. It's a sense of community. It's a sense of family. It's a respect for spirituality.* — Gloria Naylor

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* shares many aspects with Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: from cultural settings, and a decidedly female focus, to a valuing of African roots, which have led to some comparative studies. Published in 1988, the novel revolves around the love story of George Andrews and Cocoa Day, two characters from vastly different backgrounds who will find their lives changed forever during a trip to the fictional island of Willow Springs, in the southeastern coast of the United States. *Mama Day* is Gloria Naylor's third book and, according to the author herself, the first she devised as a full-fledged novel, rather than the interconnected stories featured in her first work, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which earned her the American Book Award and turned her into a critically acclaimed author, or *Linden Hills* (1985) (Naylor, "An Interview" 181). However, far from being an isolated narrative, *Mama Day* is part of an intricate universe that the author carefully crafted by drawing connective threads among her different works so that the stories and characters that appear in them are linked by ties of family, place or recurrent tropes that extend to her posterior novels, *Bailey's Café* (1992) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998) as well.[28] Born in 1950 in New York City the elder of three sisters, Naylor was a northerner by the sheer will of her mother who, upon learning about her pregnancy, arranged for the family to join the exodus of migration from the South in search of opportunities for her children. Despite this, Naylor's household represented for her the dynamics of the southern Black community and nurtured the fictional societies she would devise. As she explains, "So people grew up within a community who birthed you, who laid you away when you died. And you took care about the other's illnesses between your birth and your death. That sense of self-determination,

[28] Naylor's last novel, entitled *1996* and published in 2004, is set apart from this group as it deals with a fictionalized account of the author's supposed surveillance by the government and her theories of mind control. Interviews given upon its release and her claims that it was personally based, led to the belief that she was suffering a mental breakdown, about which she reflected (and denied) in an interview with Ed Gordon (Naylor, "1996").

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taking care of your own is in my racial blood, meaning just my whole story" (Naylor, "Interview" 27). This view is undoubtedly at work in *Mama Day*, where community becomes an indispensable element for the individual, an aspect that permeates into the narrative layout and its formal characteristics.

Preceded by three paratextual elements—a map of the island's location, a genealogic tree of the Day family and Sapphira Wade's bill of sale—to which only the reader has access, the novel begins with a prologue by one of the voices that configure this polyvocal narrative: the collective voice of Willow Springs. This has been variously described as an atemporal voice, with full knowledge of the past, the present and the future (Eckard 130) or as an ancestral voice (Buehler 59) that, stretching from the origins of time, has been able to decipher the mysteries to which not even the wise Miranda has access. Despite different interpretations, an aspect that is central to the characterization of this voice is its audacious and intimate tone that uses the African American vernacular to directly address the reader. Without a false pretense of detached omniscience, this communal voice is full of assumptions and judgements from which even the reader cannot escape. According to Trudier Harris, this characterization is intimately connected to the oral component of the narrative which is essential for the vision the novel articulates:

> The power of orality reflects a tradition that transcends temporality as well as chronology. The link between narrative voice and audience, therefore, is one that cannot be broken by the physicality of the text itself, for the voice enters into the minds of the readers, finds fertile ground in a commonality of philosophies, characters, activities, and approaches to the world. (58)

Following an apparently traditional pattern, the prologue introduces the main characters of the narrative, the temporal and spatial setting, and advances the plot. Nonetheless, in a truly postmodern fashion, Naylor subverts traditional narrative frames by depicting uncommon characters such as Sapphira (who, in spite of being the founder of the Day family, nobody can really name) or Miranda (who possesses a gift); by disrupting linear chronology (the prologue starts fourteen years after everything has happened, in the year 1999, eleven years after the date of publication, and most of the plot takes place in 1985, although the events narrated go back sometimes four generations, plagued with analepses and prolepses); and by creating an island that exists in no official map and belongs to no state, and events that move in the intersections of the real and the magical. Therefore, the prologue, both in form and content introduces in a surreptitious manner many of the aspects that are crucial in the novel such as relativity, multiperspectivism and multiplicity, which will be discussed through this analysis. These signal a framework different from the epistemology of the Western rationalist tradition of the written word and work as a warning, or a guide. The narrative is divided into two sections where a dialogue ensues between the deceased George and the living Cocoa, who comes to visit him to the family graveyard in Willow Springs. Their conversation is underpinned by the collective voice that provides general remarks about the island's events and history. While the first part deals with the life of Cocoa and George before they met each other and during the initial stages of their turbulent relationship, alternating between the

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events of New York and those of Willow Springs, the second is set entirely on the island, dealing with Cocoa's curse and George's death, as well as their reunion years later.

Naylor's novel has been read through multiple lenses that have highlighted different aspects of great relevance for the present analysis, namely the existence of a reality where fact and myth coalesce, the focus on gender, the transmission of trauma, and the perpetual return to the past. These discussions are of the utmost importance for the development of this analysis because all of them converge in the assessment of *Mama Day* as a profoundly revisionist text that tackles the legacies of racial and sexual oppression, as well as the master narratives upon which historical knowledge has been constructed. Nesrin Yavaş considers the fundamental role that the magic or unreal carries in the novel to effect that rewriting:

> […] magic realism in Gloria Naylor's novel becomes the narrative tool with which Gloria Naylor asserts the black female voice which has always been an absence in Anglo-American accounts of history as well as in black historiography. The magical, the mythical, and the supernatural in the novel effect a black mythical, matrilineal history and cultural lore with which black women can constantly write themselves and their experiences into gaps, silences of history. (252)

I find this assessment doubly valuable because, first, it alludes to a category in which the spectral has been often subsumed and unveils its significance in the novel; and second, because it offers a starting point from which to develop a specific inquiry into the spectral through the theory of spectrality that will posit it as a critical approach in its own right. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, this analysis is developed under the premise that, while the understanding of spectrality as a deconstructivist trope through which to articulate a denunciation of oppression, and its reading as an Africanist element that traces back the religious and belief systems to the African roots may coexist productively, in this novel the latter plays a primary role. It is my contention that in *Mama Day* spectrality is mobilized as an Africanist element that turns into a channel to cultural heritage and the validation of a cultural memory and identity competing in an oppositional model against hegemonic white values and paradigms. As this examination will reveal, such reading is supported by the existence of multiple Africanist elements. Furthermore, I argue that this mobilization is conditioned by the intra- and extratextual socio-historical circumstances that affect the Black community in the United States. Written in the decade of the 1980s, this novel reacts against a new wave of conservatism that promulgated the end of racism with the birth of a colorblind society, as it simultaneously curtailed the main achievements of the civil rights movement. In this context, scholars such as Keith Byerman have noted the tendency of women writers during the decade of the 1980s to cast their gazes back to "reconstruct the lost or suppressed elements of history" (23). Certainly, the past seems to have a haunting hold on the present due to its traumatic impact, as the characters of *Mama Day* testify; but this recovery must be necessarily understood in the contemporary coordinates of the narrative's publication, defined by structural racism and revisions of the silencing of the Black woman's voice. In these circumstances, Naylor's oeuvre in general, and this novel in particular, have been defined as

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performing an Africana womanist revision, that is to say, using figurations of an African tradition with a distinctive focus on the female experience of women of color (D. Thompson 90), all of them elements that are of great relevance in the novel. According to Dorothy Thomspon, and as it will be shown through the analysis, this is done, in terms of content, through the mobilization of ancestors or religious figures of the African tradition, rituals, spirituality, communalism and cultural celebration; and, in formal terms, through the use of multivocal narratives, and a matricentric focus, among others (92). Chassot explains that these women writers wrote during the 1980s, a period when "black people, and black women more particularly, were still very much like ghosts in American history and society: an absent presence that would not be acknowledged and yet could not be wished away" ("Black" 28–29). Naylor herself has reflected on this point describing the situation of Black women as individuals who have shared a "dual existence," stating that "What the black woman is bringing is a whole hidden part of American history, a whole hidden part of the female experience. […] And it becomes a celebration of the self" ("Interview" 26). Their endeavor is, thus, twofold: to reclaim the voices of their ancestors while claiming a racial and gendered voice of their own, and the ghost offers a means to carry out this project.

2.3.1. Delineating Spectrality in *Mama Day*

In this novel the spectral, faithful to its nature, is both pervasive and elusive. In this section I will provide a critical examination of the novel focusing on the functions of spectrality. For analytical purposes I will delineate three spectral elements through which Naylor tackles fundamental issues such as cultural identity and memory, the process of historiographical writing and the acts of racial resistance, namely the spectral dialogue between Cocoa and George, the ghosts from the "other place" and the haunting presence of Sapphira Wade. After considering these, I will conclude by discussing how some of the characteristics introduced through these elements and their significance in the novel may allow us to talk about the possibility of *structural spectrality.*

2.3.1.1 Ghostly Subjectification: George and Cocoa's Spectral Dialogue

It is a testament to Naylor's artistry that the key piece of information in the narrative, eventually revealed as evident, remains elusive throughout the entire work: George is dead, and he has been in a conversation with Cocoa as a ghost all along. This paradox of what is invisible to the eye and yet is certainly there seems to be a play on the nature of the ghost itself. I consider that this exchange between an older Cocoa and the spirit of George who remained in the Day graveyard after his sacrificial death is central to the analysis of the novel along the spectral paradigm for several reasons. First, it constitutes the structural axis upon which the whole narrative is articulated. Second, in their conversation, George and Cocoa draw a complex picture of the social context and locate their identities within it, thus unveiling different anxieties that emerge at the interstices of race, gender, and class. Third, it establishes an interpretative lens for what could be called a mode of "aural" haunting, following Chassot's terminology (*Ghosts* 98); that is, these ghosts do not appear in the usual

phantasmatic visions or apparitions, but instead, and on the condition of being listened to, they make their presence known by telling stories. The positioning of this model not only grants the possibility to better apprehend the second spectral element, but it also draws attention to the activity of listening as an ethical injunction, and as the ultimate source of knowledge about the world and the self. This is the inaugural sign of the relevance of orality in the novel upon which the narrative turns on several occasions, first as an element associated with African cultures through the concept of *nommo* or *nommos* that privileges the power of the word in the context of the naming process. According to Byerman, this force seems to be at the core of the author's stress on orality as it "plays an essential role in creating and maintaining the structure of Naylor's cosmos and constitutes the unwritten law by which the characters move and interact" (71). Due to this connection, critics such as Kathryn Paterson (77–78) and Trudier Harris have read the dialogue in the light of the African American vernacular form of "call and response," thus offering a reinvention of these patterns. The latter explains how this interactive mode of communication is generally associated to performative activities such as preaching or singing; in this case, however, Naylor expands this inventory by including an exchange as common as a conversation between two married people within these "interactive performances" (Harris 92–93). In addition to this, orality appears as a channel through which to deconstruct the rhetoric of the superiority of the written word as the cornerstone of knowledge and to replace it with a model of oral transmission of collective memory. In this respect, Daphne Lamothe has emphasized its adequacy to account for the transformations narratives inevitably undergo, as well as for the individual's adaptation and adoption of the collective culture:

> Orality offers a dynamic medium for the transmission of cultural memory because it presents a model of both continuity and transformation as it passes through the mouths and views of each individual. Routing, or mobility, certainly in the post-Civil Rights era, offers the possibility of an agency that enables women and men to reinscribe and actively to recreate their culture. (168)

According to her, therefore, orality is actively appropriated because of its value to retell the stories that contest institutionalized history.

In the dialogue carried out through the narrative, George and Cocoa are outlined as two seemingly opposed characters regarding their personalities, hobbies and worldviews. Their memory stretches back to the moment they saw each other in a New York café, and how by a felicitous chance they ended up meeting a few hours later in the roles of employer and employee, respectively, during a job interview. Like much of their relationship, this first encounter does not run smoothly as their differences become evident and are emphasized by the interference of a number of stereotypes with which they assess one another. Considering a supposedly purer version of Cocoa unpolluted by New York, George forges an image of her in a context that strikingly resembles the archetype of the southern belle. The accent he imagines she has creates an image that closely evokes this trope: "It conjured up images of jasmine-scented nights, warm biscuits and honey being brought to me on flowered china

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plates as you sat at my feet and rubbed your cheek against my knee" (33).[29] This white model of femininity was based on the cult of true womanhood, the woman as the angel in the house, relegated to the domestic sphere and fulfilling the divine roles of mother and wife. Even though he recognizes that his portrait operates within a stereotyped tradition, his fantasy (repeated later in the novel with the adoption of the role of master to Cocoa as his slave) legitimizes a white fallacy that prized docility and purity in white women at the expense of the utter domination of Black women's bodies. This anecdotal incident reveals other expectations and behaviors that are heavily mediated by white culture with which Cocoa and George approach each other, and in the view of Susan Meisenhelder it demonstrates the inadequacy of applying white models of gender dynamics to theirs (407–408) that resonates at different levels with the general statement of the novel. At the same time that this problematic is revealed, an avenue for change is opened since George, the rationalist man *par excellence*, moved by an unexplainable emotion, decides to follow "a twist in [his] gut in the middle of a Third Avenue coffee shop" (33), even when it collides with his strong stance against superstition. This turns his decision into an anticipatory element of his encounter with that which is unknown and cannot be reduced to laws of physics epitomized in Willow Springs. Naylor fills her novel with these juxtapositions of fixed assumptions and their frustration that, in most cases, reveal the need to leave one's given truths aside to consider the world from the perspective of the other, a tension that will end up determining George's fate.

Cocoa's annual trip to Willow Spring to spend the month of August with her family puts some distance between her and George. However, following her great-aunt Miranda's advice, she decides to write a letter following up the interviewing process, sprinkled, like Cocoa herself, with some lavender. The memory of Cocoa brought with that envelope prompts George to postulate her for a job at a different firm and to ask her out. Even though their first date is an absolute disaster, both characters seem compelled to keep building a relationship where, at the beginning, George acts as a knowledgeable guide, intent on showing Cocoa the magic of New York, but eventually turns into a love adventure. However, despite the attempts by both of them to overcome their differences, a rift inevitably opens at the very core of their relationship. Although some readings of the novel place George and Cocoa in diametrical opposition, the main obstacle to their relationship seems to be that their different backgrounds have equipped them differently to confront their search for an identity as African American subjects traversing the paths of second-class citizenship in a country that demands assimilation to prosper. The information that George has about his past, and especially his origins, is limited; he is told that his mother was a young prostitute who abandoned him wrapped in newspapers in an institution when he was three months old.[30] The Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys, located in Staten Island and directed by the strict Mrs. Jackson,

[29] Gloria Naylor. *Mama Day.*1988. Vintage, 1993. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[30] Although this is all the information offered in *Mama Day*, a different version of the event is recounted in Naylor's posterior work, *Bailey's Café.* Here a young woman named Mariam flees from her country, Ethiopia, when she is pregnant escaping prosecution for having out-of-wedlock sexual relations. However, throughout the story she maintains that she is still a virgin and never engaged in sex with anyone. At the end of the novel, she dies giving birth and her son, George, is sent to an institution by the people who had given her shelter. This has reinforced the readings of George as a recreation of a Christ figure within the reading of *Mama Day* along a Biblical rewriting (Anolik, *American* 230–231).

who does not allow for any deviance from the scripted lives these boys are prescribed, plays an essential role in what Lamothe calls George's "cultural amnesia" and "inability to 'listen to his blood'" (160). The fundamental principles that govern the institution are individualism and self-sufficiency—George describes how "Our guardians at the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys were adamant about the fact that we learned to invest in ourselves alone" (22)—, the power of the present—the motto that runs the shelter is "Only the present has potential" (23)—and a rigid observance of the racial etiquette whereby the entire life of these boys is directed at turning their abilities into marketable skills:

> No, it wasn't the kind of place that turned out many poets or artists—those who could draw became draftsmen, and the musicians were taught to tune pianos. If she erred in directing our careers, she erred on the side of caution. Sure, the arts were waiting for poor black kids who were encouraged to dream big, and so was death row. (27)

Through George's depiction, the institution emerges as a spiritual wasteland, one that is designed as such not just by the cruel whims of those in charge, but rather as a faithful reflection of what awaits outside its walls. The values sponsored in this institution are intended to train boys, mostly Black and Puerto Rican according to George's own account, to fend for themselves in a world where they will not be allowed to stray from their allotted paths. Through his childhood and adolescence George sticks to these values as dogmas, earns the scholarships that will bring the opportunity to study engineering in Columbia and become the co-owner of a successful firm. However, as Gary Storhoff pointedly asserts, "In gaining the world, George has risked his soul" (40). While this education afforded George the opportunity to survive in a profoundly hostile society, it did so at the expense of his dreams, hopes and, especially important for this discussion, the cultural attachments to his community and its collective memory. In fact, Anissa Wardi has described him as both a biological and cultural orphan who "has no knowledge of family or bloodlines that directly connect him to his history" (146).

Of special relevance in this sense is the picture that this draws of the American society in the post-civil rights era, one where despite the end of legal segregation, African Americans were simultaneously encouraged to assimilate into the white society and marginalized. This is emphasized in Cocoa's initial intervention where she paints a picture of New York as a city that perfectly epitomizes the reality of the post-racial discourses of the 1980s. She opens with an oblique comment on a seemingly abstract characteristic of the city's means of transportation: "There's something hypocritical about a city that keeps half of its population underground half of the time; you can start believing that there's much more space than there really is—to live, to work" (18). Here the allusion to the underground population, even when referring to a material aspect, cannot but be read in terms of race due to the historical associations between African Americans and the trope of clandestine movement conceptualized as subterranean movement (for instance with the underground railroad) and the link existing between the underground and invisibility through works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), one that understands the Black subject as doomed to be

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always in the symbolic and literal subterranean world. After spending seven years changing jobs due to their poor conditions, avoiding sexual harassment with inventive techniques and confronting discrimination in job hiring and housing, Cocoa can see right through the schemes of tokenism:

> The cherry vanilla who buzzed me in the door was predictable, but there might still be reason for hope. When small, liberal establishments put a fudge cream behind their glass reception cages, there were rarely any more back in the offices. Sticking you out front let them sleep pretty good at night, thinking they'd put the ghost of Martin Luther King to rest. (20)

Cocoa's account of the city and its racial dynamics explores the line dividing North and South in terms of race and reflects on how, rather than being absent, in the North this is, simply, better disguised. Reproducing a similar idea to the one espoused by the governors of the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter, she soon identifies the job distribution according to race and the existence of certain lines she will never be able to cross as a Black woman. In addressing this reality, Cocoa recounts how an open discussion of these matters was received by fellow friends and acquaintances:

> Mama Day and Grandma had told me that there was a time when the want ads and housing listings in newspapers—even up north—were clearly marked colored or white. It must have been wonderfully easy to go job hunting then. You were spared a lot of legwork and headwork. And how I longed for those times, when I was busting my butt up and down the streets. I said as much at one of those parties Selma was always giving for her certain people. You would have thought I had announced that they were really drinking domestic wine, the place got that quiet. One of her certain people was so upset his voice shook: "You mean, you want to bring back segregation?" I looked at him like he was a fool—Where had it gone? I just wanted to bring the clarity about it back—it would save me a whole lot of subway tokens. (18–19)

Her direct and unceremonious account, suffused with irony, functions as a social comment that confronts the rhetoric of the end of racial discrimination promulgated with the advent of the civil rights movement and depicts the perpetuation of racial oppression across generations. Paterson further explains that the alienation, isolation and lack of opportunities experienced by Cocoa in the city demonstrate how "Such a façade of possibility highlights the crumbling American ideal of the self-made man" (79).

Cocoa's portrait of New York as a "cold and unfriendly" (122) place and her evident discomfort with many of its ways has sometimes led to the understanding of her character's unconditional belonging to Willow Springs. However, this is not the case, for Cocoa not only chose to leave for New York and remain there despite the living conditions, but she never felt she totally fit in Willow Springs either. As Byerman states, in her approach to the island this appears as a place charged with opposing polarities where a tension is established between the need to return and to overcome: "Willow Springs represents to her both a wellspring and a site of unpleasant memory and thus a place to be simultaneously denied and returned to" (70).

At the core of her problematic relation with the island is her lighter complexion that sets her apart from the other "soft brown" or "burnished ebony" girls in town (232), who displace her on this account. Although the attacks were mitigated by her being the niece of Miranda Day, the well-respected leader of the island, it profoundly marks Cocoa even in adulthood when she continues to apply darker makeup to conceal her lightness. Color, in the novel, signifies at different levels: for one it speaks about a history of miscegenation that finds its origins in the relationship between Sapphira and her owner, Bascombe Wade, the nature of which is still to be determined. Yet, it signifies on another symbolical level since physical darkness for Cocoa seems to be associated with cultural Blackness. This association is problematized in the narrative that defines, in turn, a position against essentialist approaches. In this respect, the consideration of Miranda's view on Cocoa's complexion and transformation sheds light on the subjective and constructivist nature of racial identity:

> She remembers the little girl running home crying and almost taking off her middle finger with a butcher knife, fearing she really had the white blood she was teased about at school—she wanted red blood like everybody else. And now she strides so proud, a sunflower against the brown arms over hers, the sweat flowing from the reddish gold hair and absorbing every bit of available light to fling it back against those high cheekbones, down the collarbone, on to the line of the pelvis, pressing against the thin summer cotton. The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs—pure black. Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earth men who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But *the* Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother. We ain't seen 18&23 black from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun. Them silly children didn't know that it's the white in us that reflects all these shades of brown running around Willow Springs. But pure black woulda sucked it all in—and it's only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kind of gold. (47–48)

This reflection is pivotal, as in it the whole trajectory of Cocoa's character is encapsulated: her past (about which the reader will later learn through her own account), but also a future that eludes her until the very end of the novel. The view of "Blackness" espoused in the text rejects the fallacious arbitrariness of color and identity, providing instead a view of racial identity as something that has to be chosen and that can be performed, but most importantly, something that carries with it a memory and a legacy. Miranda's account emphasizes the evolution undergone by Cocoa that approximates her to the figure of her powerful ancestor, Sapphira. This connection reaches beyond the physical resemblance and establishes the function that Cocoa will eventually fulfill as the transmitter of the Day story and the community's history.

As Lamothe explains, it is important to take into consideration that, "While it is certainly true that Cocoa is more grounded in African American traditions than George is, she is like him in her negotiation of a geographic and social mobility and of the cultural changes that result from it" (161). There is a process that she must go through that will posit her, toward

the end of the narrative, as the latest link on the Day saga, and her testimony, a palimpsest of many before her, will become an identity map for those ahead of herself living in an always evolving world. Bringing these two viewpoints together, Cocoa's complexity can be interpreted in two different lights: as detaching herself from some of the "cultural whiteness" she attributes to George (Meisenhelder 408), and, alternatively, representing the ineludible historical "cross-cultural encounter and exchange" (Lamothe 162) and the hybridity to which any cultural model must adhere in the contemporary world to survive. As the narrative progresses, Cocoa will therefore be identified not as an opposing character to George but rather as a bridge between what he and the Willow Springs community represent. As I argued before, the conflicts between George and Cocoa that are dramatized in the narrative have to do with their different backgrounds, but especially, with the way in which they try to approach what they had deemed missing in themselves. After spending some time together, their relationship is on the verge of collapse due to these differences: Cocoa feels that she has shown her most vulnerable self to George, and he has responded by becoming more hermetic: "I had opened up to you about the frightened little girl inside of me because I'd finally come to believe that you would never hurt her. And the more I did that, the more you shut yourself off" (127). For George, learning more about Cocoa implies coming to terms with his rootlessness: "You had more than a family, you had a history. And I didn't even have a real last name" (129). These words show an important transformation on his celebrated focus on the present and the tangible. As he gets to know Cocoa, he starts realizing that something is askew in his self-made man story, but what seems especially surprising is that while he is acutely aware of his lacks, he somehow seems oblivious to the implications that it has for his identity. Fearing to lose her, George decides to disclose the truth about his orphanhood as a first step to let Cocoa in and proposes to her. Their marriage is not exempt from problems, and in the renditions of the four years spent in New York with George postponing his trip to Willow Springs, there are multiple instances of a dangerously accommodating process on the part of Cocoa that is carried out in contrast to what seems little effort on George's part. When Cocoa reflects about this period, she emphasizes this point: "And I wanted us to work so badly that I would be tempted to try and squeeze myself up into whatever shape you had calculated would fit into your plans. How long could I do it? The answer scared the hell out of me: I could have done it forever" (146). Instances like this, the aforementioned stereotypical assessment of Cocoa, or the negotiations of Cocoa's pursuing a degree in History in exchange for a pregnancy, have led to the view of George as enacting in certain aspects models of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, Meisenhelder has shown how the intersection of race and gender plays out: "George acts a male role that is, however, more seductive and more complex, for his fantasies of male superiority are overlaid with other more superficially attractive (but equally inappropriate) white ones" (411). This will acquire a greater relevance when confronted with the deeply matriarchal community of Willow Springs, where he will have to interact with a racial and gendered epistemological alterity.

Following the annual tradition, Cocoa travels to her native hometown in the summer of 1985. Willow Springs constitutes, without a doubt, one of the most relevant concoctions devised by Naylor that functions as well as a structuring element, the geographical center that

unites all the characters involved in the action across time and geographical dispersion. The fictional island could be considered a spectral element in itself: located in the southeast coast of the United States, it is placed in the dividing line between two states, but none owns it; and it appears in no maps, its inhabitants being virtual ghost citizens of the United States. Likewise, the ties to the mainland, in the shape of an old wooden bridge, are fragile, leaving the islanders completely isolated after each strong storm. The only materiality of the fictitious land is provided in the map enclosed in the text, and in its voice that devotes a considerable part of the prologue to explaining its conditions:

> […] Willow Springs ain't in no state. Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though—been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them. Look on any of them old maps they hurried and drew up soon as the Union soldiers pulled out and you can see that they only thing connects us to the mainland is a bridge—and even that gotta be rebuilt after every big storm. (They was talking about steel and concrete way back, but since Georgia and South Carolina couldn't claim the taxes, and nobody want to shell out for the work. So we rebuild it ourselves when needed be, and build it how we need it—strong enough to last till the next big wind. Only need a steel and concrete bridge once every seven years or so. Wood and pitch is a tenth of the cost and serves us a good sixty-nine years—matter of simple arithmetic.) But anyways, all forty-nine square miles curves like a bow, stretching toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north, and right smack in the middle where each foot of our bridge sits in the dividing line between them two states.
>
> *So who it belong to? It belongs to us—clean and simple*. And it belonged to our daddies, and our daddies before them, and them too—who at the same time belonged all to Bascombe Wade. (4–5; emphasis added)

This inaugural description of the island is worth considering at length since it will settle the distinctive nature of the setting that works on a paradoxical axis: as it insists on its materiality by providing all the details that should help the reader locate it, it simultaneously places it in the realm of the unreal, establishing an avenue for the exploration of the extraordinary that effectively works to suspend the reader's disbelief. This places the island physically and metaphorically in a liminal position (another characteristic that approximates it to the spectral), a trait that is likewise projected onto the characters and occurrences in the island. Thus, while the islanders know that they are living in a land reclaimed by an enslaved ancestor and they are acquainted with the legends that surround her mysterious figure, they are unable to name her, unable to fully materialize her presence. Like Sapphira, her descendent Miranda is straddled also between the world of healers and the world of conjurers, and by extension, all the events that take place in the island occur in the liminal space between the real and the magical. This liminal position produces a multiplicity of stories, of meanings and of perspectives that cannot be reduced or easily packed in the shape of a simple dogmatic truth.

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Yavaş claims that in this novel "Gloria Naylor creates, both at the narrative and the thematic level a liminal territory where plurality of worlds, views, and spaces, and heterogeneity are valorised" (248). In this regard, it is especially relevant the inclusion of Reema's boy anecdote (one to which critics have recurrently returned) in the introductory part of the novel. This young man (who remains unnamed throughout the narrative) comes back to Willow Springs after studying in the mainland. As an ethnographer, he is intent on placing the island in a map and to account for its culture and language, but the inhabitants of the island consider that his effort is headed in the wrong direction, and they dismiss his explanations. This is the case when he tries to account for the meaning of the expression "18&23"—that happens to be the date when Sapphira Wade won her freedom and deeded the land to the slaves—, which he erroneously attributes to a reversal of 81&32 that mark the coordinates for the location of the island. The narrative voice mocks his conclusions:

> Not he called it being dumb, mind you, called it "asserting our cultural identity," "inverting hostile social and political parameters." 'Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside-down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English and calling things what they really was—in the dictionary and all that—while we kept on calling things assbackwards. (8)

With this deeply ironic comment, every attempt to fixate the meaning of the expression is discarded, and by extension every effort to reduce the cultural reality of the island to a rationalist paradigm. The boy's efforts go against the whole of the novel's enterprise for, as Maxine Montgomery claims, "the confusion surrounding the exact geographic location of the island paradise points to Naylor's role in subverting fixed historiography" (45). Instead, the model proposed by this collective voice follows in the footsteps of that initial injunction to truly listen, to hear about the curve in Cloris' spine that came from literally doing a mule's work, Winky's missing eye from the tar of rebuilding the bridge, Abigail's losses or Mama Day's knowledge. With an extraordinary command of parody, Naylor abounds in his condition of estrangement from life in the land when considering the boy's description of the research process in his book: "[…] he had come to the conclusion after 'extensive field work' (ain't never picked a boll of cotton or head of lettuce in his life—Reema spoiled him bad)" (7). In the eyes of the community, he becomes an unnamed outsider who approaches their culture invested with a knowledge that emanates from abstractions often directed by the white gaze. For the community the knowledge stems from experience and tradition and its meaning is constructed collectively, very much like the island itself. As Dorothea Buehler notes, "Naylor creates settings that are fluid, impossible to locate; they are everywhere and nowhere. Yet, more importantly, they do not only exist through the projections of the beholder, but the places themselves have an inherent identity and a life of their own" (182). And yet, the author goes one step further since the assessments that Reema's boy makes are factually true and they would provide a convenient frame to approach the Willow Springs community. In the context of the text, this could indicate the coexistence of both approaches that ultimately

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prevails in the hybrid model that constitutes the outcome of the novel, a model which turns into another guiding sign in the reading and listening process.

Although Willow Springs is a fictional land, the data provided by the map and the narrative voice places it in the same coordinates of the Sea Islands discussed in the previous analysis. Spread along the United States southeastern coast, this group of islands are home to the Gullah culture which holds important retentions from the African cultures brought by the slaves who arrived there and lived most of their lives isolated from the mainland. By virtue of their relative physical isolation and comparatively homogenous population, these islands have been considered by Cheryl Wall as "repositories of African survivals and New World creativity" (1459). In his detailed study of the novel, Charles Wilson provides an overview of how the Sea Islands' background is represented in Naylor's novel and highlights the issue of independence that will become an object of debate in the novel:

> Just as Africans were imported to various coastal regions on the eastern seaboard in the antebellum days, many were also imported to islands off the Georgia and South Carolina coast, known as the Sea Islands, to work on isolated plantations. In the days following the end of the Civil War, many of these ex-slaves were forgotten, but they continued to thrive, albeit provincially. The most significant aspect of their postwar existence is that they lived without measurable intrusion from the outside world. In short, they forged ahead as an intact African (American) community, maintaining cultural nuances and linguistic patterns from the distant past. Willow Springs might seem like a completely fictional place, but it does bear the stamp of reality given its connection to this historical truth. (100)

Together with its geographical location, another element that frames Willow Springs within the Sea Islands is the existence of a distinctive culture, system of values and set of beliefs. These can be explored considering the festivity of the Candle Walk and the funerary practice of the "stand forth."

Candle Walk is a celebration that takes place on the twenty second of December, a date that Lindsey Tucker considers significative in light of the message of resistance imbued in the festivity, especially in relation to the figure of Sapphira. As she explains, "Observed on the 22nd of December, the time of the midwinter solstice, Candle Walk suggests a recognition of the fact that this longest night of the year also marks the beginning of the return of the sun from its lowest zenith, a rebirth that correlates with the rebirth of the terrestrial world" (Tucker, "Recovering" 185). The celebration consists of two differentiated parts: the whole community engages in a walk with lights, and they must give each other something made or produced by their own hands. Although the tradition has been passed from one generation to another with the eventual effacing of the original meaning, it is believed that it was intended to honor the woman who gave slaves their freedom, to guide her on her return to Africa. As legend has it: "'Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light.' Say you'd hear talk then of a slave woman who came to Willow Springs, and when she left, she left in a ball of fire to journey back home east over ocean" (111). However, following the general tendency of the novel, this meaning is not fixed either, for at an advanced age Miranda has the realization

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that the light might as likely have been for Bascombe to follow his slave. Independently of the meaning that each individual or each generation wants to grant to the festivity, what remains are the values it represents: community—the act is conceived as a communal one in which every person in Willow Spring takes part—, honoring the dead—tokens of the deceased are incorporated each year—and an expression of cultural identity—demonstrated in the opposition toward the Christianization of the ritual through Christmas that had been proposed by a priest. Adriane Ivey claims that this could be considered a subversive act, for in it the worship of a male god is replaced by that of a female deity, and "one of the most meaningful and symbolic Christian holidays" is likewise replaced by a "a more pure version of a holiday based on benevolence" (105). This reading is congruent with a general re-interpretation of the Bible that Naylor carries out though the allusion to this religious text that will be considered in the discussion of Sapphira. Equally important to the values it represents is its capacity to accommodate change: "There's a disagreement every winter about whether these young people spell the death of Candle Walk. […] But Miranda, who is known to be far more wise than wicked, says there's nothing to worry about. In her young days Candle Walk was different still" (111). This emphasizes the idea that the community represented by Willow Springs is not closed in on itself. However, while their existence and their very survival do not emanate from being a hermetic locus, they are not willing to be subject to the standards of white assimilation either. As Yavaş notes, "the magical reality of the island is embedded not in a static, unchanging, passive, nostalgic past; it is constantly re-articulated and adapted to temporal and social changes" (248). Their stance combines an encounter with the inevitable change of times and a resistance to the alienating forces of modernity and capitalism.

While Wardi claims that some links could be established between the Candle Walk and the BaKongo practice of lightening bonfires on graves and the usage of light to draw the path toward the spirit world (151), the funerary ritual of the "stand forth" is a better example of the Africanist influence. This practice does not have any real correlate in the cultures that configure the African diaspora, but it coincides with their belief in death's lack of finality. Jocelyn Donlon explains that "African religions which have shaped Christianity in the Black South tend to stress the belief that one's life does not end with physical death; rather, death is […] a rite of passage which allows for contact with the living" (23). The most comprehensive depiction of this tradition takes place upon the death of Little Caesar, Bernice's much beloved child, during the storm that sieges the island. Focalized through the perspective of George, the act unfolds as individuals approach the boy's coffin and address him in the following manner:

> When I first saw you, she began, you were wearing a green bunting, being carried in your mama's arms. […] And when I see you again, she said, you'll be sitting at my dining table, having been invited to dinner with the rest of my brood. It went on like that, person after person. Dry eyed and matter of fact. The minister calling out, Who is ready to stand forth? […] Always addressing the coffin, and sometimes acting as if they expected an answer back. (268)

As George soon notes, this practice has nothing to do with a Christian funeral—"The church, the presence of the minister, *were concessions*, and obviously the only ones they were going

to make to a Christian ritual that should have called for a sermon, music, tears— the belief in an earthly finality for the child's life" (269; emphasis added)—and each intervention of a community member draws a continuum between life and death, and the continuing presence of those who have passed away among them. As Chassot states, "the standing forth is not only a way of paying respects to the dead and sharing memories with the living; it also rests on the notion of an actual exchange between the living and the dead" (*Ghosts* 94). This has led some critics, including Chassot (*Ghosts* 94), to argue for an interpretation of George's and Cocoa's dialogue as a form of "standing forth" in itself, emphasizing orality through "an art of organic narration that is not stagnant, but ever evolving, changing, and developing" (Buehler 55). This is yet another form in which the novel engages with aural spectrality: Little Caesar, like George later, come to be part of the community's honored deceased and they remain among them, awaiting to be heard and addressed.

The particularities of Willow Springs, regarding its description, physical location and specific cultural practices, have prompted a fruitful critical debate where a number of critical concepts have been mobilized in an attempt to apprehend the island's reality. A case in point is Montgomery's adoption of Homi Bhabha's concept of the *third space*—"the in-between area located outside of predetermined cultural and geographic limits where the postcolonial subject attains and unbounded identity that refuses allegiance to singularly constructed notions of individuality" (qtd. in Montgomery xvii)—to assess the liminal position of the island. This notion is particularly useful when considering the collective leaning of the novel whereby the individualism and derived models of social and economic relations are displaced in favor of more horizontal patterns of action in a context of internal colonization. In this line, Buehler has employed Foucault's theory of heteretopias to account for Willow Springs as a locale where, despite its physical locatedness (in this case complicated because of the fictionality of the island), categories traditionally constructed as binary opposites converge. This would turn the island into one of those Foucauldian spaces defined by physical qualities that "are well plausible" but nonetheless are "spaces that exist in between reality and magic, and in between present and past" (Buehler 187). Indeed, the power of Willow Springs and the centrality it has in the novel relies on its very irreducible nature as a place that resists definition and classification, that can never be totally apprehended. An important third reading comes from Byerman, who reflects on the possible consideration of Willow Springs as a "black utopia" (67). This view fits with George's first impressions of the island:

> I had to be there and see—no, feel—that I was entering another world. Where even the word *paradise* failed once I crossed over The Sound. Sure, I can describe what I saw […]. But how do I describe air that thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in it? So as that old blue truck crept along, there was no choice but to breathe in lungfuls of oaks dripping with silvery gray moss, the high leaning pines. My nose and mouth were coated with various shades of greens, browns, and golds in the muddy flatlands. And if someone had asked me about the fragrance from the whisperings of the palmettos, or the distant rush of the surf, I would have said that it all smelled like forever. (175)

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George's initial naïve view of the island casts it first as a paradise, in great part because it represents for him a fabricated and ideal concept of a home he longs for. In considering the island as such, he is, nonetheless, reproducing the attitudes of white investors from the mainland whom Miranda has scared off after they tried to buy the land to build a vacation complex, a phenomenon that has actually affected the Sea Islands. The progression of the novel demonstrates that this initial shock George receives is superficial, for as the plot advances and Miranda tries to truly introduce him in the culture of the island, he continues to view the land as an ahistorical territory that morphs into the scrapbook of the engineer's practical mind: "A lot of this land and open space could be put to good use: nothing parasitic like resorts or vacation condominiums, but experimental stations for solar energy, marine conservation. I could even see small test sites for hydraulic power. It would bring much-needed income to the island, new people" (185). His plan for the island may be more sustainable, but it equally fails to consider the inhabitants and the legacies inscribed in the territory.

Byerman's approach steers clear from this problematic since his reading of the island along utopic terms reveals how it reinforces the fiction and instantiates a flagrant lack:

> The fact that she [Naylor] establishes the island as a liminal space beyond time, however, may suggest despair rather than possibility. Such a place can only exist as "no place," outside of orality, a mythic state. This positioning would seem to suggest that black power is an imaginary condition, a desire that signifies a lack, an absence, an emptiness that cannot be filled. (67)

Byerman's account begins to reflect the less idyllic aspects that George consistently overlooks through the narrative: the dispossession to which the people of the island have been subjected. While I find it problematic to attach the fictional or mythical dimension of the island solely to what Lamothe calls "the inordinate amount of agency held by its inhabitants" (157), these approaches provide a historicity that would otherwise be lost. If it is true that, as Lamothe claims, the islands' independence "erect[s] a successful resistance to Anglo-American cultural supremacy and economic imperialism" (158), it is also true that their prosperity is *despite*, first, their ancestor's forceful migration to America and their bondage and, later, the absolute disregard of the government, except when seeking economic retribution, as several passages in the novel evidence. In her nuanced account, Lamothe rightly points out this issue in parallel to the drafting of the mythic qualities of the island. In her own words, Naylor "transcends myth and places it firmly back in the provenance of the real by representing it as marked by physical trauma, historic rupture, and social and cultural transformation" (158). This will be essential to understand the role developed by specters in the next section.

2.3.1.2 Revenant Memories: The Day's Spectral Voices

The second and third spectral elements present in the novel are deeply interconnected and one cannot be understood without the other. In this section I will begin the discussion by considering the spectral voices that appear throughout the narrative, intending for this to serve as the basis on which to develop the spectral character of Sapphira Wade. Although these

voices belong to many of the members of the Day family outlined in the inaugural genealogical tree (and to many others who did not make it to this foundational document), they withhold a double dimensionality as their testimonies revolve around seemingly personal events that, nonetheless, tap into the collective memory of the island through the mediating figure of Miranda Day. Faithful to the principle of aural haunting, they do not impose themselves on the inhabitants of Willow Springs but instead lie silent in the family's graveyard and "the other place" (the original plantation house that the Day inherited) until someone is willing to listen to them. The novel's appointed listener is Miranda, the daughter of the seventh son of the seventh son who, according to the legend, is special. Indeed, in her childhood she realizes that "There is more to be known behind what the eyes can see" (36), something that marks the abilities that will turn her into a central character, as evidenced from the novel's title which carries the name with which everyone in the Willow Springs community refers to her: Mama Day.

Miranda's character has been apprehended from a variety of perspectives that try to account for her enigmatic construction and the role she plays in the narrative. As such, Tucker ("Recovering" 182–183) and Montgomery (49) coincide in describing her as a trickster figure, highlighting first her potential as a cultural link with African ancestral culture and traditions, and thus reclaiming this past in the formation of a new diasporic identity, as well as her mediating nature. According to these critics, she is a mediator between the past and the present, between Africa and the New World—"the bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African foremother" (Tucker, "Recovering" 182)—, and between the many categories that determine the life of the community—"masculine and feminine, self and other, sacred and profane" (Montgomery 49). In turn, Thomas Frosch traces the motif of the goddess through the narrative and argues for an understanding of Miranda as the heir to the original goddess, Sapphira, by virtue of her powers, her defining characteristics of wisdom and insight, and the symbolic elements with which she is vested in the narrative (8; 14–15). In turn, Amy Levin sees her as a representative of traditional African secret societies of women, like the Sande from Sierra Leone, with whom Miranda shares roles (especially those of surrogate motherhood and female leadership), as well as qualities and symbolism (74–78).

Of the many and diverse readings found in the criticism of the novel, the two that seem to best account for the character considering the overall narrative are those that understand her as a conjurer or as a healer. These two categories in themselves are not unequivocal, as they stem, in great part, from a common figure that had different attributes in the original African cultures, which were later modified and adapted to the American slavery context. Conjuring is a practice deeply entrenched in the African American spiritual imaginary that features prominently in the novel, and that will be explored in greater detail in relation to Sapphira Wade. As we shall see, this practice involves the existence of magic and it intersects with healing inasmuch as both rely on their practitioner's ability to see beyond what the untrained eye is able to grasp, as well as on the possession of some supernatural powers. Thus, the description of Miranda as a "healer with 'roots' in the past, strength in the present, and insight into the future" (522) that Kathleen Puhr puts forth, can best account for the tension between these two elements that can be identified in the character's deeds. While it is clear that

Miranda has extraordinary powers, their nature remains covered by a veil of the characteristic ambiguity and uncertainty that define the narrative. On the one hand, it would seem that the source of Miranda's power is based on an attentive look at all the natural and human elements that configure the landscape; as such, this perceptive insight is what allows her to understand the strength of the hurricane by interpreting the behavior of animals, to heal the physical illnesses of the island's inhabitants with herbal remedies, or to act as a midwife when needed. In this area she enjoys the same status and professional recognition as the island's medical doctor, Dr. Smithfield, with whom she often coincides in the diagnoses. Attaching her own powers to the real and ordinary occurrences of the world, Miranda demonstrates a deep knowledge of the world that surrounds her and of human psychology, claiming: "The mind is everything. Put in all the bits of glass and black pepper, every silver pin and lodestone she'll find some fool to sell her. Make as many trips to the graveyard she wants with his hair, her hair, his pee, her pee. Walk naked in the moonlight stinking with Van-Van oil—and it won't do a bit of good. 'Cause the mind is everything" (90).

Far from diminishing the importance of her abilities based on observance and traditional knowledge, the fact that these appear in the same context as magic seems to supernaturalize them in a society that detached itself from nature and history and abandoned traditional knowledge. As Byerman explains, in this context, Willow Springs is once again vindicated as a realm where these alternatives have flourished and allow for the advancement of the community in opposition to white models:

> Even if her knowledge is practical rather than magical, it is nonetheless connected to the understanding of people and nature that has developed over generations in Willow Springs. It is the kind of power that enables the community to maintain its independence from white political and economic domination. (66)

On the other hand, however, the narrative bears witness to some events that escape the laws of nature and rationality, such as Bernice's miraculous pregnancy, Cocoa's healing or Ruby's death. These events enlighten a different dimension of Miranda's powers, one that cannot be explained by her acquaintance with nature and its many secret riches or with the intricate workings of the human mind. Instead, the abilities that Miranda deploys here are rooted in ineffable rituals, conversations with the dead and the command of magic. The case that best instantiates the convergence of these two approaches is Bernice's trajectory toward motherhood. Desperate at the prospect of not being able to have a child, Bernice goes to Miranda searching for help. Since Miranda is acquainted with the former's nervousness, she prescribes a dose of patience and calm disguised as miraculous seeds and a number of household chores which are designed to take the young woman's mind off the matter. While this works for a while, pressured by her own desire and her mother-in-law's attitude, Bernice loses her hard-earned patience and decides to take some pills from the drugstore in which she works that are supposed to aid in the process of conceiving, even when these were advised against by her doctor. When she develops a strong infection that endangers her life, Miranda works first with Dr. Smithfield to make her recovery fruitful, and then proceeds to fulfill

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Bernice's desire to go to "the other place" to perform a miraculous conception. The ritual, one of what Kameelah Martin calls "conjure moments" (*Conjuring* 5), centers around the woman's body and women's sexuality and literalizes the metaphor of fecundity in the form of an egg (an element that will hold a strong symbolic meaning at the end of the narrative as well) which is introduced in Bernice's body as token of her future pregnancy:

> Nine openings. She breathes through two, hears through two, eats through one, the two below her waist, and two for the life she longs to nurse. Nine openings melting into the uncountable, 'cause the touch is light, light. Spreading each tiny pore on each inch of skin. If she could scream, she would, as the touching begins deeper at the points of her fingertips to expand the pores that let in air, caressing down the bones of each finger joint to the ones that join the palm, the wrist, the lower arms. Her shoulders, sides and stomach made into something more liquid than water, her breasts and hips flowing up against the pull of the earth. She ain't flesh, she is a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in … the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing and alive—wet—the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws in and holds out. (140)

At this point, the narration itself registers a transition from the realm of the real to the unreal, for the very description evokes what Wall calls an "unrepresentable" event (1458). Although the words are simple and easily understood, the scene in itself is difficult to imagine, and the elusive meaning of the process produces an effect of inaccessibility.

A similar absence in the literalization of events takes place in another of the magic deeds performed by Miranda, which is also the closest to an act of conjure: the mysterious death of Ruby. The harmonious stay of George and Cocoa in the island ends abruptly with the big fight they have on the night of the reception they organized for the islanders. That same night a seemingly small incident determines their future: Ruby and her much younger husband, Junior Lee, are among the guests, both characters whose reputation precedes them. The latter is depicted as a lazy womanizer that allows Ruby to pamper him while at the same time flirting with other women. Ruby is described as a conjure woman who uses magic with malevolent ends (something that places her in direct opposition to Miranda). Her powers are first introduced in the novel when she is said to have driven Frances into madness so that she could marry Junior Lee, and to be responsible for Mary Ellen's death. Later, in a paranoid distrust of Junior Lee's affairs, she buries a hex bag before Miranda's door that contains a warning for Cocoa spelled in the contents of the bag that only a woman like Miranda would know how to interpret. When, on the night of the reception, Junior Lee tries to force himself on Cocoa and Ruby sees him, she crafts a plan to end the young woman's life. Devising an apology for Lee's behavior to lure Cocoa to her, Ruby uses the apparently innocent act of braiding Cocoa's hair to put a powerful curse on the young woman. The effects begin immediately, spreading through Cocoa's body in parallel strength and devastation to the hurricane that sieges the island. Miranda soon realizes the nature of the curse: Ruby mixed nightshade in every braid in the hope that they lost time undoing each of them while the rest

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of the spell extended through Cocoa's body. Before this situation, Miranda takes action and cuts the braids from the root, an act that I would argue has important symbolic implications regarding Cocoa's maturation into the final role that she is to develop. If during the braiding process she had felt a return to childhood, as if "twenty years melted always under her fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair" (246), the necessary disposal of that braided hair could be interpreted as the equally necessary move forward from the shelter and protection of her grandmother and great-aunt into a full-fledged woman of the Day family vested with the task of carrying on the family legacy. Furthermore, as Monica Coleman explains, hair holds an important meaning in Gullah culture as a means to channel the power of god but also as "one of the greatest places of individual vulnerability" (130), which reinforces the idea of Cocoa's need to overcome the curse as part of her maturation process. After this Miranda decides to confront Ruby, but the latter never shows up, so Miranda works a second ritual:

> The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. […] The door don't open when she leaves, and the windows don't stir the circle of silvery powder. (270)

The outcome of this ceremony in which Miranda curses Ruby's house is not witnessed until after the storm, when the collective voice of Willow Springs aseptically recounts how the lightening "hits Ruby's [house] twice, and the second time the house explodes" (273) with the culprit inside. Despite this, the curse runs its lethal course on Cocoa effecting destruction of body and mind. The initial fog that clouded Cocoa's senses eventually catches up with her body, and her hallucinations are actualized into the sight of a myriad of worms eating her body from the inside. It is at this point that Miranda realizes that to save Cocoa she will need to face her family trauma and George's help. As in the two previous instances, the mystic task of saving Cocoa will be defined by omissions and silences, but unlike in the preceding cases, these do not simply add to the irrepresentability of magical workings in the rational language of the written tradition. This time the gaps are, more than ever, intended for the reader to fill them in, to signify on the events presented until that moment in a process that illuminates the constructive dimension of the literary act.

Because Miranda is at the crossroads of all these definitions and these ambivalent realities, she has herself been described as a liminal character who "traverses borders between the mythical, the magical and the real, past and present" (Yvaş 248). This is a characteristic that approximates her to the spectral voices that inhabit the island. Out of all the characters who partake in the supernatural realm, Miranda seems to be the only one who has forged the ability to truly hear them and gather the knowledge that sets her apart from others like Doctor Buzzard.[31] This character, who appears recurrently in the narrative, complicates the already

[31] The name of the character is an allusion to a real historical figure, Dr. Buzzard of Beaufort, South Carolina (who inherited the title from a white conjurer and whose real name was Stephaney Robinson) who become a well-known conjurer throughout the nation in the early twentieth century. According to Jeffrey Anderson, the man became rich through his

ambivalent opposition between the world of rationality and the world of magic. Advertising himself as a hoodoo doctor, Miranda can see right through his use of folktales to take economic advantage; she never takes him seriously and hates the comparison he insists on drawing between the two of them. The juxtaposition of both characters evidences that the alternative paradigm that governs the life of Willow Springs is rooted in a profound knowledge which only a woman like Miranda—deeply aware of her roots and embedded in the welfare of the community—can have access to. As Winsbro claims, her knowledge comes from that process of attentive listening to the voices of the dead: "Miranda differs from most people by actively listening for such voices. She recognizes that they offer a source of knowing that, although it circumvents the usual process of rational thought and interference, is not only valid but empowering" (113). This is a legacy that she understands needs to be passed onto upcoming generations, for historical memory is an essential aspect of one's identity and belonging. For this reason, and against Abigail's will, Miranda decides to take Cocoa to the place from where these voices emanate (a trip on which she will, in turn, take George) so that she can be initiated into the ritual of listening.

In the novel, the spatial source of these voices is an ensemble formed by the family graveyard and "the other place." The former is alluded to already in the prologue as a place that is part of the elements that encapsulates the history of the island and another source of meaning to which Reema's boy should have looked, led by Miranda. The collective voice of Willow Springs introduces this place by pointing out the custom of wearing moss on the feet to enter its premises:

> And when he [Reema's boy] looks back up, she woulda disappeared though the trees; but he's to keep pushing the moss in them shoes and go on down to that graveyard where he'll find buried Grace, Hope, Peace and Peace again. Then a little ways off a grouping of seven old graves, and a little ways off seven older again. All circled by them live oaks and hanging moss, over a rise from the tip of The Sound. (10)

Thus, the first approach to this place establishes its relation to Miranda; in its sod lay many of the women of her family that were lost: her niece Grace, who was abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant with Cocoa and perishes after the delivery; Hope,[32] the third daughter of Abigail who had abandoned the family; Peace, the firstborn daughter of Abigail, who died as a child; and the other Peace, Miranda and Abigail's sister who died drowned as a child, driving their mother, Ophelia, into madness and subsequent suicide by drowning in The Sound, her body never retrieved. This history of loss is completed by John Paul, Miranda's father, whose heart was broken, first by the death of his child, and then by the madness of his wife. These events seem to be traced back to the troubled relation between Sapphira and

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profession, "sometimes charging hundreds, even thousands, of dollars for a single spell" (13). This economic profitability, along with his work ethics, is precisely what Miranda indicts in the fictional version.

[32] Hope's story is featured in Naylor's novel *Linden Hills*, a narrative that follows the structure of Dante's *Inferno*. She marries a man from the mainland and decides to separate from the Day family physically and culturally. They have a daughter that has a central role in this novel, Willa Prescott, who tragically dies with her husband Luther Needed one year before George and Cocoa meet.

Bascombe. Miranda has the increasing certainty that he had fallen in love with her, and she abandoned him in her flight to freedom. This inaugural event looms like a curse on the family women and men, and as such the voices in Cocoa's guided visit to the graveyard prophesy that she too will break George's heart.

In this foray to the graveyard and "the other place," guided by Miranda, Cocoa is able to listen to the stories of the dead that draw before her eyes the history of her family to which she was alien as one deeply rooted in the socio-historical circumstances. Her great-great-grandfather, Jonah Day, the Great Mother's seventh son, provides an account of the family rooted in slavery, where kinship alliances of parenthood were disrupted by the institution: "Some of my brothers looked like me and some didn't. But it wasn't for me to ask Mama. In them times it was common to have a blue-eyed child playing next to his dark sister. And any daddies that may have been were gone long before I growed" (151). Jonah's son, John-Paul, resumes his father's story emphasizing the emancipation brought about by the Great Mother: born in the time of slavery, his father and their siblings were free because his mother "willed it so" (150). In the end, Cocoa listens to her own mother's voice, and learns how she hoped that the heartbreak she experienced could be avenged by Cocoa herself, naming her Ophelia so she could break one man's heart (151). This painful archeology of silenced voices fulfills a dual function: first, it bears witness to the underlying trauma that affects the Day family individually and to the historical trauma of slavery that was the origin of the island's community, as well as to the act of claiming freedom. Paul Eckard describes how "the other place" has turned into a source of "palpable anguish and pain"—indeed, Abigail has never returned to it since she sought refuge from a storm when she was pregnant and, likewise, the rest of the islanders avoid the place—but the history embedded there has turned it into a "repository of memory" (131). In fact, this could be considered one of Nora's *lieux de memoire*—those sites of memory described in the first chapter, a place where the collective history of the island and the individual history of the Day family come together, one where the world of the living and the world of the dead converge. Second, "the other place" is vested with extraordinary possibilities and a strong symbolic meaning: it is the place where these women come to engage with the past not as recounted by the monographs and treaties that Cocoa studies in her History degree, but to access the personal testimonies that build the collective identity of the island. As Eckard points out, "Miranda returns there to tap into its memory, for the power and knowledge the place contains" (132). The source of her power, therefore, stems in great part form the memory transmitted by her ancestors, and Cocoa's coming to terms with this reality is a necessary step of her maturation as the carrier of the legacy for generations to come. It could be said that in this trip Cocoa discovers and confronts Ophelia: the epitome of the family trauma and her own self inscribed in its genealogy. Miranda's words to Cocoa—"[…] it's time you knew. An old house with a big garden. And it's seen its share of pain" (152)—evoke her long-learned lesson about looking beyond what is evident and provides her niece with the necessary tools to pursue her path with the awareness of where she comes from. Thus, as Yvaş explains, Cocoa's recovery will be central for the transmission of a collective memory informed by the gender perspective which grants women's lives the place that they have been denied and for the reclamation of an African

American cultural identity in future generations. Describing her as "the medium for the transmission and continuity of a cultural memory having its roots in the Other place, in 18&23, and in the matriarch Sapphira Wade," this critic states that "Cocoa's survival is paramount to the active reconstruction and rehistoricizing of black women's history and cultural memory" (Yvaş 252).

The relationship established between Miranda and the spectral voices that inhabit "the other place" and the graveyard provides an insight on the inner world of the character that complements her collective dimension that has been illuminated by previous readings. While the latter is fundamental in the development of the plot, it is essential not to overlook her identity as an individual, since this is a central element of her role in the community, as well as in the search for a cure for Cocoa. In Miranda's character the individual and the collective realm are unified, which points at the impossibility to dissociate these two elements. In a passage that is worth quoting at length, Miranda reflects on the events of her life that led to her transformation:

> Miranda smiles into the darkness. My, that was a beautiful walking stick. Hickory. Studded with brass nails on the curved handle, polished so they shone like gold. And the long, sleek bodies of them snakes carved so finely down its length that when he turned it they seemed to come alive. The tap, tapping of the stick. So few times like those. No time to be young. Little Mama. The cooking, the cleaning, the mending, the gardening for the woman who sat in the porch rocker, twisting, twisting on pieces of thread. Peace was gone. *But I was your child, too.* The cry won't die after all these years, just echoes from a place lower and lower with the passing of time. Being there for mama and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. You have a gift, Little Mama. John-Paul's eyes so sad. It ain't fair that it came with a high price, but it did. I can't hold this home together by myself. And Abby, she ain't strong like you. We need you, Little Mama. Gifted hands, folks said. Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own. Saw so much heartbreak maybe never wanted my own. […] How could she have gone, with Abigail terrified to go near that rocker, trembling and choking for air when the woman rises up to scream, Peace, Peace? How can I go with you? she asked him. […] Mama and child. Mama and sister. Too heavy a load to take away. Why, even Abigail called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own right. Abigail's had three and I've had—Lord, can't count 'em—into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now. (88–89; emphasis in original)

This interior monologue opens with an appreciation of John-Paul's walking stick, an heirloom that Miranda inherited from her father. This cane has a symbolic relevance in the novel: while for Miranda it stands for the memory of her father, its appearance at critical moments in the narrative supports its role as a symbol of the power that Miranda possesses—as such, it is used to destroy Ruby—as well as its roots and memory—as such, when she gives it to George to follow his quest of bringing Cocoa's cure, the walking stick becomes the token of the

tradition forged by generations of the same family that he must claim as his own. However, he sadly transforms it into a weapon to defend himself against this knowledge. The memory of the cane's owner directly submerges Miranda in a reflection about her past where one witnesses for the first time the sacrifices she had to make for her family. After her mother went mad and her father plunged himself into work to avoid dealing with reality, Miranda assumed the role of surrogate mother to her sister Abigail, and caretaker of the home and her parents. This forced maturation displaced all other desires: she abandoned the possibility of leaving and creating a family of her own, to care for her father and sister, and progressively this increased to encompass the whole community for whom she became a leading figure, a healer, a mother. In this sense, this fragment bears witness to the transformation of Miranda into Mama Day, a trajectory that marks her shift from the individual to the collective. This excerpt shows that the regard and respect she enjoys in Willow Springs has come at the cost of giving up a great part of her individuality—without, nonetheless, giving up herself—and making hers the resilient injunction of her father to live on through the pain inscribed in her (her)story.

This awareness makes Miranda turn once and again to the voices of the dead since they are the source of the knowledge and experience that allowed her to move forward and embrace her role as the physical and spiritual healer of the community. As Byerman explains, "Her life-affirming and healing efforts are contextualized by the constant presence of the dead. Moreover, it is the presence of the dead that gives the community its character and strength. […] Always below the surface can be heard the haunting voice of the dead, and new voices are constantly being added" (70–71). In Willow Springs the commerce between the living and the dead is part of the fabric that unites the members of the community and that provides them with a shared cultural identity. Paterson writes about the intercorrelation between the historical past and the spiritual, which in the novel are perpetually linked:

> For Naylor, the spiritual and the historical are not distinct cultural elements, but inextricably linked, as the spiritual becomes historical, and histories become infused with spirit. The catalysis for this process is genealogy: the spiritual and its historical context are transferred from one generation to the next, in the process providing a portal through which the spiritual can break into and act upon events in the present, in turn generating new histories. (77)

The specters are instrumental in bringing the past to the present and, as an extension of the places they inhabit, they also become repositories of a memory that is at once individual and communal. They impel us to listen to them to find our healing, and their testimonies function as an alternative to the history that has forgotten them. The collective memory forged by the members of the Willow Springs community offers a more viable option to account for the past and the present of the island that resists the reductive definitions of dominant historiography. As Patricia San José Rico explains, "Willow Springs' memory is a dynamic memory, open to the mental interpretation of each of its bearers, rather than a stagnant, monolithic fixed version of past events controlled by particular interests" (92). Thus, in

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Naylor's work history and historiography are categories in perpetual deconstruction, their meanings questioned and in constant actualization.

2.3.1.3 Spectral Cosmogonies: Sapphira Wade

The character of Sapphira Wade becomes an embodiment of the different aspects discussed so far, and her presence haunts the whole narrative. In a sense, it could be said that she haunted Naylor for most of her writing career too; soon after finishing *Mama Day*, she announced that she was working on a prequel that would deal with the life of Sapphira and her relation to Bascombe. In the end, the project never fully materialized, but one hundred and thirty-one pages, which revolve exclusively around the life of the slaveowner, remain extant (Edwards & Harris 323). Unlike the rest of the spectral elements delineated and analyzed so far, Sapphira never appears in the text directly, but there are incomplete, oblique references that conjure her presence. This representation approximates her to the spectral, especially if considering the way in which Chassot describes the effect the ghost produces on the configuration of the narrative. As she explains, "Wandering in and out of the text, disrupting the narrative and fracturing authoritative views into a kaleidoscope of voices and perspectives, the ghost ultimately questions the notion of a coherent, complete, and exhaustive history" (Chassot, *Ghosts* 79). Despite this pervasiveness in the text as an indeterminate force that rules the lives and traditions of the island, she features more prominently in the narrative in two specific moments: in the prologue of the novel, where she is depicted in close connection to Willow Springs, and toward the end, when Miranda is searching for a cure for her niece and finally discovers her name in a dream. These are the words with which Naylor chooses to begin her novel:

> Willow Springs. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: *depending upon which of us takes a mind to her*. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: *depending upon which of us takes a mind to her*. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. *It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words*, soon as you cross over here from the bridge. (3; emphasis added)

By virtue of its positioning, the depiction already speaks about the centrality that Sapphira will have in the narrative and, most importantly, how her presence is indissociable from Willow Springs: she is the cornerstone of the island's traditions, identity and memory. In the island's collective imaginary she turns into a cosmogonic myth, a legend of the origins and development of the island itself and, yet, she is an elusive ghostly figure who remains unnamed despite her preeminence. This paradoxical aspect sheds light on Sapphira's double identity that reproduces the duality found in her heiress. In the same way that Miranda's

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individual identity, influenced by the knowledge of the past, contributed to the forging of her collective identity as Mama Day, the nurturer of the island, Sapphira's individuality as a woman subject to the conditions of slavery and her act of resistance transform her into a mythical figure within the community, the Great Mother. As the narrative voice goes on to describe her as a "true conjure woman," her identity is, once more, placed at the interstices of the real and the unreal, the individual and the collective. The ambivalent references to magic and the supernatural scattered in the narrative find an anchor in this definition of Sapphira and provide a lens through which to understand the forthcoming curse that will affect Cocoa and the role of Miranda in her healing.

Conjure has a long tradition in African American spirituality and belief systems, and in the novel it constitutes the most relevant Africanist element. Although the conjurer was a common figure featured in slave accounts, the first extensive literary treatment of this phenomenon appeared in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, published in 1899.[33] In his monograph *Conjure in African American Society* (2005), Jeffrey Anderson describes a "wavelike pattern of increasing and decreasing interest" (3) regarding conjure in the United States. This obeyed to different stances concerning the reclamation of marginalization of African American vernacular practices and beliefs that were considered retrograde, pictured badly and condemned by the mainstream white society and thus, at periods, disowned by African Americans themselves (4–5). However, J. Anderson points out that in the 1970s a renewed interest in conjure can be traced alongside a "new respect for black folk beliefs" (4). This revival, which will extend into the twenty-first century (as shown in the case of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*) is attributed to a broad range of factors that directly impact Naylor's work. In a more general plane, J. Anderson names Latin American migration and their importation of similarly-creolized belief systems, the impact of postmodernism with its emphasis on plurality and questioning of master discourses, and the emergence of New Age mysticism, primarily amid the white sectors of society (18–19). In the African American context, J. Anderson explains that, despite the remnant of some negative connotations, "Black cultural nationalism provided the medium through which hoodoo has regained a prominent role in African American literature" (19–20). Conjure became another symbol of identity (19) amid the project of reclamation and revaluation of African American culture that sought to provide an alternative to Eurocentric discourses (20). The treatment of the conjurer in the novel is ambivalent, clearly reflecting the social status that was attached to it the period. In fact, prior to Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic study of folk culture, this figure had been degraded, as it was part of the beliefs of a discredited group of people. In his *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1990), John W. Roberts provides a historical account of the conjurer and its social role in slave societies. He explains that the practice of conjure can be traced back to different African religious rituals based on a worldview where phenomenology was not uniquely situated on physical causality, but in which, most often, the

[33] Kameelah M. Samuel considers the influence of this novel in a group of works from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that feature this figure, among which *Mama Day* is found. What she terms "neo-conjure tales" are defined as an evolution of original conjure tales defined by their "use of African-based spiritual systems as a trope to the orally transmitted folk-tales that were disseminated among the enslaved and took as their subject matter conjure or hoodoo" (15).

exchanges of "life-force" between individuals were performed obliquely through rituals or other symbolic ceremonies (75). In these transactions, different religious specialists interceded in the name of the community, and this is the basis for the crafting of the figure of the conjurer (68). As Roberts explains, the reductionist conception of conjuring as witchcraft is the result of Western bias and can be best understood in a larger process of discrediting alternative forms of knowledge:

> The conception of conjurers as individuals who used their power to induce fear was undoubtedly influenced by the view of many that the prototype for the conjurer in black culture was the African witch-doctor and conjuration merely a form of witchcraft. Therefore, in their discussions, scholars imposed many of their western biases concerning witches and witchcraft onto the conjure tradition. The most obvious effect of the view of conjurers as witch-doctors and conjuration as witchcraft has been a tendency to ignore or misrepresent the importance of the religious roots of the tradition. When conjuration has been discussed from the viewpoint of African religions, the conclusions have been colored by an ethnocentric view of these religions as little more than superstitions. (68)

In the novel in general, and especially through the treatment of Sapphira and Miranda, conjuring appears as a healing practice (as reflected in the opening of the narrative quoted above or in Miranda's trajectory) and as a cursing one as well (in Ruby's curses or Miranda's response, as well as on the inferred methods that Sapphira might have used to get Bascombe to deed his slaves the land). In this respect, it is interesting to briefly consider this description of Sapphira alongside the depiction found in the bill of sale that accounts for her abilities in the following manner: "Has served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft" (n.p.). The juxtaposition of both descriptions evidences the shift alluded to by Roberts, and it is significant to the broader indictment of historiography that Naylor willingly places this account as a paratextual rather than intratextual element, in a process that simultaneously leaves evidence of the white discourses and chooses to condone instead the account of the community. In other words, the collective memory is valued over the historiographical account. Conjurers occupied an important position in the slave community; although the role of religious leadership was lost, they retained their dimension as healers, one that on their physical and psychological aspects was much needed under the circumstances of slavery. Roberts argues that the transformation of a variety of religious rituals from the diverse cultures the slaves had into new shapes conditioned by the subjection to slavery allowed them to identify the common structures that continued to determine their lives. As he explains, "In essence, the transformation of the expressive and ritual traditions that enslaved Africans had associated with African religious specialists resulted from the recognition that, despite surface changes in their lifestyle, there existed deep structural similarities which justified the perpetuation of their traditional religious practices and worldview" (91). In a sense, this recognition is what will prompt the flourishing of the African American community around African-based belief systems, religious practices and cosmologies, influenced and adapted by their life in America.

Due to the mostly favorable position that conjurers enjoyed among the rest of the slaves and their mystic powers, they were sometimes represented as folk heroes, thus subverting, if only symbolically, the hierarchies that governed the plantation. As Yomna Saber explains, "Conjuration grew into a vehicle to disrupt racial hierarchies, subvert power structures, and assure blacks that they held a secret weapon that could grant them victory despite the atrocities of the situation" (378). Thus, although they might not have had the chance to affect the workings of the peculiar institution or to avoid the atrocities their fellows had to endure, their potential resided in their power to unify the individuals into a community, as "spiritual attributes and behaviors reflected values that they accepted as the most advantageous to their survival and well-being in a rigid hierarchical social structure in which communal welfare had precedence over individual need" (Roberts 95). Despite efforts on the part of whites to suppress these beliefs and practices, they remained after emancipation, transmitted through the commonly known "conjure tales," and the figure of the conjurer captured the imagination of different writers. It is especially relevant in this context to mention the reclamation that contemporary Black authors from the diaspora such as Maryse Condé in *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* (1986) (originally published in French), Naylor herself in this novel or Bernice's McFadden in *Gathering of Waters* (2012) have made of this figure. Saber accounts for this phenomenon in connection to the potential of the conjure woman to revisit the past through a model of Black female resistance: "The conjure woman was their [the writers engaging this figure] vehicle for self-definition and the trope for establishing their voice, while re-negotiating and re-conceptualizing crucial questions of agency, authority and authenticity" (380). In fact, in her survey of conjure moments within African American fiction, Martin posits the evolution of the figure of the conjure woman as a "*biomythographical* subject," arguing that it is "used to resist the subjugation and marginalization of black Women and provides critical sociocultural commentary a role that other black female archetypes and characterizations do not" (5). In naming Sapphira first and foremost a conjurer, Naylor indirectly depicts her as receptacle of African roots, as a powerful woman able to manipulate the elements to heal, but also to injure. Furthermore, she becomes the builder of a community and the originating point of a legacy embodied and recuperated across more than one hundred years and spanning several generations. Even though this is the most common reading of Sapphira's character as the one that derives naturally from the reading of the novel adopted here, she has also been approached from other perspectives. Similarly to the case of Miranda, Montgomery understands her as a trickster figure that functions as a mediator between the African continent and the West, and whose identity escapes the reductionist attempts at taxonomy (39–41). In turn, in David Cowart's view, she evokes the African figure of the Nana Buruku or Bukulu, "a deity so ancient as to frustrate mythography" (451). It is noteworthy that, while these interpretations offer different perspectives that try to account for the many prisms that configure the character, they all share with conjuring a reclamation and a re-valuing of Africanist elements that are central to the novel's project.

In this initial introduction of Sapphira into the narrative world, relativity and ambiguity are emphasized above everything else. Twice does the narrative voice offer information about

Sapphira's skin color and her abilities, and twice does it undermine any attempt to place her identity in a fixed space, thus stressing how there is no such thing as objective reality, but, instead, the construction of this real and mythical female figure depends "upon which of us takes a mind to her" (3). Montgomery has claimed that the ambiguous manner in which the character of Sapphira is presented defies any attempts of classification through reductive taxonomies, pointing out that "complicated selves owe no allegiance to singularly constructed ideas of time, space or identity" (43). These aspects have been extensively explored throughout the rest of the narrative and they constitute one of its structural characteristics. The attribution of these characteristics explicitly to Sapphira is paramount for the definition of two other issues central to the novel: female identity and history. These two elements are inextricably linked through the figure of Sapphira because she is the founder of the island. The extant information conveys how she was sold as a slave to Bascombe in 1819, and that in the four subsequent years something happened that allowed her to claim the land for her descendants and the rest of the islanders and, as legend has it, fly back to Africa. The nature of the events in that lapse, like the figure of Sapphira herself, is undetermined:

> And somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven songs in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by persons unknown. (3)

This excerpt demonstrates a resistance to provide a unique truth in the shape of an easily digestible story. Following the injunction to listen to the many spectral voices that both directly and indirectly shape the novel, we are able to effect a narrative reconstruction that leaves the portrait of a slave woman sold to a plantation where she becomes the object of the master's attention. The nature of their relationship is never fully disclosed, but the possibility is opened that he truly loved her and that he was never murdered but died of heartbreak upon her escape. I would argue that the gaps that do not allow us to form a full picture of their relationship direct our attention toward a more evident, if never articulated, truth: no matter the nature of their liaison, for Sapphira it would always have been one of subjection since Bascombe held a position of absolute power over her. As Buehler explains, Bascombe's attempt to fully possess Sapphira that he inherently asserts as the slave owner, frustrates any possibility of reconciliation between their positions (216). Missy Kubitschek goes one step further and points out how this "racist patriarchy" is projected through the ensuing generations shaped in the curse that seems to separate men from women in the Day family. As she explains, "The emotional alienation between Bascombe and Sapphira reverberates through the generations in a perpetual separation of men and women of the same generation, and of women and their children. In the family tree, this dichotomy is expressed through all-male and all-female generations" (Kubitschek 87).

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The facts that remain amid this ambivalence, as Willow Springs' collective voice pointedly reminds us, are "the death of Bascombe Wade," "the deeds to our land," and "seven sons" (3). These are the foundational events of the present Willow Springs community as one birthed from the subversive act of resistance of a slave woman. As echoed in the initial paragraph, through this act Sapphira redefines herself as an individual, and the collective identities she represents (as a woman and a slave) undo the equivalence of slavery with absolute dispossession and posit matriarchy as an alternative model of community construction. The position of subalternity defined by the intersection of racial and gendered oppression is re-signified as one of resistance. In this process she first undoes the category of patriarchal power that served as the grounds for the institution of slavery. As Anolik explains, "The slave-owner, Bascomb[e] Wade, has been subverted by Sapphira, the slave woman who appropriated his property (including herself and her children) and founded the matriarchal dynasty whose descendants inhabit the island" (*American* 221). On this expropriation of the male power by the female, Naylor builds a critique of the historical stereotyping of Black women that is alluded through Sapphira's name. Like the "mammy" (an asexual portrait of Black women as maternal and self-sacrificing in relation to the white owners or employers) and the "Jezebel" (the hypersexualized opposite with which the white rhetoric attempted to downgrade the rape and sexual harassment of Black women), the sapphire constitutes another one of the common formulas through which Black womanhood has been coded in the white racist discourse. This caricature is built in opposition to the mammy and it often represents a "threatening" and "argumentative" Black woman who conveys her opinions publicly and whose primary role is the emasculation of Black men (West 461). Although this stereotype emerged in connection to a character from the TV adaptation of the deeply racist radio program *Amos 'n' Andy* during the 1960s, Naylor's indirect allusion to it two decades later punctuates her process of revision. First, she historicizes what was presented as an irrational anger by considering the socio-historical context in which Black women were forced to live since the times of slavery and gives visibility to their particular oppression. Second, she reframes this animosity by directing it at the white slave master, and by positing it as a place from which to build resistance, a call for action that perfectly reflects the status of Black women's fight for a voice in the period when the novel was published. If, as David Pilgrim claims, "The Sapphire Caricature […] is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen," Naylor effects a powerful revision of this archetypal view. Appealing to a posterior conscience, the author draws attention to the elusive ways in which these stereotypes are perpetuated through the dominant discourse and the media. This project of emancipation from historically biased accounts of Black life mobilizes as well traditional African-American myths such as the story of the Flying Africans. This legend, extensively explained in *Praisesong for the Widow,* and alluded to in this novel through the rendition of Sapphira's flight to Africa in a bolt of light, is part of the African American lore created by the conditions of forced migration. Together with a broader use of Africanist elements made in the novel, this story epitomizes cultural roots as an immediate locus from which to assert a cultural identity that resists the policies and rhetoric that have historically

tried to erase the Black subject and continue to do so in the present. Thus, in a deft approach, Naylor offers a text that, in James Coleman's accurate words, "through the process of its complicated narrative decenters the patriarchy and recrates the African American cultural tradition around black women" (118).

Due to Sapphira's role as the factual mother of Willow Springs, her act is projected in the constitution of the community, something that grants her the title of Great Mother. Discussing the centrality of the gender perspective in writings of contemporary Black women, Caroline Rody reflects on the connection established between the figure of the mother (and mother-daughter relations) and historical narratives in the following manner:

> The intensity of contemporary black feminist matrifocality must be seen, I believe, to reflect the intensity of engagement with history. […] If we understand figures of the black mother in African-American women's fiction to carry the valence of a charged, ambivalent relationship to the past, it becomes clear why the two fictional strands of mother-daughter relationships and maternal history have developed in tandem, why the number of matrifocal novels and of historical fictions rose simultaneously. (50)

I believe that this insight is fundamental to understand, first, how Sapphira's powerful gendered act determines the status of women in the island as emancipated inheritors and carriers of her legacy. Furthermore, they end up establishing the governing principles of Willow Springs within what Wardi calls a "unique epistemology" based on "the interrelationship between legend, myth and history" (148). This contravenes the values and principles that were elevated to absolute truths by the white patriarchal authorities and instead renders an appropriation of the values associated with the feminine in the establishment of a productive site of creation of meaning and resistance.

The paradox that inevitably emerges in the novel has to do with the fact that, despite Sapphira's centrality in the past and present of the community, its inhabitants are unable to name her, as her name remains an enigma even for a woman like Miranda (her direct descendant and living legacy) until the end of the novel. The construction of a narrative in which this can be possible is a testament to Naylor's craft and evidences another avenue in which the spectral metaphor can be useful to apprehend the text as it is influenced by a powerful force that is inevitably there and, yet, it remains invisible, un-namable. This can be interpreted in different ways, of which an allegation for displacing the individual and individualism in favor of the community should not be ruled out. In fact, it is a constant pattern in the narrative that the individual speaks of the collective, as can be seen through a close look at the island's ritual of Candle Walk. This, while supposedly based on the honoring of one individual, comes to encompass the whole group through a collective memorial to the deceased and the acts of solidarity that unite the island's inhabitants. Chassot, in turn, understands the ghostliness as reflecting the silencing to what Sapphira was subjected in the master narratives, therefore "signify[ing] the repressed of historiography, the excess that cannot be absorbed but must be policed and expelled by the science of history in order to keep its claim to facticity" (*Ghosts* 79). Various approaches have, likewise, pointed out another key

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factor that can help account for this paradox: trauma. Anolik reads these gaps as well as the resistance to secure the meanings along the broader project to destabilize these narratives in relation to the cultural trauma of slavery, and claims that:

> Naylor's refutation of the conventional restoration of narrative meaning suggests that the institution of slavery negates the possibility of restored meaning or identity, causing an irreparable schism between the present and the past. The lacunae in the history of many African American families can never be filled. The comfort offered with the restoration of property is not available when the property is human; stolen life cannot be restored. (*American* 224)

This is best instantiated through the contentious expression of 18&23: when Willow Springs's voice condemns Reema's boy's attempts at fixating the meaning of the expression and directs him instead to the experience of the people, what remains unsaid (but readily to be contended with) is the founding experience of slavery. As San José Rico explains, the expression refers to "the whole of the traumatic memory embedded in Willow Springs, in the minds and hearts of its inhabitants, to the part of history that is never recorded in books but passed on through storytelling and memory-work" (94). The tension between the explicit and material importance of Sapphira's action in the shaping of a self-sufficient community which maintains its cultural roots and identity, and the silencing to which she is subjected reflects the duality of the scars left by the traumatic wound: the resilience to move forward, and the inability to fully represent and apprehend the trauma of the past. San José Rico goes on to explain how "any attempt to fully explain what 18&23 means would entail telling and understanding what those traumatic memories have done to the collective identity of the inhabitants of Willow Springs, their meaning and significance as well as their present consequences" (94). Thus, in this first textual appearance, the ghost of Sapphira Wade becomes a means to denounce the way in which the tragedy of forced migration and slavery has left a traumatic scar on the African American community. Complementarily, it offers a testimony of resistance that illuminates what Chassot describes as the "constructed, fragmentary, tentative, and incomplete character" (*Ghosts* 102) of history and of the historiographical process that seeks to obliterate the atrocities of an institution based on the commodification of human bodies, and of the acts of resistance of these people that would shatter their logic of domination.

The second time that Sapphira is explicitly mentioned in the narrative is toward the very end. Willow Springs has survived a violent storm that broke the bridge to the mainland, but the Day family is besieged by the curse that progressively takes hold of Cocoa's body and mind. The illness that ails Cocoa is rooted in a physical and psychological plane, as it involves "being conscious of one's own mind disintegrating" and "watching one's body being consumed" (Harris 85). Desperately seeking a cure for Cocoa, Miranda's and George's methods are pitted against each other: applying his engineering training, George wants to rebuild the bridge as soon as possible in order to get Cocoa out of the island and take her to a doctor. The bridge, which has been a point of contention throughout the narrative, acquires a symbolic meaning as the only fragile means of connection with the mainland, neglected by

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every state authority and depending solely on the islanders' efforts to rebuild it whenever it is broken. Since the storm takes place in what is for George a moment of transition and of an embryonic awareness about a culture different from the one of his upbringing that approximates him to his roots, Paterson claims that the fracture that the destruction of the bridge entails could be seen as an opportunity to embrace the model offered by the island and to discover a part of his identity subsumed in a process of acculturation and assimilation. As she explains, "Such reintegration functions as a reversal of the Middle Passage, since the individual does not merely return to the ancestral community but also opens up new knowledge and forges new connections" (Paterson 95). However, George never considers this possibility, until it is too late for his salvation. Miranda, in turn, realizes that a different kind of cure is needed for such an illness.

The quest for a cure on Miranda's side is inextricably linked with an inquiry into the past: the past associated to Sapphira and to the origins of the island, which she is unable to grasp, and the past of her family marked by the trauma of loss, which she is resistant to confront. Thus, Miranda's physical venturing into "the other place" parallels a psychological deepening into the past of her family. The physical remnants of a book where information about Sapphira is hidden does not offer her any relief, for she is unable to read the faded letters. Miranda struggles unsuccessfully to decipher the name of the woman who initiated the Days. Instead, it is when she falls asleep, extenuated from the physical and mental effort, that this information comes easily to her: "Over and over until she goes to bed to get down on her stiffened knees and pray to the Father and Son as she'd been taught. But she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira" (280). This event resonates through the narrative as an act of reconstitution of female identity at the crossroads of mother-daughter relationships. As Kubitschek argues, "The dream heals Miranda's deepest wound, the abandonment she felt when her mother lost her mind grieving over Miranda's younger sister's death. Sapphira, the archetypal Great Mother, nurtures her necessarily smaller incarnation; Mama Day/Miranda experiences herself for the first time as a mother's daughter" (81). Miranda's transformation through this dream, which Wardi equates with a process of rebirth (159), enables her to confront the traumatic loss of her own mother and her own forced maturation, giving her an insight that is indispensable to find Cocoa's cure. In a scene that literalizes the opening of the door to the repressed, Miranda is finally able to open the well and listen to her sister's and mother's voices:

> Miranda's pulse is racing for a good many reasons as she grasps the edge of the well and peers down. […] *Look past the pain.* But there ain't nothing down there and this looking is straining her eyes. Something she's not doing right. Refusing to let go of the edge, Miranda closes her eyes and stands there, her feet tangled in the ground holly, her stomach pressed against the heart-shaped ginger. And when it comes, it comes with a force that almost knocks her on her knees. She wants to run from all that screaming. Echoing shrill and high, piercing her ears. But with her eyes clamped shut she looks at the sounds. A woman in apricot homespun: Let me go with peace. And a young body falling, falling toward the glint of silver coins in the crystal clear water.

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> Circles and circles of screaming. One, twice, three times peace was lost at that well. How was she ever gonna look past this kind of pain? (284)

The above passage is worth considering in detail because it offers the dramatization of the confrontation with a traumatic past as an insurmountable condition for Miranda's full claiming of her status as daughter (first abandoned and then reclaimed by Sapphira herself) and as the mother of the community (through the concluding healing of Cocoa). Moreover, the imperative to listen in opposition to relying uniquely on the evidence that is offered to the eyes, is once more reinforced. This serves as a testament to the power of the voices that knock a woman like Miranda off her feet, and as a background for understanding the importance of Miranda's request to George.

Beyond the importance that the discovery of Sapphira's name has for Miranda and the Willow Springs community, the means through which this information is revealed is another staple on the critique that the novel has thoroughly articulated on the matter of the construction of the historical discourse. Throughout the narrative, experience and memory, especially in their collective and cultural dimension and transmitted orally, have been privileged over written historiographical accounts. Montgomery explains how folk beliefs and the oral tradition effect a subversive rewriting:

> In Naylor's fictional cosmology as in oral tradition, the power to recall is an enabling mnemonic practice among those denied access to the written word and printed text. Remembering thus allows for the creation of an alternate reality, a counterhegemonic discourse that critiques, undermines and subverts cultural paradigms of the dominant society. (Montgomery 38)

In the same way that Willow Springs evades American cartography, or that the epistemology of the island resists the rationalist paradigm, Sapphira's identity cannot be traced down in a physical document, but it is unveiled in a dream. This is another area through which Naylor explores the differences between George and Miranda: whereas the latter embraces the truth that has been given to her by her ancestors, the former is open about his disbelief in his previous visit to the graveyard and "the other place." While intrigued by the legend of a female ancestor, George could only believe in her existence if some record were to be found among the papers of the slave master. His misunderstanding of Sapphira's figure goes deeper than a dismissal of the oral tradition that constitutes the cultural memory of the island, and he also misreads her subversive act of resistance as a gendered claim of selfhood inherited and adopted by the rest of the Day women. When pondering on the fact that all the tombs are marked only with a name, the novel subtly registers George's flawed interpretation of the island's tale, which evidences a male and white bias which Cocoa cuts short: "You explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day. Early women's lib, I said with a smile. A bit more than that, you answered" (218).

There is yet another instance where the differences between George and Miranda are symbolically rendered. Upon the event of her wedding, Abigail and Miranda gift Cocoa a quilt that they made together. In addition to the special significance that quilts have within the

African American literary tradition, in the novel the quilt acquires thematic centrality as a proxy for the inclusion of different perspectives, and as a symbol of the worldview espoused by Miranda and embraced by the whole of Willow Springs. Meisenhelder observes the multiple ways in which the quilt serves to represent the foundational elements of this cosmovision: community, history and lived experience. First, each of the pieces stands for an individual, a token of their individuality and their lives, but it is in the collective ensemble that they become a beautiful and functional piece. According to this critic, "the pieces can be readily identified, but stitched together they create something whole, immensely richer and more beautiful than the scrappy rags used to make the quilt" (Meisenhelder 413). Second, the notion of history that comes from the quilt is one that weaves together the past and the present, the individual and the collective, in a process that is in constant revision and actualization. As such, when Miranda ponders on the different people represented in their quilt, she realizes that despite the pain that some of them bring to the whole picture, their perspective is fundamental for they configure the fabric of Cocoa's history as well: "It was too late to take it out of the quilt, and it didn't matter no way. Could she take herself out? Could she take out Abigail? Could she take 'em all out and start again? With what?" (138). As Meisenhelder pointedly asserts, this reflection lays bare the cornerstone of Miranda's resilience that resides in her ability to put together the good and the bad, and that will become the underlying force that determines the life of Willow Springs' inhabitants and, in the end, of Cocoa and George as well. As she explains, "The result of weaving individuals, past and present, pain and joy together is not simply aesthetic beauty but also spiritual strength, psychic health, and social vitality" (Meisenhelder 413). This meaning that Abigail and Miranda have embraced, is one that the younger generation of Cocoa and George is yet to realize. As such, when they receive the present, their response is divided, as Cocoa's reflection shows: "You wanted to clear a wall in the living room and hang it up. But it had been made to be used, and I also knew they hadn't gone through that kind of labor just for me. I ran my hands along the multicolored rings. They had sewed for *my* grandchildren to be conceived under this quilt" (147).[34] This brief excerpt, implicitly addresses the fates of both characters in the remainder of the novel. George is not yet able to grasp the symbolic meaning of the quilt, appreciating it only for its aesthetic beauty and understanding it as a work of art designed to be put on display and revered. Cocoa, in turn, already discerns some of its potential meaning: what it represents is to be carried on for generations to come.

Another aspect that is worth considering in the brief depiction of how Miranda receives the name of Sapphira has to do with the subtle displacement of Christian organized religion: she is about to pray to the Father and the Son of this doctrine, when she falls asleep and the name of the Mother is reveled directly to her. The place of Christian religion in the island has

[34] This excerpt seems to engage in intertextual dialogue with Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." This short story, published in 1977, revolves around the conflict between two sisters on the question of the family quilts and the use they should be put to. At the core of this dispute rests a differential understanding of African American identity. The mother and the sister who remained with her in their birthplace consider the quilts to be a gift to greet the formation of a new family and household that must be used and renovated employing the skills she has learnt from her foremothers. Whereas for the other sister, who has left the family home and embarked on an Afrocentrist reconfiguration of her identity, these heirlooms are a work of art to be hanged on display that her backward family cannot appreciate.

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already been considered through the practice of the "stand forth"; while many characters subscribe to Christian beliefs, they blend them with other spiritual views rooted in the African tradition. In this sense, many critics have explored the different ways in which the novel revises Christianity's foundational dogmas as another of the West's master narratives. From the names of the two inaugural generations of the Day family line that are directly taken from the Bible, to the allusion to some parables that resonate with the African American history of slavery and struggle for freedom (such as Hagar's story or the evocation of Hebrew slaves crossing the Red Sea), the central part of this revision and rewriting is the replacement of an omnipotent, detached male god with an equally powerfully female goddess who partakes in the human experience and whose actions are intrinsically prompted by the needs and struggles of her fellows. This functions at different levels in the narrative: first, as Ivey has noted, Naylor revises the androcentrism of this religious approach and its symbolic implications, providing instead a view of the human being more connected with nature: "By rejecting the Christian trinity and Christian myth and replacing these myths with her own, Naylor subverts the symbolism on which dominant ideology is based. She replaces the dominant masculine image of sacrifice with a spirituality based on connection to nature" (106). Second, the elevation of these characters to the status of Biblical figures with a clear gender focus, visibilizes their experiences and reinforces their collective value.[35]

Miranda's confrontation with the trauma embedded in the Day family that seems to perpetually oppose its men and women leads to the realization that Cocoa's cure must necessarily be an effort of integration. Because Cocoa has decided to join her life with George, and Ruby was deeply aware of their feelings, Miranda believes that the key to overcome the power of the curse must necessarily involve George. In him, Miranda sees the potential of the truthful love that George and Cocoa share, but she also identifies his reliance exclusively on himself as an obstacle for trusting others and finding a solution where nobody is sacrificed:

> In all her years she could count on half of her fingers folks she'd met with a will like his. He believes in himself—deep within himself—'cause he ain't never had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to *hand* it over to her. She needs his hands in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. Yes, in his very hands he already held the missing piece she'd come looking for. (285)

[35] *Mama Day's* intertextuality, not only with the Bible but with other previous and contemporary texts, has been object of extensive research. Among the different inquiries, it is important to note the connections with Shakespearean plays, especially *The Tempest* as background intertext and point of departure for a revision of the literary canon (cf. Erickson [1993], Kubitschek [1994], Storhoff [1995], Cowart [1998], Blyn [2002], García González [2007]). In this light, the novel could be understood as one that rewrites the play in racial and gender terms: the subalternity of Caliban comes to occupy a central stage, as the enslaved woman and her descendants have taken hold of the island and established a matriarchal society.

However, in spite of George's encounter with a reality that is drastically different from the one in which he was reared and the feelings that had sprung on him since the first moment he met Cocoa, he constantly attempts to tame the affective response and refuses to abandon the models of his upbringing. As such, throughout the novel he repeatedly fails to understand the richness of the island's culture for itself, interrogates the customs and traditions and insists on finding logical explanations for the events that escape rationality. In this regard it is important to consider the foreshadowing dream that George and Cocoa have prior to the curse. First him and then her, they share a dream where Cocoa is presumably drowning, and George tries to save her by starting to swim from the other end of The Sound. In the middle of his struggle Miranda comes to him and tells him to get up and walk. Infuriated, he tries to confront her: "With my last bit of strength I pushed my shoulders out of the water to scream in her face, you're a crazy old woman! And I found myself standing up in the middle of The Sound" (183–184). Although the resemblance between the imaginary situation and the reality is uncanny, George chooses not to pay head to the parallelisms and the lesson learned about the futility of trying to save Cocoa by himself. Since they fall outside his rigid set of rules and laws governing his reality, he ignores them and insists on his project. Desperate at the worsening condition of his beloved, he first plans to use a small boat to cross over to the mainland and look for help. When he finds out that the rest of the men have used it for wood to rebuild the bridge, he again fails to realize the importance of the collective effort. His final act of tragic blindness comes when he decides to resort to Miranda as his last resource.

The exchange between the both of them is marked by the fatal certainty and frustrated hope that George will come to understand, as both characters embody opposite views that still have to be reconciled. Winsbro explains this opposition thus:

> Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* describes the collision of two worlds, two systems of belief, and two approaches to survival and growth in today's universe. New York, characterized by an emphasis on culture, alienation, and scientific reality, is a world controlled and explained by modern rationality. In contrast, the island of Willow Springs, characterized by an emphasis on nature, community, and the imagination, is a world controlled and explained by supernatural forces. (109)

Aware of his reticence, Miranda vests him with the cane of her father and the ledger she found in "the other place," both highly symbolic of a different kind of power that stems from the cultural memory, and her instructions are direct:

> "Back at my coop, there's an old red hen that's setting her last batch of eggs. You can't mistake her 'cause she's the biggest one in there and the tips of her feathers is almost blood red. She's crammed her nest into the northwest corner of the coop. You gotta take this book and cane in there with you, search good in the back of her nest, and come straight back here with whatever you find." Miranda feels his body go rigid, but she won't let him pull back and she rushes to get through. "Now, I'm warning you, she's gonna be evil so watch

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> out for your eyes. But, please, bring me straight back *whatever* you find—and then we can all rest. You look like you could use a lot of it, son." (295)

At first George is unable to take her seriously and leaves her to go to Cocoa. However, when he attests her much worsening condition, he returns to her and to seek the emblems that will accompany him in his quest. As the narrative perspectives alternate at an increasing speed, it becomes apparent that not just Cocoa's life depends on his actions, but his own as well. Gifted with sight that reveals the core of both the human and the natural world, Miranda prophesizes his failure: "And it was gonna be harder still, 'cause he was taking her way. It ain't a proud man in front of her—his pride wasn't needed—but it wrenches her inside that he'll be traveling without it. Wrenches her inside that the other way—his way—is to lose him" (299). Indeed, when George overcomes his fear of hens and enters the coop to find nothing *but* his hands, he loses the little faith he had managed to build and turns John-Paul's walking stick into a destructive weapon with which the coop is reduced to a bloodbath of broken animals' bodies and his heart slowly begins to give up. It is perhaps with the clarity of death approaching that he finally understands the meaning of Miranda's words, just a moment before exhaling his last breath next to Cocoa, just a moment too late:

> But there was nothing to bring her. *Bring me straight back whatever you find.* Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands? […] There was nothing that old woman could do with a pair of empty hands. I was sitting in a chicken coop, covered with feathers, straw, manure, and blood, and why? I looked around me again and kept laughing until it started to hurt. Why? I brought both palms up, the bruised fingers clenched inward. All of this wasted effort when these were *my* hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go. (300–301)

M. Coleman has alluded to the significance that hands have in Yoruban art as a representation of ancestors (128), as a possible avenue to understand the emphasis that Naylor places on this last part of the novel. While I consider that this reading fits with the careful interweaving of Africanist elements that the author effects throughout the novel, I believe that in this case a literal meaning is more appropriate. Miranda sees George's metaphorical understanding of her instructions as one inherently faulted because it searches beyond what she is asking him; what she demands of him at this point seems to be an act of faith: to strictly listen to what she is saying and follow her request. Having done that would have implied that George was able to leave aside his own mindset and that would constitute the first step into learning about the role of ancestry and memory.

This means an end in different senses in the novel: the end of George's life as he had known it, the end of Cocoa's illness and the end of the Days' family curse. But in many more, it is a new beginning, for in Willow Springs death does not imply finality. Tragic as George's death seems, it is deeply associated to rebirth, both his own and Cocoa's, a rebirth that speaks about identity and belonging. George's death has been read as the ultimate failure of the alienated individual and of "masculinized rationality" (Lamothe 167), and, while I too conceive of his death as signifying on the inadequacy of the white social model's aspiration to

universality, I do not interpret his death as a failure since it is through his final passage that he becomes a full member of the African American community. As Eckard explains, "He ends up sacrificing his own life, but in doing so George ironically becomes fully assimilated into the community. Although he had no personal history of his own, through death George contributes to the collective history of Willow Springs and becomes part of its lore and memory" (132). This integration and the recognition of his status as a member of the community by his fellow neighbors are symbolically effected with his inclusion in the group of those honored in the annual Candle Walk. Likewise, he is buried in the Day family plot, which grants him the possibility to communicate with Miranda, who assures him of a future day when Cocoa will occupy her place as a listener: "One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time—that I won't be here for—when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you" (308). It is, therefore, after death that George will eventually have access to all that which escaped his taxonomic view and will recognize its value. As Chassot claims, "it is only through death, and through becoming a ghost himself, that he will learn to re-vision his approach" (*Ghosts* 94). It is in this sense, as well, that spectrality is configured as a site of resistance for it offers a space of cultural identification from which to claim a cultural identity that had previously been denied. As Paterson explains, "What George gains in Willow Springs is an ancestral heritage that transcends genealogy; when he aligns himself with Cocoa and her living ancestors, he becomes spiritually grafted into their lineage, a lineage that extends beyond the physical boundaries of the island to the continent of Africa itself, of which the island is an extension" (89). Furthermore, I would argue that, if in the space of death he is able to recognize the cultural ties that he had lacked, Naylor's work then actualizes the Africanist belief of a continuum between life and death and the consideration of the afterlife as a space of definition demonstrating George's adoption of these values through his transformation in a spectral presence of the community.

While Cocoa's transformation may be more subtle, it is crucial since it speaks to all the central issues raised throughout the narrative. After George's death, she needs some time to heal and to reconsider the value of her own life, aided by her grandmother and her great-aunt who had conjointly functioned as her surrogate mother. Progressively, Cocoa makes her life anew: she moves to Charleston, marries again and has two children, the youngest of them named after George. Aged forty-six, Cocoa returns every summer to the island of Willow Springs like she used to, but now she has learned to listen to the voices of "the other place," as her book-length dialogue with George demonstrates. Even though Cocoa had already heard the voices that warned her about how she would break George's heart, when she comes back after mourning for her loss and for what was lost, she has gained the insight into the relevance of these voices at a personal and collective level. As Wall points out, the novel renders the transformation of George and Cocoa in terms of their ability to become "active listeners":

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> Although George cannot surrender to the ways of Willow Springs in time to save himself, he learns to listen after crossing over, so that his spirt remains on the island and from there carries on the dialogue with Ophelia that structures

> the text. George has become another of the voices of history which Ophelia has learned to heed. Willow Springs makes those voices and that history tangible in a way that commands attention. (1461)

This has communal resonances as well, for it implies that the memory the island encapsulates—from the slave trade, to Sapphira's act of resistance, to the progressive alienation from the African roots of the twentieth century, to the return of the younger generations—is a guiding force for the individual in the new challenges imposed by the ever-changing racial line. This is what Lene Brøndum has described as the "mythic memory" that "will sustain Naylor's Cocoa at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (158).

While an inherent opposition seemed to be established throughout the novel between the world of Willow Springs and the world of New York, with the characters belonging to one or the other representing two polar opposites, the conclusion of the novel leans toward a more integrative view, escaping from the essentialisms that had already been repudiated in the construction of cultural identities. The major representative of this stance is Cocoa herself, with her decision to live in Charleston as a halfway between the exacerbated paradigm of white assimilation epitomized in New York, and the alternative world of Willow Springs. Her choice has been interpreted as an attempt to synthesize the values that contribute to the development of the self as a part of the community, an approach that opposes a competitive model. As Winsbro points out, "The ideal, Naylor suggests, is to recognize the powers and limitations of both types of belief, striving to reconcile and mediate between them, allowing one to take over where the other fails. To insist on only one type of belief, on only one type of reality, is not only limiting but potentially destructive" (128). When, as the appointed carrier of her people's legacy, Cocoa embraces this hybridity, "supplementing a belief in the self with a belief in external powers" (Winsbro 125), the place of cultural identity is located, not in a set of fixed values defined by opposition and isolation from other societies, but rather in knowing one's history and recognizing one's roots even in an increasingly globalized world. The novel would put forward, in Lamothe words, "an understanding of cultural integrity less reliant on the notion of the static and isolated village, and more invested in ideas of cultural memory that do not obscure or deny the existence of cross-cultural exchange" (157). As this critic suggests, the work does not fall into the fallacy of engaging a utopic vision of hybridization, underlining the conflicts, miscommunications, distrust and abuses of power (Lamothe 162), but, by favoring Cocoa's integrative way of life, it seems to suggest that this is the most viable option. The ghost registers this anxiety and, as such, it never leaves the text, turning into a constant reminder that forgetting is not an option, and that healing is part of the process through which the individual and the community must go on forward. Cocoa's role as the carrier of the legacies of her family and her community define her as an African American woman inhabiting the complex landscape of American society toward the end of the century. She bears the metaphorical scars of the past, but has chosen to embrace the resilience that these wounds taught her to raise awareness on how to navigate a society that demands assimilation and amnesia, refusing both.

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2.3.2. Concluding Remarks

The critical analysis carried out in the preceding pages has revealed the role of spectrality in conveying the palimpsestic nature of history. In doing so, there were a number of elements that appeared reiteratively when approaching the three main spectral elements of the novel, namely: relativity, ambiguity, multiplicity and liminality. These are central to define the characters, plotlines and settings of Naylor's work and transcend these particular elements to address the central themes and questions posed by the narrative. As such, Montgomery considers liminality—the matrix from which the rest of the characteristics derive—as shedding light on the state of the hybridized identity of individuals that the narrative's outcome seems to make. She explains how it directly engages "the border subject's attempt to mediate the condition of being in exile and achieve a hybrid self that exists within and at times outside the institutions of a larger society" (xvii). However, liminality, as well as the aforementioned relativity, ambiguity and multiplicity are also the key defining characteristics of the spectral. In other words, not only does the narrative approach spectrality from a thematic perspective, but the very characteristics that define the spectral phenomenon come to define the novel structurally. It is for this reason that I would like to conclude by putting forward the idea that the novel, by giving these elements the status of articulating narrative forces, deploys structural spectrality. I would argue that this foregrounding of the spectral and its constitutive elements becomes a key narrative asset that invites us to question the received narrative together with all those intertextual references that Naylor deconstructs.

The more open delineation and discussion of the three spectral elements that constitute the body of the analysis have shown the different dimensions of the spectral metaphor. The spectral dialogue that vertebrates the novel works in a formal way as the instrumental means to supplement the portrait and background of the two central characters and at the same time it depicts post-civil rights America. This is defined, from the perspective of the Black population, by a continued struggle with structural inequality and the simultaneous placement on an identity crossroads where African American individuals are torn by an imperative to assimilate into the mainstream white racist society that discriminates and marginalizes them. From a thematic perspective, it engages an understanding of death with origins in various African religions, where passing away does not entail finality but a change of state in a continued existence. Thus, the examination of spectrality at this level produces key contentions that will define its functions in the two instances discussed. The spectral voices of the Day family, and more importantly, Miranda's ability to listen to them, depict an intrusion of the traumatic past into the present where the repressed emerges and it marks the dual dimension—always individual and collective, personal and political—that defines the spectral object, which is eventually amplified through the analysis of Sapphira Wade as a haunting presence in Willow Springs. It is in this character where the Africanist dimension of spectrality in this narrative is fully outlined by recovering the figure of the conjurer as an epitome of the retentions and adaptations of different African cultures under a shared experience of dislocation and brutalization. Speaking back to African-based folk knowledge and African American traditions, Sapphira's character and her subversive act of resistance

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construct Willow Springs as a space where African heritage, in the shape of the island's many idiosyncrasies, is part of the vibrant community's daily life. The model of the island, while it vindicates the currency of its roots, is not, however, constructed as a hermetic space but as one that keeps self-actualizing to provide its members with the necessary tools to confront each historical moment. In this respect, Wall claims that "Naylor's novel does not simply assert the value of recuperating African-American cultural legacies; it seeks to dramatize their utility in the contemporary world" (1450).

Indeed, this project of cultural reclamation speaks directly to the conditions of the decade in which Naylor wrote her most important works, one marked by the tension between the proclamation of a color-blind society and the existence of racial disparities, as well as other intra-group problems, such as gender oppression and silencing, about which Black women were writing. Beyond this, however, in an interview given in 2005 (more than a decade and a half after the publication of *Mama Day*) to Tomeiko Ashford, Naylor said: "I think we are still struggling under the scars of slavery" ("Gloria" 74–75). In this light, her project, like those of the rest of the authors examined in this dissertation, is extremely current inasmuch as it evidences the conditions of cultural dispossession that remain unchanged, as discussed in the next chapter. The ghost and the ghostly, defined as they have been as tokens of what remains, of what keeps returning because it still needs to be reckoned with, or because it is a violence still unfolding, are thus mobilized to bear witness to the past and present struggle forged with acts of resistance and solidarity. In this process the act of reading, reconceptualized in this work as listening, entails an approach to the material conditions of haunting and how these are perpetuated across generations.

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3. THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SPECTRALITY: THE PERPETUATION OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with the critical examination of spectrality in the works of two contemporary African American authors. Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and his short stories "Tell Me, Tell Me" (1992) and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*" (2018) form a constellation where the ghost appears embedded in a magic realist landscape profoundly marked by an ever-present racial history; similarly, the specters of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) embody in themselves the past and present legacies of chattel slavery. Whereas the texts studied in what follows do not constitute as homogeneous a unity as the pair studied in the previous chapter, they are brought together due to their analogous deployment of spectrality. In the second chapter I argued that the foremost dimension of spectrality outlined in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Mama Day* was the Africanist, mobilized to convey the struggle against assimilation and as a means for the reclamation of a diasporic cultural identity, and, while the foundational trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery was present, the function of the ghost in connection with the subsequent articulation of a social criticism of contemporary circumstances occupied a secondary place. In turn, this chapter proceeds under the reversal of this claim: I contend that, in the novels and short stories under analysis in the following sections, the ghost appears first and foremost as a marker of racial trauma, one whose attempted burial or repression ultimately fails and thus, through its reemergence, unearths a history that reflects on the configuration of a complex socio-cultural landscape. In line with its fluid ontology, the mobilization of the spectral is multi-layered. In addition to becoming a vehicle for the expression of the historical oppression that continues to define the racial dynamics between the white and Black sectors of society, it delves into the internal dynamics of the African American community and considers the patterns of safety networks introduced in previous works alongside the underdeveloped cases of marginalization and exclusions of dissident identities through the case of homosexuality in *Visitation*. Similarly to previous cases, the ghost operates both at the individual and collective level, positing personal trauma alongside broader socio-historical coordinates of collective or cultural trauma. Furthermore, inasmuch as the specter subsumes different time ranges, it draws a continuum among different forms of oppression whose focal point is its perpetuation in the present. This turns into the spearhead of the social critique developed in these narratives where the ghost's potential for revision appears as another means of resistance. Conversely, the Africanist component, structural in the cases of *Praisesong* and *Mama Day*, appears here consigned to a secondary position, greatly

marginalized in *Visitation* and gaining momentum toward the end of *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* Despite this observation, it is important to note that the readings proposed in this chapter are not meant to be conceptualized in opposition to the previous ones. Rather than seeking differentiation, these authors seem to carry on with their forebears' legacies, actualizing the potential of the ghost to address those aspects that had been previously underdeveloped and to vindicate how its disruptive power continues to be a useful tool to undo the silence and indict the systemic racism of the present.

Arthur Redding defines the ghost as "that which survives, singular, jealous, persistent, and beckoning—specters, absences that refuse to absent themselves, which would rise from the graves to which a national history has hastily consigned them" (114). His description engages a vision of the spectral phenomenon that approximates it to the workings and representation of trauma: revenants of a violent past which, in its perpetuation, refuse to stay buried. He records two factors that are key in the examination of the texts analyzed in this chapter: historical erasure and persistence. If, as Patricia San José Rico claims, silence has taken place among African Americans due to guilt, shame and fear (11), the attempted erasure enacted by the dominant ideology is more blatant and pernicious. This has been implemented at a national level by invoking an all-pervasive narrative of racial progress that used first the achievements of the civil rights movement, and later the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president as irrefutable proof of its validity, and as a chief tactic of evading historical responsibility. These attitudes on the part of different authorities have precluded an honest reconciliatory process whose projection in the future seems to be further imperiled by the iteration of different forms or racial discrimination four centuries after the first enslaved person set foot on American ground. The ghost becomes a key mechanism for expression of this reality: it embodies that which cannot be buried because it has neither been dealt with, nor is it dead, but keeps repeating itself; straddled between the past and the present, the specter forces both orders in a dialogue. The haunting unleashed by the revenant becomes simultaneously a "metaphor for memory" and "a call to witnessing" (Parham 11) where the convergence of the past and the present appears as an insurmountable condition for the building of any prospective egalitarian future. At an individual level, the condition of being haunted is akin to an ethical standpoint that can be framed in the broader context of an affective turn. As pointed out by Marisa Parham, "Haunting names how we experience the pain of others or, even more specifically, how the pain of others shades our own subjectivities" (7). At a collective level, this approach to the ghost and the alterity it represents becomes the symbolic way through which to incorporate that past into the national narrative and redress its effects on the present. As Hershini B. Young explains, "Reparation and reconciliation are achieved not by pressing the ghost back into its grave, but rather by multiple historical re-engagements with the specters that haunt (national) bodies in ways that resist closure" (19). In the United States this has not been the case, but rather the opposite, as the country seems to have been swept into a worldwide turn to nationalist, conservative values that uphold unabashed white supremacy, prompting an increasing tide of violence against racialized bodies.

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The different socio-historical analyses that have emerged in the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, and that seek to account for the current status of African Americans in the U.S., share a retrospective formula that allows for the location of the present moment alongside previous systems of legally enforced discrimination. As anticipated in the analysis of *Beloved*, the decade of the 1980s, where most of the works analyzed in the dissertation are set, is posited as a pivotal moment in the construction of two seemingly exclusive realities: the emergence of mass incarceration as yet another mechanism for the social coercion and control of the Black population through the criminal justice system, and the reinforcement of a colorblind rhetoric.[36] One of the most influential studies to date is Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), which, due to its comprehensiveness and timeliness, will be used as guidepost along this brief historical survey. M. Alexander focuses on the criminal justice system as a major historical agent in the fabrication and maintenance of a criminal "undercaste" (*The New* 7). In a now generalized tendency, the author defines the working of race in the United States as that of a caste system:[37]

> Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did. Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race. (*The New* 13)

She draws the parallels between Jim Crow and the period of mass incarceration regarding legalized discrimination, political disenfranchisement, racial segregation and the symbolic production of race as synonymous with criminality (M. Alexander, *The New* 191–197). As discussed in the previous chapter, in the post-Reconstruction era Black life became absolutely devaluated except as fodder for the growing industrialization of the South. In their survey of the antecedents of mass incarceration, different authors point out the system of convict leasing, the chain gang and debt peonage as major installments in the crafting of what Douglas Blackmon has called "the age of neoslavery" (402) whose tentacles reach into our

[36] Ava DuVernay's critically-acclaimed documentary *13th* (2016) offers a comprehensive audiovisual account of the historical repression and control of Black bodies and the configuration of Blackness along criminal paradigms. Featuring prominent historians, lawyers and social analysts, the film interrogates the emergence and consolidation of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex in relation to the vested interests of the government and private companies that specifically target African Americans.

[37] American journalist and writer Isabel Wilkerson makes of this the axiom of her historical survey *Caste:The Origin of Our Discontents* (2020). She explores the African American case alongside other caste systems in the world and points out the eight central pillars through which this is constructed: "divine will and the laws of nature," vesting racial difference with a divine or spiritual foundation (100); "heritability," a status transmitted from generation of generation that annuls mobility (105); "endogamy and the control of marriage and mating," that sanctions exploitation of the lower caste but forbids equal pairing (see the banning on interracial marriages) (109ff.); "purity" of the dominant caste in opposition to the "pollution" of the lower castes (115); "occupational hierarchy," which affects the division of labor along hierarchical lines (132); "dehumanization and stigma" of the undercaste (142); "terror as enforcement, cruelty as means of control," the domination of the undercaste through the exacting of punishment (156); "inherent superiority" of the upper caste as opposed to the "inherent inferiority" of the undercaste, a case of biological and cultural difference that cannot be surmounted (159).

days. In his study of convict leasing, Alex Lichtenstein observes how this developed into a new system of forced labor, and indicates the considerable financial benefits that both companies and the state gained, to the extent that it became a key asset in the South's industrial development, as well as in the perpetuation of racial domination (13). In addition to the profits garnered by the state by means of physical exploitation, convict labor was also used to control free labor unrest, as prisoners were used to replace paid workers, prevent strikes or render them ineffectual, and to force higher productiveness while maintaining poor working conditions for laborers (Lichtenstein 98). After this practice was banned in 1908, it was replaced by chain gangs, a similar concept in which a group of inmates were chained together and set to work on physically demanding jobs such as road building, as a form of punishment. Such gangs were heralded by their proponents as a progressive reform, whereas they in fact constituted an accurate reflection of the brutality and stagnation of racial relations in the South (Lichtenstein 159). In a similar vein, this period saw the emergence of prison farms, some of them on former plantation grounds, like the infamous Angola, where prisoners were forced to work to raise crops and cotton, which made the connection to slavery all the more conspicuous. As the twentieth century progressed, these institutions were transformed into State Penitentiaries that continued to house and exploit a disproportionate number of Black bodies. The perception of similarities with the past is so strong among inmates and visitors alike that poet and activist Clint Smith, after visiting Angola Prison Farm, now Louisiana State Penitentiary, in 2021 described it as follows: "The parallel with chattel slavery made it feel as if time was bending in on itself. There was no need for metaphor; the land made it literal" (116).[38] In this manner, convict leasing and other analogous forms of bondage, served a dual function: to control the Black labor flow and extract economic profit, and to create a criminalized collective. In this regard, David Oshinsky points out that "Convict leasing would also serve a cultural need by strengthening the walls of white supremacy as the South moved from an era of racial bondage to one of racial caste" (57).

The achievements of the civil rights movement in the decade of the 1960s brought forth a strong backlash, another outburst of what historian Carol Anderson has called "white rage" (*White* 3). Triggered by Black advancement and "demands for full and equal citizenship," this rage subtly "works its way through the courts, the legislature, and a range of government bureaucracies" (C. Anderson, *White* 3). This is what happened in October 1982 when Ronald Reagan officially declared the War on Drugs. While the legal tactics that would be subsumed under this label had been underway for some time, with this official declaration the national government effected a rhetorical shift toward "law and order" that would be maintained as far as the 2016 presidential campaign, when Donald Trump described himself as the law-and-order candidate. It would soon become evident that beneath this apparent neutral term there was a racial target, as evidenced by the policies promoted, the stereotyped discourse adopted, and, more ostensibly, the outcome of these policies for the African American community. As

[38] Other accounts of this prison can be found in the historical Black Panther Party member Albert Woodfox's memoir *Solitary* (2019). Woodfox, together with Robert King and Herman Wallace, were part of the so-called "Angola Three," framed and convicted to one of the most strenuous punishments in the history of the U.S. imprisonment. Both Woodfox and Wallace spent more than forty years in solitary confinement, most of which were served at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

M. Alexander (*The New* 55) and C. Anderson (*White* 124) point out, the war on drugs did not have a correlate in a dramatic change of drug abuse, but instead obeyed to political interests. The more trenchant problem was the economic collapse that was affecting the inner city as a result of the deindustrialization and technologization processes that rendered many menial workers redundant; the impossibility for them to access other positions due to their lack of higher education, as well as the relocation of factories in other countries, while the proliferation of predatory mortgages led many to drug-selling as one of the few viable options for survival (M. Alexander, *The New* 50–51; Forman 157).

In the face of this economic downturn that severely affected the inner cities, the administration opted for "tough on crime policies" which entailed a punitive turn that effectively erased any rehabilitative options, as demonstrated through the different pieces of legislation that were passed during the period. The Comprehensive Crime Control Act (1984) transformed policing trough militarization and the granting of unprecedented power to law enforcement corps (Hinton 312). This would become institutionalized in subsequent administrations through federally-funded grants such as the Byrne Program for the acquisition of weaponry and special teams of the drug task force (M. Alexander, *The New* 83). Sanctioned by the law, a number of policing practices were developed that unequivocally targeted the Black (and Latinx) population. These include the so-called "stop and frisk" whereby any person suspect of illegal activity can be stopped and patted down; pretext stops, where minor traffic offenses are used to carry on consent searches which, despite their theoretical consensual nature, are hardly ever opposed by individuals, even when in risk of conviction; "broken window policing," which condones police intervention whenever they perceive signs of disorder; or the good forfeiture provision that allows the police to keep any items found in anti-drug sweeps or police raids. In addition to the precarization of personal liberties entailed by these practices, the most alarming aspect that unites them all is racial profiling. Far from being the sole product of individual unconscious bias, profiling was legally upheld by the Supreme Court ruling in the McCleskey v. Kemp (1987) decision that declared "targeted racial profiling acceptable for the sake of public safety" (Hinton 326). The backing of these racially discriminatory practices was also extended to other cases such as Whren v. United States (1996) that upheld the constitutionality of pretext stop without considering the factor of race, in spite of the ample evidence that suggested that Blacks (and women, regardless of their race) were stopped at higher rates than whites;[39] or to Scott v. Harris (2007) whereby the Supreme Court condoned the use of deadly police force when a man evaded a traffic stop for speeding. In his survey of these constitutional cases, former prosecutor Paul Butler describes this carceral state as part of what he calls "the chokehold." Appropriating the terminology that defines the brutal police practice that has taken the life of many African Americans, he uses the term to describe the condition of Black life in the United States:

[39] Forman provides the statistical data of these claims: "Black men are more than twice as likely as white men, and black women are more than twice as likely as white women, to be subjected to a pretext stop. In fact, black women are more likely to be pulled over for pretext stops than are white men, despite the fact that white men carry guns and commit violent crimes at much higher rates than black women do" (213).

> A chokehold is a process of coercing submission that is self-reinforcing. A chokehold justifies additional pressure on the body because the body does not come into compliance, but the body cannot come into compliance because of the vise grip that is on it. This is the black experience in the United States. This is how the process of law and order pushes African American men into the criminal system. [...] The Chokehold is a way of understanding how American inequality is imposed. (P. Butler 5)

The second major piece of legislation that regulated the war on drugs was the Anti-Drug Abuse Act that was passed in 1986. This implied more money allotted to drug-related enforcement as well as harsher penalties, including mandatory minimum sentences for distribution. Once again, racial disparity became blatant: punishments were "far more severe for distribution of crack—associated with blacks—than powder cocaine, associated with whites" (M. Alexander, *The New* 53). The act posited a 100-to-1 disparity in sentencing between crack and cocaine, based on the fallacy of the former's greater addictive power, whereby a person possessing 1 gram of crack was sentenced to the same time as someone possessing 100 grams of cocaine (C. Anderson, *White* 132; Forman 164). The punitive stride continued toward the end of the century when in 1994 Clinton passed the Three Strikes and You Are Out law which entailed a life sentence for those committing a third felony. Beyond arrests, disparities can also be found in the processing of the detainees who, often due to lack of resources that would grant access to proper representation, are often overcharged and forced to accept plea bargains; and some are even wrongfully imprisoned (M. Alexander, *The New* 84–87).[40]

The dismantling of the welfare system enacted by Reagan which, according to James Forman, led to a two percent increase in poverty affecting especially Africans Americans (158), and which, coupled with this legislative apparatus that rendered many poor citizens felons and thus ineligible for social aid, laid the grounds for the explosion of mass incarceration. As M. Alexander points out, "In two short decades, between 1980 and 2000, the number of people incarcerated in our nation's prisons and jails soared from roughly 300,000 to more than 2 million. By the end of 2007, more than 7 million Americans—or one in every 31 adults—were behind bars, on probation, or on parole" (60). This has propelled the United States to the first position concerning imprisonment rates in the world: "Home to the largest prison system on the planet, with a rate of incarceration that is five to ten times higher than that of comparable nations, the United States represents 5 percent of the world's population but holds 25 percent of its prisoners" (Hinton 5). This conglomerate of social control, political

[40] Due to the proliferation of these practices, at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s different non-profit organizations such as The Innocence Project or the Equal Justice Initiative were founded to provide legal assistance and to work towards the exoneration of the wrongfully convicted. The latter, founded by civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson has, furthermore, carried out several projects of historical memory recovery such as the Legacy Museum (Montgomery, Alabama) and published various reports on the domestic slave trade, segregation and lynching. In his memoir *Just Mercy* (2014), whose film version was released in 2019, Stevenson provides a detailed account of the historical antecedents of mass incarceration, the disproportionate toll on African Americans and the landmark decisions worked by the organization to advance the reform of the criminal justice system regarding capital punishment, as well as the imprisonment of minors and the mentally impaired.

interests and private business profits vested in the business of surveillance, control and imprisonment has led to the understanding of mass incarceration as the fuel of the "prison industrial complex," a term that accounts for the interlocking interests of private companies, state agencies and political parties.[41] Amid this staggering prison population, Black Americans are disproportionately represented. M. Alexander establishes the connection between the racially biased policies implemented through the War on Drugs and the numbers of Black inmates:

> In at least fifteen states, blacks are admitted to prison on drug charges at a rate from twenty to fifty-seven times greater than that of white men. In fact, nationwide, the rate of incarceration for African American drug offenders dwarfs the rate of whites. When the War on Drugs gained full steam in the mid-1980s, prison admissions for African Americans skyrocketed, nearly quadrupling in three years, and then increasing steadily until it reached in 2000 a level *more than twenty-six times* the level in 1983. (*The New* 98; emphasis in original)

P. Butler has also addressed the "racialized enforcement of drug laws," claiming that while African Americans constitute around 13 percent of the people who commit crimes, they constitute about 60 percent of those who serve time (122). Beyond the bloodcurdling data, M. Alexander rests her central argument on the effects that entering the prison industrial complex entails for those henceforth considered felons and for their communities, as well as the more generalized implications that this has for the construction of Blackness. She equates being branded a felon with second-class citizenship (*The New* 94): social aid is denied as drug offenders are no longer eligible for food stamps and they are evicted from public housing; citizen rights are also curtailed as they are not allowed to vote in twelve years and cannot serve in juries; other prohibitions include the access to certain job licenses or a driver's license.[42] These measures greatly complicate the re-integration of released prisoners in society at large and also within their own community, which entails an important psychological toll for individuals and the destruction of family units, all of these becoming factors that feature prominently in the increasing levels of recidivism. Alongside this, one of the main outcomes of this process is the stigmatization of the African American community in association to

[41] As a response to the detrimental effects of mass incarceration, a number of activists, scholars, and artists have sponsored the abolitionist movement "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex." Angela Davis, one of its foremost proponents, summarizes the main objectives of the organization to redress the effects of the criminalization derived from the War on Drugs and enforced through the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994): "The ultimate goal of this gathering was to propose new vocabularies and a new discourse that would help to shift the 'law and order' rhetoric to one that acknowledged the role played by the multifaceted criminalization of Black, Brown, and poor communities in consolidating the punitive turn. Emphasizing the danger of authorizing incarceration as the primary response to disrupted social relations—economic disorder, illiteracy, the lack of healthcare, harm, etc.— and as the legitimate and immutable foundation of justice, the conference initiated board conversations on racism and repression within the prison system" (A. Davis 369).

[42] In fact Joshua Price conceives of the present status of the prisoner as one of social death and argues that "after slavery was abolished, the primary mechanism of social death migrated from the institution of chattel slavery to the criminal justice system" (81). His argument regarding the consideration of prisoners as socially dead draws on three features that he defines as intrinsic to the system: institutional violence, generalized humiliation, and natal alienation (6).

criminality held on the fabrication of stereotypes of the ghetto as a jungle and its inhabitants as thugs, superpredators, crackheads, welfare queens and crack babies. The result of a carefully orchestrated system of racial repression, these stereotypes do not emerge in a vacuum but are the contemporary correlate of discourses of Black pathologization that originated to justify enslavement.

Although the rates of mass incarceration have decreased since 2010, it is important to note that this is a problem that interlocks with many other issues that greatly impact African American life conditions and standards in the United States. Unemployment rates for Black people duplicate that of whites, which leads to a widening wealth gap between the two groups: "In 2013, the median white household had thirteen times the wealth of the median black household" (P. Butler 181). This mediates access to education and health, the latter an aspect that became apparent during the late Covid-19 pandemic when African Americans contracted the disease and died at higher rates than whites, partially due to the essential jobs many of them they carried out, the mostly poor areas they inhabited and lack of access to the healthcare system (Villarosa 317). Jeneen Interlandi points out that "African and Latino Americans have the highest uninsured rates in the country and, as a result, shoulder a disproportionate burden of the health system's failings: they are more likely to die during pregnancy or from cancers that are treatable when caught early, and more likely to suffer the worse outcomes associated with chronic medical conditions like diabetes" (388–389). All these forms of racial discrimination have a common outcome: Black death. Be it through overt violence on the part of state authorities or vigilante white-supremacists, or through more covert dynamics, death is pervasive among African Americans, a point that the narratives under analysis bring to the fore. These structural problems are emphasized by the systematic denial of equal access to the ballot and participation in the democratic processes among Americans. In her comprehensive study *One Person, No Vote* (2018), C. Anderson describes the situation in the following manner: "The United states is now at the tipping point where the concerted efforts at the state and federal level to purge American citizens and cull and homogenize the electorate is a clear and present danger to democracy" (*One* 95). She sheds light on the problem of voter suppression that developed as consequence of the revocation of the Section 4b of the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965 through the Supreme Court decision of Shelby County v. Holder (2013), whereby preclearance or federal oversight was eliminated. In some states this has led to the passing of laws, such as the Voter-ID legislation, that specifically target the poor, elderly and minorities whose access to this kind of identification has been proven to be more limited (*One* 51–52). Practices such as voter roll purge (*One* 74–94), gerrymandering (*One* 98) or the arbitrary shutting down of polling stations (*One* 162) has also impacted negatively the equal participation of all sectors of society in the elections, sometimes making it virtually impossible for many citizens to recover enfranchisement.

Despite the profound impact that these structural constrictions continue to have for African Americans, when the United States elected its first Black president on November 4th, 2008, a new post-racial era was heralded. While Obama's campaign mobilized minority voters and carried an important symbolic significance, historians coincide in pointing out the

lack of substantial changes concerning racial matters. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor claimed that "African Americans under Obama are experiencing the same indifference and active discrimination; in some cases, these have become worse" (*From* 11). She pointed out the high rates of Black unemployment (even among those with higher education) as well as the disparities with whites, and the poverty rate that escalated to a 27 percent among African Americans (Taylor, *From* 11). Against the rhetoric that upheld the recovery of the 2008 Recession, Matthew Desmond argues that this economic crisis "caused the average Black family to lose a third of its wealth, and most Black businesses did not survive the downturn" (177). In an article published in 2020, M. Alexander pointed out some positive aspects of the Obama administration such as his support of prison downsizing, of social movements for the enfranchisement of felons or the legalization of marijuana in various states. His "modest criminal justice system reforms" included overseeing the first drop in federal prison population in more than thirty years, granting clemency to nearly two thousand people, passing legislation to reduce sentencing disparities involving crack and powder cocaine, phasing out contracts with private prisons and limiting of military equipment transference to police departments (M. Alexander, "The Injustice"). However, this also coincided with the "expansion of the system of mass deportation" that launched the building of private detention centers for immigrants (M. Alexander, "The Injustice"). Likewise, his Task Force on Twenty-First-Century Policing, while it accurately indicated the key problems of law enforcement and potential solutions, failed to implement any of them (Taylor, *From* 131–132). Instead, Obama was prone to endorse the rhetoric of Black responsibility that relied on stereotyped constructions of Black manhood, rather than on the impact of structural inequality. Despite these dire prospects for African Americans, dominant discourses embraced the hegemonic rhetoric of progress that has systemically obscured structural racism. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has assessed the workings of color-blind rhetoric and color-blind racism by examining the aforementioned residential segregation, educational disparities, poverty rates and the workings of the criminal justice system and traces their origins to the decade of the 1960s and the civil rights movement, when the mandate to "keep blacks in their place" became a priority that had to be carried out covertly. As he points out, "color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards" (Bonilla-Silva 3). Bonilla-Silva explains that this "new racism," more sophisticated and subtle than previous regimes (17), can be accounted for through four central frames: abstract liberalism (that employs ideas of political liberalism to account for racial matters, centering on the individual's freedom of choice), naturalization (whereby racism is accounted for as a natural occurrence), cultural racism (appealing to stereotypical constructions of the racialized subject) and minimization (denying the centrality of discrimination in the present) (54). These frameworks coincide in their obliteration of structural dynamics and the focus on the individual who, despite their purported colorblindness, is effectively constructed along historical paradigms of Black inferiority.

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Before this paradoxical amalgamation of the systemic enforcement of inequality, its tragic outcomes and the attempted erasure under the rhetoric of a post-racial era, African Americans organized under a new movement of resistance and liberation: Black Lives Matter. This social movement was founded in 2013 by three African American women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Ayo Tometi (formerly Opal Tometi), after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the perpetrator of the heinous murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. Martin was one in a long list that had been crafted for years prior and that will be engrossed in the years to come where African Americans become the deadly victims of police or vigilante violence. Another brutal case was to take place only a year after, when Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer and his body left to rot in the pavement. This prompted a number of protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that soon expanded nationwide, as will be the case again after the videotaped murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. As shown in the statement on its webpage, the organization is defined by its expansive and inclusive scope and the driving force to affirm Black lives and Black humanity in the face of devaluation and disposability. In the memoir of the movement's origin, tellingly entitled *When They Call You a Terrorist*, Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele appeal to the decolonizing project of the movement: "The goal is to live beyond fear. The goal is to end the occupation of our bodies and souls by the agents of a larger American culture that demonstrates daily how we don't matter" (148). The scope is decidedly intersectional, as it brings to the fore the experiences of women of color, queers and transgender people often forgotten or obliterated in past and present accounts.

In fact, Andrea J. Ritchie has pointed out the systematic invisibilization of these collectives' experiences of sexual harassment and violence targeted at women and gender-non-conforming individuals in accounts of mass incarceration and police violence. This has been all the more striking if we take into consideration the data which place women's incarceration growth at a 50 percent higher rate than that of men, and a 700 percent increase of women of color in the prison industrial complex between 1980 and 2014 (Ritchie 43). Famous cases such as Sandra Bland, whose suicide after an arrest was attributed to police violence in 2015, or Breonna Taylor, who was killed in her own home in 2020 after incognito police officers forced their entry, have led to the creation of specific campaigns such as "Say Her Name," an initiative sponsored by the African American Police Forum led by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Her work on intersectionality, together with other theoretical explorations of what Maya Bailey called "misogynoir," that is, "the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (1),[43] have contributed to the project of visibilization of women and other marginalized groups on account of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This has become an important corrective to the male-

[43] Bailey coined this concept in 2008 to describe "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture" (1). Since then, the term has transcended its original field of application as well as geographical boundaries, in great part because it names the paradox to which Black women are subject: "hypervisible in media [...] and invisible when in need of lifesaving attention" (6). Taking this into consideration, Bailey's project adds to the historical work of Black feminists who sought to redress caricaturized representations of Black womanhood as well as their omissions from the social debate.

centered coverage of the civil rights movement, and it actualizes the womanist initiatives begun by the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s.[44] Taylor argues that the BLM movement has "created a feeling of pride and combativeness among a generation that this country has tried to kill, imprison, and simply disappear" (*From* 190). Following a historical trend, this has been answered with an important backlash: the proponents of the movement have been accused of "domestic terrorism" and described as "pos[ing] a threat to the lives of law enforcement" (Garza 384) and answered with slogans that claimed "All Lives Matter" or "Blue Lives Matter" in defense of whiteness and the police, respectively. The major backlash, however, was the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States in 2016. Thus, the candidate that hoisted the values of white supremacy, heterosexism and populism seemingly came to counteract the presidency of the first Black president of the country.

The texts under analysis in this chapter, whose publication is inscribed in this bleak socio-historical context, appear as an important vehicle for the articulation of a profound social criticism that seeks to disrupt the pillars of the avowed post-racial era. Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits,* published at the end of the 1980s, works against the silencing of homosexuality within the African American community, demonstrating the tragic consequences of marginalization and advancing an awareness that will be central in the social organization of the twenty-first century. Published four years later, his story "Tell Me, Tell Me" conjures the ghosts of history to stir white consciences as it calls for historical responsibility in the face of the rhetoric of progress. Almost two decades into the twenty-first century, Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* goes back to the Jim Crow South to lay bare the structures of the New Jim Crow. Kenan's story "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*" unearths the acts of resistance buried beneath the haunted American house. These narratives draw the contours of what Isabel Wilkerson has defined as a caste system and the dynamics of what she calls "casteism," that is, "Any action or structure that seeks to limit, hold back, or put someone in a defined ranking, seeks to keep someone in their place by elevating or denigrating that person on the basis of their perceived category" (70). Redding has pointed out the importance of "haunted" narratives (fictional and otherwise) "in the aftermath of persistent violence" (4) because such narratives are best suited to render the traumatic experience. While initial conceptualizations of trauma and, consequently, trauma narratives have relied on a past, event-based paradigm, the work carried out under the project of decolonization of trauma studies has outlined a different notion of the traumatic phenomenon that sheds light on how this works on oppressive structures, as discussed in the

[44] This group, founded in Boston in 1974, was active until 1980 and had among its most prominent members feminist theoretician and critic Barbara Smith. Their famous Statement published in 1977 anticipated the theory of intersectionality that would be crafted by Crenshaw in 1989 when defining their politics as a response to the ineffectual claims of white feminism and Civil Rights activism to account for the experience of Black, homosexual women. As established in the document, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practices based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Taylor, *How* 15).

first chapter. Angela Onwuachi-Willig has coined the phrase "the trauma of the routine" to address this reality, emphasizing the structural vulnerability of marginalized or oppressed groups. As she explains:

> In essence, within systems that regularly and disproportionally subjugate and devalue certain groups, much like the criminal justice system does with African Americans, the reliability and predictability of routine norms do not bring a sense of comfort and security for the denigrated group; rather, they bring greater stress, a stronger sense of exclusion, and the immense anxiety associated with the group's not feeling protected under the law or any other governmental system. (347)

This is precisely the kind of traumatic experience that these novels and short stories engage: not solely the wounded memory of an inhumane suffering from centuries past, but the exploitation, marginalization and death that continue to be carried out under its imprint. These texts lay bare the traumatic experience of living in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlives of slavery," defined by "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (*Lose* 6). Addressing the potential of the spectral in its literal and metaphorical level, Kris Manjapra claims that "Ghosts announce the unended. They unsettle, frighten and haunt. And who would not agree that our twenty-first century is haunted by its accumulating past? Ghosts trouble postslavery societies in our consciences, our memories, and our social disorders, in order to disturb us and ask for redress" (9–10). Indeed, the ghost in each of these texts becomes the palimpsestic ethereal witness of the trans-historical and multi-prismatic oppression of African Americans in the United States.

3.2 RANDALL KENAN'S FICTION

Did you know, once upon a time, Black folk could fly? Or so it has been said. A hidden truth. A metaphor. A way of looking at yourself and the world. Remember that when you think you are stuck in the mud.— Randall Kenan

Randall Kenan was born in 1963 in Brooklyn, New York, to unwedded parents and he was only six weeks old when his father's family offered to take care of him and he was sent to North Carolina, a place that would nurture his writing. The absent figures of his mother and father were soon replaced by his great-aunt Mary, his 'Mama,' who raised him as her own in the rural community of Chinquapin amid an extended family of grandparents, aunts and uncles. After enrolling in the University of North Carolina to obtain a BS in Physics, which he saw as the perfect outlet for his love of science fiction, he "got distracted by literature and writing" (Kenan, *Walking* 615) and changed the path of his studies and his whole career. Once he graduated, he moved to New York where he worked in different publishing houses before he became a writer and a professor at various institutions across the country, the last of which was his *alma mater* where he taught English and Comparative Literature until his unexpected death in August 2020. It was the Dumplin County of his childhood and adolescence that became a locus of inspiration for most of his fictional and non-fictional writings. These feature shared themes that deal with the personal and social conflicts the author experienced

as a Black homosexual in the rural South. His fictional works, under analysis in this chapter, comprise his debut novel, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), as well as two collections of stories: *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* (1992), and *If I Had Two Wings* (2020), which was published just before his passing, both of which were finalists for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His literary production and contributions were further recognized with prizes such as the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction (1992) or a Guggenheim Fellowship (1994), among others.

Alongside this, Kenan published a set of non-fictional works that include a young-adult biography of James Baldwin, and a collection of essays entitled *The Fire This Time* (2007) that evokes this author's reflections on the state of race relations in America, denouncing color-blindness as a bankrupt concept (Kenan, "The Fire" 63). Similarly to Baldwin, he addresses a letter to his godson warning him of the uncanny metamorphosis he will experience before the eyes of the white majority that will place him "among the most despised group in the homeland: the young African American male" (Kenan, "The Fire" 23) and stresses the necessity to overcome this status that society has imposed on him by valuing himself. His most outstanding work in this area is his monograph *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, published in 1999. This book, which has been described as "blend[ing] the genres of travelogue, biography, oral history, and spiritual autobiography" (Hovis, "I Contain" 100), emerged from the author's quest for an answer to what it means to be Black in America through countless trips and interviews around the country. This necessarily engages with questions pertaining to the conception of race as a social construct, the performativity of identity and the intersections of race with a multiplicity of defining factors including gender and sexuality, to conclude with a reflection on the danger of understanding racial identity along essentialist lines, "a monolithic sameness, a we-ism" (Kenan, *Walking* 8).

In this section I will focus on a number of texts that are brought together in relation to the deployment of the spectral metaphor as they grapple with different modes and processes of haunting. However, these offer, as well, a comprehensive sample of the central themes and tropes that can be found in Kenan's fiction. His is a work defined by the straddling of fantasy and reality where, after the influence of magic realist writers such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, everyday life becomes the arena of the extraordinary. In Kenan's view, these so-called Latin American Boom authors spoke from a cultural standpoint close to his own, where the various substrata of European, American Indian and African Creole traditions provided him with a framework through which to explore the lives of Black folk that defied the social realist tradition of Southern literature (Kenan, "The Good" 703). He explains how the contact with this literature, as well as other external influences, allowed him to craft a work that escaped the tyranny of realism:

> When I first read his [Marquez's] work, it was like looking into a mirror. But more importantly, it told me that the way I had been looking was not totally bizarre and irrelevant but valid in some way. American writing, and Southern writing in particular, has been long dominated by what academics call 'realism.' I grew up with a world view that did not necessarily fall easily into

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> that category. My encounters with Marquez and other Latin American writers—and Jewish and Japanese and Italian writers— gave me faith in my own vision. That was enormously important in my development. (Kenan, "Randall Kenan" 16)

As discussed in the introductory chapter, magic realism is intimately connected to spectrality inasmuch as it provides a literary framework through which to apprehend the construction of alternative realities where the subaltern disrupts the historical status quo. As such, in his fiction Kenan blends the folk tradition of the rural Black South—its culture, beliefs and modes of expression—with the supernatural to speak about a vast array of topics situated on the margins of the normative and the real. The ghosts, talking hogs, miracle performers, fallen angels and the multitude of creatures that wander through Tims Creek configure a landscape profoundly marked by a racial history that many of its inhabitants refuse to confront and often become vehicles to introduce a queer experience of reality that transcends sexual identity to tackle a particular conception of time and space.

Before moving to the analysis of Kenan's novel and short fiction, it is essential to dwell briefly on the relevance that queerness, especially as it intersects with Blackness, has for the author. In "Letter to Self," Kenan reminds a younger version of himself of how he was born "rich in identity—Black, Southern, Queer" and encourages himself to embrace that identity and not to "ever let anybody tell you any bit of it is a burden" ("Letter" 264). This wisdom, gained with the passing of the years, does not preclude the bitter reality that he must confront in an environment where the queer Black man is still seen "as a strange and exotic creature" (Kenan, "Letter" 264). The author's words refer back to the history of the African American homosexual community in the U.S. which has been fraught with pathologization, accusations and exclusion. In order to fully understand these attitudes, it is necessary to consider the position that the Black man has occupied in the American imaginary. Don Belton points out the symbolic construction of the Black male self as a brutalized body that has been paradoxically constituted as a site of national fear (2). Similarly to the case of Black women discussed in *Mama Day,* the mythification of this figure has been codified by the creation of two oppositional stereotypes that reduced the Black man to either the Sambo/Uncle Tom stereotype—"epitomiz[ing] an innocuous and neutered model of black masculine sexuality" (Richardson 3)—or the Black rapist—"a myth that cast African American men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed them as inherently lustful and primitive" (Richardson 3–4). This second construction, like the Jezebel in the case of Black women, which often codified a growing anxiety about miscegenation, established a problematic association between Blackness and sexuality that generation after generation of African Americans would try to undo. This would be translated in a dual movement that deeply affects the status of Black homosexuality: in an attempt to redress the stereotype of the Sambo, a strong masculinism would be embraced as tantamount to racial authenticity. According to Charles Nero, this became especially flagrant in the rhetoric of Black nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s with its emphasis on developing Black manhood, a "metaphor for the strength and potency necessary to overthrow the oppressive forces of a white racist society" (412). Furthermore, Stefanie Dunning explains how this discourse

emphasized an artificial connection between homosexuality and whiteness which would be perpetuated for generations, turning sexual orientation into an act of racial treason interpreted both as renouncing one's community and not working in favor of its perpetuation through reproduction of a patriarchal hegemony (46–47). The second axis on which this redress of discrimination is attempted is through the adoption of the Euro-American masculinity model, which can be understood as part of the wider framework of respectability politics. This will be more tenaciously endorsed with the publication of the Moynihan Report in 1965 entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, where issues of gender and sexuality resurface in the pathologization of the Black family on the grounds of its seemingly matriarchal structure that allegedly undermined male progress (White & Cones III 196). Joseph White and James Cones explain the different aspects in which the adoption of this paradigm of masculinity was counter-productive for African Americans: based on individualism, material success and patriarchal power, this model not only obscures many of the foundational aspects of the Black community, such as the strong interpersonal bonds, but also belies the economic inequalities derived from structural racism and reproduces heterosexist behaviors (116–117). Notwithstanding this, and motivated in no small part by the unrelenting toll that racism was taking on the African American community, the adherence to these precepts was posed as the unique means to transcend a second-class status. Such situation places Black gays and lesbians, as well as other dissident sexualities and gender identities, in an extremely difficult position: they are excluded from their own community due to their sexual orientation and from white groups due to their race, thus relegating them to invisibility.

These social attitudes have been mirrored in the intellectual and literary sphere as well, with a multiplicity of writers such as Molefi Asante, Eldridge Cleaver or Amiri Baraka espousing homophobic discourses. In a more indirect, if equally pernicious manner, until the consolidation of Black Queer Studies at the end of the twentieth century, there was a systematic marginalization of Black homosexual writers, with the outstanding exception of James Baldwin, whose work *Giovanni's Room* (1965) has been cited a precedent for Kenan's work. As Patricia Holland states, "The relegation of queer subjects to the unproductive end of Black literary production places them in a liminal space. Such disinheriting from the procreative process contradicts a communal desire to bring back (all) black subjects from the dead, from the place of silence" (107). Framed within what Robert McRuer has called the Queer Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s (17), Kenan's work makes use of the spectral metaphor to redress this wrong. When the author considers queerness, he establishes a dual dimension that is going to be patent through his narratives and that is intrinsically linked with the study of the spectral proposed in this chapter: "I'm interested in the definition of what queering is. I think it is more than just that expression of gender or sexuality that runs against the norm. But it is transgressional. It is oppositional. And it's movable, too" (Kenan, "Writing" 109). In this assessment, Kenan associates queerness first to the question of sexuality and then expands it to a more general sphere, an element defined in opposition to normalcy. Robert Rheid-Pharr considers the combination of both aspects as embodied in the figure of the Black homosexual whose identity entails "a crisis of identity and community that threw into confusion, if only temporarily, the boundaries of (Black) normality" (379). Living

outside the norms of respectability imposed by the group and possessing the force to destabilize its structures, the homosexual mirrors the characteristics and effects of the ghost, and both are brought together, as Rheid-Pharr points out, by becoming signifiers of the abject (392). Throughout the fiction studied in this section, Kenan exploits these associations in a multiplicity of ways: the spaces he introduces bear the imprint of queerness in their mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the inscription of the fantastic in the everyday world creates a new order full of possibilities. Likewise, in raising the dead—according to Holland, "the ultimate queer act" (103)—and the multidimensional haunting they unleash, he gives a voice to those constituted as ontological and queer Others and enables the exploration of the construction and deconstruction of dissident subjectivities.

3.2.1. *A Visitation of Spirits*

A Visitation of Spirits was Kenan's first and single incursion in the field of the novel and it constitutes, in both form and content, a work with strong experimental overtones.[45] In the narrative, Kenan engages with the life of Horace Cross, a sixteen-year-old Black boy struggling with his homosexuality in the rural community of Tims Creek within a profoundly religious family. Autobiographically inflected, the story introduces many of what would become signature themes in the author's fiction, as well as the fictional town of Tims Creek, North Carolina (a proxy for the Chinquapin of his childhood), that he would expand in his two subsequent collections. At the core of Horace's conflict is the intersection of the community's racial history, the demanding structures of the Cross family, and his individual identity, where his sexual orientation becomes the spearhead in the battleground among tradition, community and individuality. In what follows, I will offer a critical analysis of the role that the spectral plays in a narrative that develops in the interstices of the factual and the hallucinatory. It is my contention that the spectral metaphor appears in a dual structure of individual and collective repression associated, respectively, to sexual and racial oppression. In contrast with the two previously analyzed works, the conception of the spectral espoused in this case must be understood in a broad sense for, among the creatures that Horace conjures, there is not a single apparition, but a multitude of supernatural entities led by a demon that accompany him through his difficult journey toward death. Therefore, rather than on *spectral agents*, like in most of the texts examined, the analysis will focus on four spectral scenes through which the reality of Horace, the Crosses and the Black community of Tims Creek will be apprehended. Alongside this, the present analysis will consider as well the bidirectionality in the haunting process the narration stands witness to whereby Horace is both a passive *haunt-ed* object of the ghosts that besiege him, and an active *haunt-ing* agent for the community he abandons.

Despite the centrality of the aforementioned scenes in this analysis, it is imperative to note the structure of the narrative, one that Doris Betts has defined as "kaleidoscopic" (12), especially, as this will support for the reading of Horace as an active agent of haunting toward

[45] In several interviews Kenan talked about a novel in progress, originally entitled *The Fire and the Baptism* and later changed to *There's a Man Going 'Round Taking Names,* but it never came to light (Crank 104).

the end. The novel opens with two anticipatory epigraphs that point to Horace's experience in the story: the first of them, taken from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), introduces the ghost as a short-lived entity with a strong transformative force, reinforcing the importance that the spectral will play throughout. Furthermore, the exchange between the Ghost and Scrooge, with its insistence on the latter's disappearance at midnight, anticipates Horace's night odyssey accompanied by the spectral crew and his fatidic outcome. The second, taken from William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), references the invocation of a demon that, in the novel, will constitute the act of inception of the spectral scenes specifically, and the plot more generally. These apparently dissimilar references draw a continuum through different literary traditions that recall the long-standing presence of the supernatural, and also the multiplicity of sources used by the author in the crafting of the scenario where the spectral haunting will unravel. The narrative is subsequently divided into five different parts whose titles conjure the world of magic and religion. The first two parts, entitled "White Sorcery" and "Black Necromancy," respectively, open with citations from the Bible that introduce a religious approach. This, however, is counteracted by the very titles that invoke the pagan world of divination and ancestral intervention (Holland 115–116) and mark the protagonist's eventual shift toward the supernatural. The third part, entitled "Holy Science" and followed by the words of Samuel Johnson, "A voluntary descent from the dignity of science is perhaps the hardest lesson which humility can teach" (105),[46] pits the dogmatic truths of religious belief against the world of possibilities Horace finds in science. The fourth and fifth parts, entitled "Old Demonology" and "Old Gods, New Demons," respectively, implicitly tackle the spectral presences that account for Horace's descent into pain and his tragic outcome. Followed by a quote by African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, the title "Old Demonology" evokes Horace's scars and the intersection of the spiritual and the material world as embodied by the host of intermediary "daimons" (Tucker, "Gay" 328n7). Invoking the subjective, "Old Gods, New Demons" closes the narrative by drawing Horace's abandonment of his community's religiousness as he is seemingly possessed by the ghosts that have haunted him throughout, and it opens the possibility for a different mode of existence.

In addition to this initial textual division, it is the various narrative formats employed by Kenan that deserve our close attention. The narration is organized around two main axes: two alternating plotlines developed in two different temporal frames and narrated by a third person narrator, as well as a number of confessional chapters. The former comprise, on the one hand, the set of events that took place on April 29 and April 30, 1984, beginning with Horace's decision to look for supernatural help to get over the crossroads he finds himself in on account of his sexual orientation, and ends with his suicide. Focalized through the perspective of Horace, the excerpts that constitute this temporal line include the four spectral scenes that we will analyze in connection to the literal appearance of spectrality in the novel and that configure Horace as a haunted subject. On the other hand, the second temporal line is developed in the present and narrates the road trip and hospital visit on which Jimmy takes his

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[46] Randall Kenan. *A Visitation of Spirits.* 1989. Vintage Contemporaries, 2000. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

uncle Zeke Cross and his aunt Ruth Davis on December 8, 1985. Alternatively focalized through the perspectives of these three characters and culminating with their eventual confrontation, their ruminations and reflections draw a nuanced picture of the family history and their ties to the African American community of Tims Creek. The second axis comprises the four chapters entitled "Confessions" narrated on the first three occasions by Horace's cousin, James Malachai Greene, "Jimmy," and in the last one by Horace himself. Following the tone set by their title, these are written in the first person and more reflective in nature, which allows for the further development of these central characters. In contrast with this approach, each of Jimmy's confessional chapters has the particularity of including an excerpt where he reproduces an event of the past using the conventions of a theater play with character's interventions and stage directions. These occasions register moments of tension where he seems to be transported to the position of spectator, and they demonstrate, according to McRuer, the extent to which "Jimmy has been and continues to be transformed by Horace" (98). The first of these shows Horace's confrontation with Jimmy moments before the latter kills himself in the former's presence; the second, a previous dialogue between both characters where Horace confessed his homosexuality to Jimmy searching for counsel; and, the third, an argument between Horace and his relatives during Thanksgiving on account of him having pierced his ear with an earring. Finally, inserted within the two main temporal lines, opening and closing the story, there are two sections, entitled "Advent" and "Requiem for Tobacco," respectively, told from the collective perspective of the community and concerned with the rituals and life of Tims Creek. This second group of texts, developed after Horace's death, will, in turn, become an avenue through which to explore a more implicit form of spectrality that I will associate to the turning of Horace into an active agent of haunting.

With a fragmented and multiple temporal frame, several narrators and focalizers, as well as parallel and expanding storylines, the complex structure of the novel offers the reader a puzzle where Horace's fate becomes the centerpiece. *Visitation* is set in motion by the protagonist's inability to reconcile his homosexuality with the destiny his family hopes he will fulfill. This tension is echoed in his very first introduction: "He was Horace Thomas Cross, the Great Black Hope" (13). The use of his family's perspective to describe himself records the identity conflict that he is experiencing that tears him between the projected view of his family and the sense he has of himself. This duplicity will be explored throughout different characters and events in the novel, and it will culminate in Horace's confrontation with his spectral *doppelgänger*. Trapped in the dichotomy of having to choose between embracing his homosexuality and renouncing a family and a community that will never condone it, or comply with these standards and sacrifice himself, he turns to the world of the extraordinary and fantastic to claim his agency. The plan he devises is to shape-shift into the North Carolinian red-tailed hawk, which will allow him to spend the rest of his life "Not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he had slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years" (12). In and of itself, his decision to turn into a bird has an ample resonance in the novel: motivated by his wish to escape "that sin he would surely commit if he remained human"

(20), this transformation not only allows him to get rid of his sexual inclinations, but also, as Holland points out, to escape from the racial constrictions imposed by society (118). This is clearly evoked by the trope of flying whose associations with freedom are common in African American folklore (Roark 245), as seen in the legend of the Flying Africans. In addition to that, this would allow him to regain the control over his life that he had lost (Costello 135), and it would permit him to live among his own without being bound by human laws.

Thus, Horace follows a three-part ritual that he researched and adapted from an ancient book: first he burns a list of ingredients, then draws a pattern of syncretic symbols and, finally, invokes the name of the demon that will grant his wish. However, something goes awry in his plan and, instead of the promised liberation, the demonic figure that he conjured plunges him into the depths of his living nightmare. This shift records the relation between the real and the extraordinary crafted in the novel. The coexistence of both in the daily lives of the community to which Horace belongs goes in line with Kenan's conception of magic realism. This peculiar reality of blended realism and fantasy is claimed by Horace himself as part of his background and collective identity, when he reflects that "his was a very rational mind, acquainted with science and mathematics. But he was also a believer in an unseen world full of archangels and prophets and folk rising from the dead, a world preached to him from the cradle on, and a world he was powerless not to believe in as firmly as he believed in gravity and the times table" (16). However, such intermingling of orders, which Horace takes to an extreme, seemingly deprives the supernatural of the fully evasive value with which he sought to invest it. The exchange between Horace and the countless creatures that accompany him, "hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and wargs" whom he labels "aberrations like himself" (28), redefines the magic or supernatural as the means through which the tabooed and repressed are articulated. Thus, in his blindly following of the disembodied voice that he has awakened, Horace will be confronted with the re-enactment of painful scenes of repression and suppression (Tettenborn 256) that dramatize the individual and collective dimensions of his predicament. The tragedy of this macabre tour de force resides in the fact that, unlike for Avey Johnson, for Horace this immersion does not bring healing but an evisceration of the trauma that leads to his death. In what follows, we will consider each of these spectral scenes as sites where the personal and the social are interlocked in a complex manner.

3.2.1.1 Religion and Homosexuality

The first place that Horace is guided to by the host of supernatural creatures led by the demon is the First Baptist Church of Tims Creek. Religion is a fundamental pillar of Tims Creek and there is a symbiotic connection between the First Baptist Church and the Cross family that directly impacts the life of the protagonist. Éva Tettenborn states that "Horace's conflict with his sexuality is, not least of all, fueled by the Cross family's interpretation of Christianity and by the family's patriarchal commitment to the ancestral vision of creating generations of black ministers" (257). The experiences that he will live there reflect the dual implications the institution has for African American members as "a locus of both community and exclusion" (Tettenborn 257). Tracing the history and evolution of the Black church in the United States,

Anthea Butler explains how from its very inception during the times of slavery it served the purposes of providing education, arranging mutual aid groups and constituting political organizations that became instrumental for the civil rights movement (339). The institution, whose Methodist and Baptists denominations vigorously spread throughout the country since the end of the eighteenth century, developed as a distinct mechanism of resistance and resilience in the face of racial oppression and discrimination. In fact, subsumed in the latter, Martin Luther's King Progressive National Baptist Convention, would play a fundamental role during the civil rights struggle. However, a strict and often biased adherence to and misinterpretation of the Scriptures has led to the instauration of conservative values and the subsequent condemnation of alternative lifestyles. Especially notable for the present analysis are the homophobic attitudes that the Black church has adopted in matters relating to sexuality. Some authors have pointed out that the reticence (in the best cases), or the vehement condemnation may be partly accounted for as a defense mechanism against the toll of racial discrimination. Kelly Brown-Douglas explains how homophobia is partly rooted in the adoption of respectability politics that seek to counteract stereotypical views of Blackness: "Because White culture racialized sex and 'sexuated' race by equating blackness with sexual deviance, the Black community has been diligent in its efforts to sever the link between such deviance and blackness" (97). In the same line, Horace L. Griffin attributes "sexual conservatism" (59) in the religious Black communities to the attempted counteracting the hegemonic construction of Black sexuality as pathological. As he points out, "African Americans have spent their years of freedom seeking to gain respectability by the mainstream as sexually moral beings and overcoming the historical labeling as a sexually perverse people. In an effort to receive acceptance from a homophobic society, blacks strongly condemn and deny homosexuality within black communities and churches" (20). This produced a silence which, in cases like the AIDS/HIV epidemic that disproportionately affected the Black population (Brown-Douglas 3), has proven deadly. Furthermore, this, coupled with the view of homosexuality as a "White disease," has led to the erasure of countless members of the group. As Brown-Douglas points out, "The egregious claims that homosexuality is a White disease thus not only ignore the facts but also carelessly deny the humanity of many Black women and men" (99).[47] In addition to this thesis of white assimilation (often backed in the

[47] While in the analysis of the novel I focus on the traditional values of the Tims Creek First Baptist Church, it is important to note that, far from being a monolithic entity, the Black church has upheld different progressive theologies. This was the case of Black Liberation Theology that emerged in the late twentieth century at the hands of James Cone as a response to "the sociopolitical push for equality and full citizenship" (Floyd-Thomas & Pinn 2). Deeply embedded in the socio-historical context, this religious philosophy sought to synthesize the Christian values with the revolutionary Black Power movement (Pinn 18) and thus presented a view of god as ontologically Black, epitome of the oppressed and vested in their liberation from oppression. While, as pointed out by Roger Sneed, this theology "does not address issues of sexual difference" or sexuality (44), its relevance in this regard resides in the fact that it spurred a number of theologies that approached the status of other African American subjects whose particular experiences had been erased or subsumed within an male-centered focus. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the Womanist Theology that incorporated sexuality to its discussion of the Black female experience, thus establishing a more egalitarian view within the congregations that ascribe to it. In his book *Their Own Receive Them Not* (2006), Griffin (himself a Black homosexual minister) notes the cases of some congregations that, relying on liberation theology, have established Black gay congregations such as the case of Dr. James Tinney's Faith Temple, the first of this kind set up in 1982 in Washington DC, or Bishop Carl Bean's Unity Fellowship Church in Los

amply refuted contention that homosexuality was not present in Africa), other arguments that declare homosexuality a sin and that are transversal to both white and Black congregations include the choice thesis (according to which same-sex desire is the result of personal election), the argument for unnaturality (as following the example of the animal world) or the inability of procreation as the absolute end of marriage (which problematizes heterosexual marriage without children) (Griffin 78–99). All these are tackled either directly, as shown in this first spectral scene, or indirectly, in the role the family has designated for Horace as carrier of their legacies.

This turbulent relation between the church and the LGBTQ collective constitutes the core of the spectral scene and of Horace's inner conflict, especially inasmuch as in Tims Creek the religious institution is inseparable from the Cross family and the extended African American community. Horace's incursion in the sacred building develops in three key moments during service that shed light on central aspects of the protagonist's background, identity and dilemmas. Together with the spectral congregation of relatives and neighbors, Horace listens first to the sermon of the late Right Reverend Hezekiah Barden, "as firm and as direct as any hellfire-and-brimstone preacher" (76), that deals with the topic of same-sex desire:

> This [the Bible] is my liberation, this is my salvation, my rock and my shield, my place to go when I get weary, what picks me up when I fall down, and sets my feet on solid ground. *Liberated? Behind the times?* Brothers and sisters, there is no time but now, and now I am telling you: It's unclean. (79)

The preacher adheres to a rigid interpretation of the Bible which he heralds as his sole guide and nurturing force, appealing to the long-standing tropes of resistance. Once he has established common ground with the congregation and raised its approval, he proceeds to assert the atemporality of the Scriptures and to categorically condemn homosexuality as a practice that is not sanctioned by the Bible. His words further describe same-sex desire as a weakness and pose the devil as an agent intent on interfering with the paths of the parishioners. Thus, as Griffin explains, "Messages that would ordinarily be considered messages of hate were justified by black ministers as being faithful to their calling to preach against sinful behavior" (60). Despite the incendiary sermon, Horace rejects the invitation of the demon to kill the Reverend, in the same way that he had refused to perform different symbolic transgressions that this specter had proposed to desecrate the religious rituals. His choice is, however, undermined by the sudden apparition of his dark and ghastly double that deftly decapitates the Reverend. This scene, thus, mirrors Horace's dilemma and its outcome: although a part of him wants to break free from the constrictions imposed by the dogmatic approach of his congregation, he considers that to be a dark part of himself that must be repressed and silenced, opting instead for adopting Reverend Barden's interpretation, even when it denies Horace's very existence. Maisha Wester explains that, therefore, the church for Horace comes to represent "the site of an ideology that explicitly condemns and demonizes

Angeles, focalized in the convergence of racism and homophobia and intent on reversing homosexual stigmatization (191–194).

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him," a process that will ultimately take his life: "The Othering that Horace suffers through religious doctrine leads to spiritual alienation" (233).

The second part of this fateful spectral scene is the baptism to which Horace is violently subjected. If, in the first instance, he occupied the passive role of spectator, this requires him to play an active role. Taking into consideration that he was already baptized as a child, this second spectral reenactment of the ceremony demands his absolute compliance with the views and precepts the govern the religious community in which he is immersed. In other words, this projected second baptism will cleanse Horace of his sinful homosexuality in exchange for his renouncing that part of his identity and acquiescence to the family values. It is precisely the spectral presence of different relatives that works as a catalyst for the full exploration of the depths of the conflict the protagonist harbors. Imbricated in a church building that the young man knows as well as his own home, are the figures of his grandparents, Ezekiel "Zeke," and the deceased Retha Cross. The couple had reared him as if he was their own son and the grandfather had placed in him the hopes for the continuation of the Cross legacy. The relation between Zeke, a stern and traditional man willfully oblivious to Horace's sexual condition, and the church goes back to the old man's own grandfather Ezra and his father Thomas, and it is inextricably linked with their social status in the Black community. His ancestors founded the Black congregation and their positions as chairmen of the deacon board has, ever since, been a prerogative of the Cross men:

> As it was explained to him, his grandfather was the center, the source of the church's memory, the link to the terrible past they all had to remember. His father and his father's father before him were church leaders, and it had fallen upon him to lead, to guide, to counsel his people, their people. A chief, a great elder. (72)

This fragment, taken from the initial assessment that Horace makes of the people present in the service, describes the position of his grandfather in the community and reveals his role and status. His and his family history is meant to become an exemplary paradigm of Black progress and respectability. In fact, in the novel, ministry is presented "as a profession to validate the Crosses not only in the eyes of the community, but also in the eyes of God" (Tettenborn 255). Raising from the poverty in which the plantation system of the wealthy white Cross family had left them,[48] hardships and losses notwithstanding, Ezra initiated his family line in freedom and settled the grounds for the foundation of a church that would nurture a community of fellow African Americans into survival and prosperity. In his time, this was a revolutionary act of resistance embedded in a larger claim for the rights that had been granted after Emancipation, which forever united the name of the Crosses to the religious and social institutions of Tims Creek. As Tettenborn argues,

> The emancipated slave envisions a life for his family and his male descendants in which black men claim a place from which they were excluded under

[48] The white branch of the family is referenced in the fourth spectral scene and further described in the short story "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," where Jimmy traces the origins of Tims Creek to the ante-bellum period.

> slavery and a position from which to speak successfully. Ezra's vision is not only an act of ensuring respect for his own family, but also an act that elevates the entire African American community by offering a new form of dignity in the form of official, legal church services for former slaves and their children. (255)

However, this seems to have been achieved only at the expense of setting up a hermetic and homogeneous system regulated by a rigid set of norms and values inherited from white standards that leave no space for individuality. In this respect, Lindsey Tucker states that "Possessed of a world view that is basically fundamentalist and separatist, the community has attributed its survival to the rigid maintenance of patriarchal family structures, stable racial identities, and normative sexual desires" ("Gay" 306). While such approach denotes the traumatic imprint that years of subjugation, devaluation and terror have left on the communal psyche of the African American community, the very system they crafted enacts this violence at different levels against members of their own group. Horace's predicament is the most vivid and tragic example and, as J. Coleman says, "he cannot live up to the same beliefs and tradition that have apparently brought these people through an oppressive past into an impressive, although quarrelsome, old age, and held together a community and a way of life" (64).

The Cross family turns into a locus where the personal and the public, as well as the individual and the collective, coalesce turning its members into victims of their own system of "patriarchal and heterosexist forms of familial containment" (Tucker, "Gay" 307). The most outstanding case is the group of relatives who have been expelled from its structure. Throughout Zeke's reflections and Jimmy's confessions we learn of the story of Sammy (Horace's father), a man who enjoyed partying, women and defying parental authority and his eventual decision to leave the family. In opposition to him is the figure of Lester, his cousin and companion, whose wild spirt was tamed by the iron fist of his mother Jonnie Mae (also present among the spectral crowd). The case of Rose, Jimmy's mother, offers the most detailed account of the process of exclusion enacted by the Crosses. She drops out of high school and returns home three times, each one carrying with her a new baby that she leaves to the care of her mother. When she decides to stay to look after her offspring, she feels displaced by her sisters who make her existence a living hell until she resolves to move away forever. The subsequent ostracism to which she is subjected is witnessed by her son when she comes back to attend the funeral of her mother and, with the exception of Lester, she is left to grieve in absolute isolation. Rose, like Horace, seems to have been turned into the scapegoat of the family's sins and, upon reflection, Jimmy traces a connection between both characters that unsettles the alleged righteousness espoused by the family. With the perspective of time, Jimmy ponders on a more heightened and nuanced image of his mother that transcends the vilified versions he inherited:

> How much I could have learned from her. She had raised her fist to her home, to her God, to her people, and chased after her heart...*and lived*. What had she seen? The scars were evident to me. I saw them in her hands, in her neck, in

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> her stance, in her face. How had it changed her? *For she could never return home*. What had she come to understand of love and sex and lust and freedom, of violence and betrayal, of evil and hypocrisy, and all the naked pain I am sure she endured? Does knowing those things make living easier? But I would never know, for as Pharaoh *I could hear my heart ossifying within my living breast. It would break before it would soften*. (122; emphasis added)

This entire reflection must be contextualized in the wake of Horace's suicide, and it indirectly alludes to the fact that, unlike Jimmy's mother, Horace has not survived. The Cross family seems to be divided between those who toe the line, a party in which Jimmy irremediably finds himself, and a group of denied outcasts to which Horace would have certainly belonged if he ever decided to come out to his grandparents. At this point, Jimmy is forced into acknowledging the scars that this Manichean division have left in his mother, but also that self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, the empathy and understanding that comes from her experiencing a life outside these imposed boundaries. This realization can be framed as part of that process of haunting unleashed by Horace's death that especially affects Jimmy, which will be considered in further detail in the final section. However, it is important to note at this point the short course of his epiphany since Jimmy already places himself outside its reach, perpetually trapped in the reproduction of the family structures condemned to effacement.

The last case worth of consideration in the long list of family outcasts is Jethro, Ezekiel's brother. Whereas his exclusion is more subtle, it sheds light on the contradictions and shortcomings of the family model. While the Crosses' rhetoric depicts Jethro as a man who lost his position in the family due to his alcoholism, for which they blame his wife Ruth Davis, she, as one of the few female characters that possess a voice in the story, presents a different version of events. For her, it was rather the ambition of Zeke and Jonnie Mae to become the heads of the family that eventually displaced Jethro and led to his addiction. These competing views reach the apex in a confrontation between the two elders that takes place during the road trip, one where Ruth voices, in an unparalleled manner, a strong critique of the Cross family. She sets herself symbolically apart from them stating: "I ain't no Cross, damn it. I'm a Davis. That's what I was born, you old fool" (198). The reclamation of her maiden name transcends a momentary outburst and speaks metaphorically of the agency that the old patriarch seems to have continuously seized from the rest of the family: "You always trying to tell somebody the way to talk, the way to dress, the way to live. Well, I'm my own person. Hear me?" (195). In their exchange, Ruth attacks the old man's yielding of the Bible to protect himself and condemn others as hypocritical, leaving a record of the old man's contradictions to which the reader is privy through the access to his thoughts. In contrast to Horace's unsullied view of his grandfather—"a righteous man, […] a man who walked and talked and slept with God on his lips, at his side, in his breast" (71)—he appears as a man full of sexist, racist and homophobic prejudices. Thinking about his past, he remembers his marriage to Rheta after she became pregnant, believing himself a better man than his father whose objectifying view of women reduced them to a mechanism of reproduction; he acknowledges the existence of two illegitimate children born of his philandering; and, it is

only years after Retha, perpetually silenced and working like a mule, passes away that he begins to wonder if she was ever truly happy in their union. He does not fare much better through the assessment he makes of Horace and his death:

> A little quiet, a mite shy, damnned bookish. But he was all right. Didn't give me no trouble. And them girls of Jonnie Mae's helped so much—*he was ungrateful, that's what the matter was.* Life had been too easy for him. I made Sammy work. And I worked right there with him. Two men together. So I had an idea of what was going on in his head. [...] When he said he wanted to run on the track team, I was so happy he finally wanted to do something other than read in a book, I said go right ahead. But he started to change. Now, in grade school it was all right to have his little white friends, cause they wont friends. They was schoolmates. The way it ought to been. *But when he went over to South York High School and commenced to 'hanging out' with them white boys, his 'group' he called it... just messed his mind up*. (64; emphasis added)

Never directly referencing the possibility of homosexuality, he blames the boy for his own misfortune, overrides the problematic lack of communication with a prescription of hard work, an iron fist and more tough love, accuses him of being ungrateful, and ultimately blames his interracial friendships.

The criticism articulated by Ruth goes beyond the personal to indict the entire order of the Crosses and the preeminence that Zeke has had in enforcing it. With the tone of a prophetic curse, she blurts out: "Well, you'll see yourself one day, Ezekiel Cross. See what you and your family, your evil family have wrought. And it wont just on Jethro. It's on Lester. It's on this boy here. It was on your grandboy. You all is something else" (197). Aside from the aforementioned condemnation of the family, Ruth mysteriously alludes to an unnamed issue that seemingly connects such disparate characters as Jethro and Horace. Some critics have pointed out at homosexuality as the unnamable trait that unites some of these characters, but their link can be understood in a more general sense as each of them embodies different dimensions of what Tucker calls "the spectral presence of difference" ("Gay" 311). What these characters unequivocally share is that their deviations from the prescribed model have turned them into victims, in different degrees and to different extents, of the order imposed by the Crosses. The suffocation and erasure of the inner desires, impulses and personal traits of these insurgent selves, forced into a pernicious uniformity, is what ultimately brings about the destruction of the elder's project. As Wester points out, "The family repeatedly suppresses and/or expels those members that explicitly manifest signs of difference; however, such expulsions can never completely exorcise those elements that destabilize the familial identity" (222–223). Each of the aforementioned removals endangers the true meaning of family as a kinship structure of support and problematizes the traditional notion of family they wish to uphold, by breaking the generational transmission of religious power. When Sammy, as the rightful heir, opted out of his role, Zeke was forced to make an alliance with his sister Jonnie Mae that would coalesce in the Cross-Greene amalgamation. With her only son Lester annulled and with no offspring, the family moved one generation ahead so that Jimmy, himself the child of an outcast, could fulfill the wishes of his

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domineering grandmother even at the expense of himself. However, Jimmy's troubled marriage to Anne ends with her premature death at the age of thirty-seven and having born no children, so Horace becomes the last hope to keep the rule of the Crosses over the religious institution in the community and, therefore, their preeminent social status. In this sense, his death reinforces the decaying system that the familiar structure represents and the imperative need for transformation for the sake of the group's permanence.

It is important to note that the configuration of the aforementioned female characters, Jonnie Mae and Ruth Davis, serves to further indict the unit of the Cross family and to expose its own contradictions. The entire chapter that is focalized through Ruth's perspective revolves around her marriage to Jethro. The three fragments of the couple's conversations that structure this part are concerned with different aspects of their troubled relationship. The first of them captures Jethro's love declaration and Ruth's mistrust of his words based on his problematic behavior that is expanded in the second dialogue. Here Ruth kicks him out of their home because of the toll that his alcoholism is taking on her. In this regard, the narrative offers a detailed account of the countless nights in which her husband came home drunk and pushed himself on her exhausted body:

> […] and the pain, the quicksilver pain shot up and out through her loins, and the rhythm, the rhythm, began, and she reached to grab something, anything that was not him, and she tried with all her might to remember that it was love, and that she once loved him, and that she wanted to love him and it turned into a prayer, a funny prayer because it would be lost on the rhythm that stabbed through her. (132)

Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, this small fragment of Ruth's painful memories registers the abuse of her own body that mirrors the pain and despair of her aggressor, as well as her attempted evasion through the creation of a fantasy that will allow her to keep on living. Through this excruciating remembrance, Ruth articulates a powerful critique of two foundational aspects of the Cross family: religion, through the trivialization of prayer amid such intimate violence; and patriarchal heterosexuality. In this respect, the third excerpt from the couple's conversations is shrouded in a mysterious silence: when Ruth tries to find a reason for her husband's disconsolate crying, she is answered with silence and an enigmatic confession: "I ain't worthy of you, Ruth. And I don't know what to do about it. I just don't. I try to do better. I sure do... but I fall. I'm weak" (135). Despite the ambiguity of his words, critics such as Tucker have read them as a confession of Jethro's inarticulate homosexuality ("Gay" 310). In turn, Jonnie Mae is a complex character whose presence and role in the narrative problematize the very structures that she seeks to maintain. Throughout the narrative she appears as a strong woman intent on providing her children and her grandson Jimmy with a better future that, in the case of her daughters, materializes in the difficult provision of a higher education that would allow them access to the job market and, thus, economic independence. However, she also demands an exacting engagement with the family and the community that is translated in the compliance with its norms and values. This positions her as Zeke's counterpart in terms of power and authority in the family unit. Paradoxically, within

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the Cross family structures, this position is discordant due to her gender: even while she is a staunch defender of the status quo, her very existence and role in the unit contravenes these principles. Wester has duly noted the centrality of this character in the "destabiliz[ation] of gender and sexual roles that damage the family's sense of stable patriarchy" symbolized by her androgynous name (223). Thus, through a multiplicity of characters at both the center and the margins of the family, Kenan shows the fragility and the incongruity of the principles that regulate Horace's life.

The outcome of Horace's spectral baptism relates to this condition: the scene of the christening places Horace at a crossroads that sheds light on the battle within himself. When pressed to be reborn into this new identity that generations of Crosses have crafted by the approval of those spectral members of his family attending the service, Horace resists and, instead, embraces his homosexuality, which leads to the rejection and abandonment on the part of his relatives:

> How he wished he could be his grandfather at that moment, and at that moment he was overwhelmed with a sadness both red and blue, and at that moment he realized he could never be like his grandfather, never be his grandfather, and, most painfully, that he did not really want to be his grandfather after all, and at that moment he faltered and stumbled only to find, not his aunt's arms, but the floor, and that the lights were out and that he was naked, kneeling in the pulpit, clutching his grandfather's gun, sobbing. (86)

Mourning the boy that could never be rehabilitated, Horace chooses to accept himself: not simply his sexual condition, but all the facets of his own personality. He learns that he cannot fit into the model his grandfather created after himself, that his identity can never be reduced to the prodigal Black messiah and, for this reason, he will have to continue his life separated from his family. The narrative illustrates the abrupt effacement of the spectral crowd that constitute, in the demon's words, "The ghosts of the past. The presence of the present. The very stuff of which the future is made" (73), and its replacement with the empty reality of the church building that accentuates Horace's absolute isolation and alienation. The rejection of the attempted baptism functions at three levels: the problematization of the inherited tradition, the present torment of Horace, and the outline of the future he chooses. It furthermore implies the utter destruction of the Cross family structure, as their last vestige of hope for the perpetuation of their legacy is frustrated. Furthermore, through this scene where Horace vindicates himself as he is and sees no future among his kin, the narrative renders a masterful disarticulation of the reductive and oppressive conception of family, and by extension community, based on heterosexual reproduction that approximates it to an act of queering history as discussed by Carla Freccero in the first chapter.

In confirmation of Horace's worst expectations, in the third and last part of this spectral scene, the congregation constituted by the familiar faces of his relatives and neighbors make a ghostly return to exact justice. Ruthlessly, they start throwing insults at him that allude to his sexual condition, his defective masculinity and his racial affinities. The shouts of the fiery crowd drive him literally and metaphorically away from that church he had known since his

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childhood, which was "grafted to Horace's memory as strongly as his home or the look of his face in the mirror" (70). This expulsion ultimately testifies to the homophobia of the institution as it demonstrates "that the gay individual cannot and does not survive such attempts at accommodation with the church" (McRuer 82). Thus, the novel offers a complex view of the relation of the Black community with mainstream society, with the religious power structure and, most importantly, among its members, one defined by the imprint of racism. In her exploration of the treatment of Biblical rhetoric for the articulation of racial liberation, Lucy Littler offers a detailed account of the paradoxes that govern the religious institution that is worth considering at length:

> Kenan's text articulates, with astringent and tragic clarity, [...] the absence of and the continued need for transformations within the black church that will allow all those oppressed by the interstices of race, class, gender, and sexuality to participate in and reap the benefits of the community's ongoing struggle for civil enfranchisement. Kenan's tropological revision examines how "liberation" and "progress" have been defined in the post-civil rights era, challenging the viability of the Exodus narrative as a model for black liberation, as it demands the sacrifice of individual subjectivity and allegiance to exceptionalist notions of American identity in order to perpetuate the American grand narrative of progress and the illusion of a monolithic African American community. (38–39)

The ghosts that Horace encounters in this first spectral scene viscerally bring to light the ambivalences of an institution that once helped raise the silenced from oppression, but has simultaneously turned into an oppressive force for those many Others whom it erases. The whole spectral scene renders a dramatization of Horace's internal conflicts as underlined by violence: the breaking away from tradition, symbolically emulated through the decapitation of Reverend Barden, a forceful baptism that demands renouncing the self and adopting the community's precepts and the abrasive response of the congregation to his resistance. Ultimately, the ostracism to which Horace is relegated, in Tucker's words "a kind of death" ("Gay" 313), serves to make him turn to that demonic voice that reassures him on his already foregone conclusion: "There is no other way. […] There were no more tears. No more chances. No more" (87).

3.2.1.2 Horace's (Mis)Education

Following the strange crowd, Horace arrives at the scenery of his second and third spectral scenes: the Tims Creek Elementary School and the South County High School. These can be considered as transitional toward the final spectral scene and they serve as vehicles to develop the full-fledged specters of homosexuality and race that are essential for his outcome. These spectral scenes are bound together under the common axiom of the school and the relevance of these interrelated spaces resides, firstly, in the fact that they appear as agents of socialization that function as a microcosm of the larger society regarding racist and homophobic attitudes. Secondly, the rendition of these spaces and the events that take place in

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them, as focalized through the perspective of Horace, shed light on his emotions and his feeling of oppression. Described respectively as a place which "in its plantationlike grandeur, made Horace wonder about hell" (87), and as somewhere that belongs "to a different era" (141), the elementary and the high school transfigure the protagonist into a metaphorical slave imprisoned by mainstream social standards and expectations that underline his seeming inadequacy. The ensemble of these two ghostly scenes can be divided attending to different stages of Horace's sexual development—his sexual awakening, the discovery of his sexual orientation and experimentation, and the repression of his sexual desire—that serve to outline the contour of his haunting as an individual, one deeply marked by the intransigent norms of the society he belongs to.

The experiences that Horace re-lives through the spectral enactment of his memories from the Tims Creek Elementary School first render his sexual awakening. Influenced by his religious background, the stance that Horace has toward sex reduces it to a deadly sin. Sex is a taboo topic in his pious family and so Horace is forced into reconstructing a theory of lovemaking based on the knowledge provided by his once best friend, John Anthony, and by popular culture. His approach to sex and to his own sexuality is profoundly impacted by the religious dogmas that he has imbibed since he was a child and that are translated into an unfathomable guilt. The rendition of his sexual awakening is a testament to this:

> The image of God he carried in his head was a bleak one—the Old Testament God of Abraham and Isaac and David, who took no foolishness and punished true to his word. A vengeful, dusky-skinned Arab with electric eyes and white hair. This God thundered in his mind after his orgasms; this God bellowed in his head when the need arose and Horace had conjured up the pornographic images he had seen of women and men in unholy congress. Is that when the truth uncovered itself and stood naked before him? When the thought of a woman failed to arouse him, and the thought of a man did? (101)

The fragment is pivotal in the narrative, not only because it demonstrates the extent to which these dogmatic truths affect Horace, but especially because it is the first insight on his homosexuality, one marked by an implicit articulation through a rhetorical question. If, before the eyes of his elders, sex is a sin, then surely homosexuality must be an aberration. This categorical view will torment Horace for the remainder of his life, and it will be at the core of his decision to kill himself.

In school Horace learns the absolute importance of heteronormativity and the consequences of deviating from it, as epitomized in the figure of a fellow Black student. Gideon Stone was already marked as an outcast because of his parents: his father, Lucius, being the town's bootlegger and his mother, Viola, the one in charge of running the economy of the business and safeguarding it from her husband's drinking habit. In addition to that, and to the demise of Tims Creek's strict mores, Gideon is an intelligent and proud gay boy adamant about his sexuality and unbothered by the norms of decorum that advocate self-effacement: "Gideon had, as the old men say, sugar in his blood. But unlike decent folk, he was not reticent about it; in fact he paraded it about. He cultivated a dainty, feminine air,

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delicate and girllike. His hands formed flowery gestures in midair, and he had something of a mincing walk. People snickered" (98). As a result, he was made a scapegoat for other boy's jokes and insults to which Horace unconvincingly contributes under peer pressure. It is this incident, and especially Gideon's response, that retrospectively marks the point of inflection in what will become Horace's reflection about his own sexual identity. After Horace hesitantly joins the rest of the class in calling him a faggot, "Gideon turned around and looked at Horace. [...] [H]e just fixed Horace with a gaze whose intensity frightened him. Now, looking at the phantoms, Horace realized how it had seemed to be more than an angry glare. *It was more of a curse. A prophecy*" (100; emphasis added). In the detailed description of Gideon's glare offered by the narrator, the ghosts' foreshadowing potential is confirmed by the reality in which Horace finds himself and allows for a reinterpretation of the encounter that registers the destructive view that Horace has adopted regarding same-sex desire. Horace fears being drawn into the Otherness which Gideon represents, his fixing gaze seems on the verge of defining him, and so he desperately escapes toward the safety of gender performance. He devotes all his efforts to finding a girlfriend that will allow him to silence the self-doubts that started to emerge; for him, however, that is not yet a question of external appearances but a quest for the very self or, rather, a (recon)quest of the ideal self:

> He had had a feeling that if a girl saw something in him, perhaps the reflection of a man to be, perhaps irresistible cuteness, or perhaps just the fact that somebody nice liked him, somebody outside his family and church members, *then he would be whole*. He set out, while in the sixth grade, to catch a girl friend, more like a hunter after a deer than a cavalier after a maiden. (96; emphasis added)

Characterized by the light tone of the whole narrative, Kenan manages to juxtapose such transcendental moments as the innocent discovery of an identity in formation with the futility of forcing oneself into roles crafted by others. The first part of the quotation evokes Horace's very human search for wholeness. Rooted in a community and a society that will not accept him for whom he is, he looks for an agent that would give him the validation that he needs, the safe passage that will allow him to fulfill the role for which he is destined. However, each spectral irruption of the past into the present frustrates this hope and stresses the idea that he is only welcome as part of the host of creatures that accompany him in this anguished spectral pilgrimage. As Tettenborn points out, "He fights hard to become what his community expects him to be, a heterosexual black male [...]. To appear and pass for 'whole,' ironically Horace must sever or repress one important part of his identity" (258). In this sense, it could be affirmed that the specters of queerness, in an ample sense, haunt Horace: the queer understood in relation to his sexuality, but also understood as something which escapes the norm. In the end, it is what he perceives as a defective sexual desire that prevents him from achieving that longed-for normalcy, that wholeness.

The third spectral scene develops in the South County High School and it represents two subsequent phases in Horace's trajectory. When he ends up sharing a biology project with Gideon, the suppressed sexual desire that he had harbored all along for him flows unbridled

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amid "an overwhelming guilt" (146). Overpowered by the strength of his desire, Horace confesses his love to him, and this exchange leads to the beginning of a clandestine relationship where the former acknowledges his sexual identity and engages in sex for the first time. At this point, Horace no longer harbors any doubts about his sexual orientation and seemingly accepts it. In fact, the spectral metaphor enables the existence of two parallel currents of thought, one that captures the reflections the event excited in that moment, and another with the assessment of those events from the present, and in both this seems to be a plain reality. Witnessing the spectral scene, a disrupted Horace claims:

> Had he a chance to do it again, he was certain, very certain, that he would succumb. It was "the magic of the first time" that clung to his mind now, and though fraught with guilt, it had been somehow pure in its sordidness, honest in its awkwardness, innocent in its seriousness. [...] How could such a thing be evil? (143–144)

This meditation not only reinforces his views on the matter, but it rhetorically answers the dilemma he faces at the end: there is nothing intrinsically wrong with who he is, and yet, it will never be condoned by his family, his community and society at large. Thus, as McRuer explains, his relation with Gideon, together with the self-acceptance it brings, is destined to failure:

> [...] Horace and Gideon do not embrace a 'black gay identity' together, an identity with which they subvert and expose the contradictions of the various communities of which they are constituents. Instead, the pressure from each of these communities precludes the possibility of Gideon and Horace coming together. Horace, caught up in the belief that he is in need of transformation, is ultimately unable to imagine that he and Gideon might work together to transform others. Gideon comes to signify, for Horace, everything about himself that must be obliterated. (83–84)

Trapped in a dead-end road, Horace "began to feel silly—silly, he was sure, the way a man about to be hanged feels silly, with a rope about his neck" (155). These words describe an execution that evokes the image of lynched Black bodies hanging from trees across the South, but here it is used to allude to a senseless lynching carried out by the members of the African American community against one of their own, a clear anticipation of the protagonist's suicide.

This burden of projected rejection is what ultimately guides Horace in the next steps he takes toward an attempted self-denial. After a summer of avowed approach to his grandfather, he returns to high school intent on overcoming his sexual condition and erasing any signs of his relationship with Gideon. This entails a disruption in Horace's evolution toward full self-acceptance: instead of following the pattern of sexual awakening, homosexual acknowledgment and coming out, he ultimately opts for the rejection and attempted suppression of his same-sex desire. While it is true that the disclosure of his sexual identity is not, by any means, mandatory, the fact that he cannot do so for fear of retaliation shows his entrapment in what McRuer has called a "cycle of recognition and disavowal" (84). This

results in a sexual and gender conflict that will deepen his already polarized perspective. In an attempt to preserve the closeness to and, therefore, the love and acceptance of his grandfather, Horace adopts the latter's patriarchal and homophobic views whereby homosexuality is equated to a "disease" (160). This transformation that Horace sets in motion is articulated around the performance of gender identity—he takes up track running and embraces sports as one of the defining spheres of masculinity, and he finds a girlfriend—and the rejection of homosexuality. However, the internal conflict that this accommodation entails for him is dramatized in the confrontation that ensues between him and Gideon. Unable to keep resisting the latter's sexual advances, he thwarts them with violence, punching him and keeping himself from offering him help or asking for forgiveness: "He never suspected he could inflict such a thing on another. He imagined another world, another place, in which he could gladly have complied with Gideon's wish and fallen into lust, steamy, lascivious abandon—but no" (164). This scene becomes the clearest epitome of Horace's regression, at the same time that it subtly suggests the psychological toll that his willed transformation takes on himself by altering the moral codes that had regulated his young life. As Tettenborn notes, "Horace thus equates his personal normalcy not with the formation of healthy gay relationships but rather with the enforcement of heterosexual values, down to the choice of romantic partners" (260). Both adolescents are restored to their former roles and Gideon spells for Horace the truth of his long-forgone prophecy: "I see what you think you're doing with your 'new' friends. But remember, black boy, you heard it here first: You're a faggot, Horace. You know? You're a faggot" (164).

Gideon's answer points to the second point of contention for Horace: the new life he is intent on creating has unwittingly led him to social groups mainly populated by white boys whom he befriends. This is interpreted as an act of racial treason by his fellow Black classmates who criticize him and accuse him of "being an Oreo" (161). To all extents and purposes, this seems the last straw on Horace's conflicted existence: he renounced his authentic self to fulfill the prospects his family and community had for him and became an epitome of Black masculinity, only to find himself accused of racial disloyalty. In this regard, it is important to note that in addition to articulating Horace's story, the specters raised throughout these scenes are also used to resurrect the ghosts of racism that pervade Tims Creek. Horace himself acknowledges the racial discrimination suffered in school, the "name calling, foul and disdainful attitudes, humorless pranks, unflattering innuendo, and out-and-out fights between blacks and whites" (90). While his experience of discrimination is partially slanted due to the Crosses' high position in the social hierarchy (attested in the novel through different incidents in which Horace can see his privilege at work), the accounts of different characters configure a landscape that is profoundly marked by racial conflict. For instance, Zeke reminisces about an encounter with the justice system when he was a teenager and claimed the money a white man owed him. This was solved when his own father, Thomas, took it upon himself to instigate an exacting physical punishment on his son before the court so as to make him learn "his proper place" (160). Lucius Stone's remarks on structural discrimination appeal to the material conditions describing lack of opportunities given to the rural, poor Black southerners. The most vocal ones are, without a doubt, the conglomerate of

the Cross family who, as heads of the community, have opted for a separatist racial approach on which they instruct the youngest member of the clan:

> The evils of the world had been put before him, solidly and plainly. He had heard the menfolk around the barber shop and in the field talk about the white man; he had heard his aunts and the womenfolk hiss and revile the name of whites; he had heard his grandfather lecture and spin yarns about how black folk had been mistreated at the hands of the white man. *He had heard. He was shearing. But did he understand*? (89; emphasis added)

While the collective attitude of the Tims Creek Black community is understandable as motivated by the historical oppression suffered at the hands of whites, it implies an impenetrability of external influences that ultimately relies on the reproduction of essentialist views of Blackness. Anthony Hoefer elaborates on this idea by considering how what once was a mechanism of protection has been transformed into a regulating instrument against difference and hybridity:

> [...] the Crosses, along with the community of Tims Creek, have thrived precisely because they have sought to distance themselves from white people as much as possible and to strictly regulate necessary or unavoidable moments of contact. While they have been relatively successful in their efforts to create a black-controlled space, that space is itself ultimately restrictive. Once the regulation of difference was a matter of self-preservation; now, it is necessary to preserve their sense of themselves. The Crosses can neither brook ambiguity along the margin of their community nor tolerate any threat to the purity and stability of its center. (109)

That "center" to which Hoefer refers is no other than Horace, the last link in the family's chain and, as such, his relation and association to the white sectors of society is harshly judged by his relatives and the community.

Thus, Gideon's words, so acutely encapsulating Horace's schizophrenic reality, resonate with him and bring about a confrontation with the self that destroys his attempted crafting of a heterosexual identity. He is left "with the smelly ghosts of the men who, for all these months, he had told himself he did not lust after, with the realization that it was a lie and that soon, soon and very soon he would fall, and fall hard" (165). Horace's words mobilize the spectral to talk about the psychological burden that his internal conflicts place on him. Haunted by his sexual desire, his ghosts become the somber messengers of a "fall" that, in referring to the carnal temptation (which will be explored at length in the following spectral scene), implies as well a fall from grace and his ultimate demise. Deploying what Hoefer calls the "Southern apocalyptic imaginary," this spectral scene foreshadows a bleak ending, and the reality that Horace must confront after it is gone does not offer much relief. He stands alone and naked before the high school building, in Pekka Kilpeläinen's words "a repository of traumatic memories of struggle, repression, and self-deception" (312), and attends to the materialization of a dark, winged specter armed with a helmet and a scimitar. However, before Horace can

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reach for help, this angel-like ghost refuses to grant salvation and abandons him, still a haunted "object of a few things that would not simply be gone" (166).

3.2.1.3 The Specter of Race and Sexuality

In this final scene the spectral has a stronger presence: rhetorically, various designations such as "ghost," "phantom" or "specter" are used to describe the different visions that haunt Horace. Along with this, the narrative introduces a new facet of the spectral as a mechanism of reduplication through the figure of the *doppelgänger*, which will be fundamental not only in this passage, but to eventually understand the second main character of the novel, Jimmy. Finally, this scene bears witness to the inherent double dimensionality of the spectral: in addition to the individual scope of the haunting that Horace experiences, the spectral agents that emerge in this scene tackle the collective memory of the African American community. This fourth retrospection entails a change of scenery that takes Horace inside the Crosstown Theater building and the anchored locus of the town's cemetery. These places bring about the spectral enactment of the previous summer when Horace, advised by his teacher and against his grandfather's wish, started to work there. His coming into contact with the theater crew implies the visceral undoing of all his attempts at repressing his sexual desire and the destruction of the façade of heteronormativity he had built in the previous months. Swept by the atmosphere of sexual freedom established by the actors, Horace is "haunted and taunted" (216) by the attraction he feels toward different male members of the company. He begins a sexual relation with one of these, Antonio, which is described in terms antithetical to the love and innocence of the first encounters with Gideon. The relation they have is a purely physical one where Horace abandons any pretense of love to explore the "lure of the flesh" (233). As Tettenborn explains, this is a crucial factor in Horace's carrying on with their liaison: "It is precisely this absence of affection, tenderness, or love that allows Horace to engage in this relationship. [...] Most likely, Horace can permit himself to be physically intimate with a man if he does not have to be emotionally invested in him" (261).

Their encounters take place in an abandoned house, a space full of Gothic undertones that, as pointed out by Wester, holds strong implications in regards to the forbidding nature of their encounters: "The 'haunted' house becomes a welcoming place for transgressive sexuality in part because both the house and the queer body function within established Gothic texts as figures of horror" (229). This view held by Horace is further explored in the conversations the two lovers have that implicitly return to the dilemmas that still haunt Horace. He has seemingly adopted his role as the receptacle of his family's legacy and his only project is to make himself worthy of their hopes: "You know, I often think of how I'm going to make my family proud of me. [...] I'm the next generation" (224). This wish is at odds with that part of his identity he is exploring, and this clash is better seen in his opposition to Antonio's use of the term "faggot" to describe him. The narrative echoes a conversation between the lovers in which Antonio questions Horace about his resistance to name his homosexuality: "What's the matter? Don't like to be called what you are?' [...] 'What I *am* is brilliant'" (224–225). While this exchange could be interpreted as an attempt to transcend a reductionist view of identity along sexual preference, these words clearly refer

back to the episode with Gideon and thus re-inscribe in the text the protagonist's resistance to fully embrace his sexual condition. This fragile architecture that Horace had crafted to be able to live up to the family expectations, without absolutely renouncing himself, is further imperiled when he helplessly falls in love with a fellow Black actor, Everett Church Harrington IV. This young man, who belongs to the northern Black middle-class, represents the ideal of racial pride, and yet he matter-of-factly endorses his sexual condition. Similarly to what had happened in his relationship with Gideon, Horace is first stirred by an irrational hatred toward him that swiftly concedes to his attraction and a declaration of love that is unrequited. Everett's rejection produces a profound resentment in Horace that he tries to quiet by giving himself in to the absolute debauchery of drugs and orgies of the theater crew in the local cemetery. However, this behavior only reinforces his feeling of inadequacy and leads him into a vicious cycle that fuels his loneliness and self-hatred. This finds a dangerous outlet in the progressive transformation of his body into a sexual object: "His loneliness led him into careless and loveless liaisons with men who cared only for his youth, and though he pretended not to care, he worried more and more for his soul, and his increasing confusion took on a harsher guilt and self-loathing" (240).

The pivotal moment in this fourth spectral scene is the so-called mirror scene, which has received copious critical attention. This becomes the climax of the intersection between the racial and sexual conflict that will be fundamental for the outcome of the story. As Horace makes his way into the recesses of the theater building, he encounters the most disturbing vision of the night:

> He pulled back a coat, clutching the gun, and saw someone sitting in front of a mirrored dresser, putting on makeup. He was a black man, dressed in a sun-bright costume, orange and green and blue and red, like a harlequin's. As Horace looked into the mirror, the face appeared more and more familiar, though it was becoming obscured by milky white greasepaint. He realized. Saw clearly. It was him. Horace. Sitting before the mirror applying makeup. Of all the things he had seen this night, all the memories he had confronted, all the ghouls and ghosts and specters, this shook him the most. Stunned, confused, bewildered, he could only stare at his reflection, seeing him and him and him. (219)

The sighting is articulated around the key elements of color, the mirror and the figure of the double that are mobilized to provide a nuanced portrait of the theme of racial identity. It is especially through this latter where spectrality becomes instrumental in offering a displaced and self-reflexive view of the self, for the *doppelgänger* is no other than Horace's projected spectral representation of himself which induces a profound feeling of estrangement. This other version of himself, to which Horace himself refers as "the specter" (219), is first and foremost defined in relation to the bright colors of his costume. It is important to note that, throughout the narrative, colors are synaesthetically associated to the different positive or negative experiences that Horace undergoes. As such, the bright times are described as "green, yellow, and orange-red days of field trips and sack races and science experiments and practical jokes and books, always books" (94); and, in opposition, the moments of distress are

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conceptualized as "a sadness both red and blue" (86). This scene both redefines these associations and foregrounds black and white as two colors that are paradoxically absent from Horace's musing and yet central to the definition of himself due to their racial load. This association between brightness and happiness is undone when the colors are endorsed by a figure that profoundly unsettles Horace because they are juxtaposed to the artificial whiteness that covers *his* Black features. The narrative offers a detailed description of this process where a perplexed Horace first attends to his spectral transformation, and then is invited by the ghost himself to imitate him:

> But the reflection of himself continued to cover his entire face with white goo, deftly, expertly, with fingers, Horace's fingers, that seemed accustomed to this odd activity. As if it were normal.
> Soon the entire face was obscured, though Horace could recognize the face, the nose folks said to be just like his great-grandfather's, the lips rumored to be like his grandmother's, his father's determined chin, his maternal grandmother's sad eyes... but all was white now, finished in a white like porcelain, smooth and thick. (220)

This fragment turns into a metaphor for the cultural whiteness of which the Crosses and the rest of the African American community accuse Horace, and it mobilizes two different subtexts that shed light on the racial dimension of Horace's conflict. Hoefer points out the associations to minstrelsy that produce an erasure of the Black subject (117), and McRuer invokes the figure of the mask which, I argue, speaks back to Fanon's conception of assimilation of white standards discussed in the previous chapter. McRuer explains how the inherent duplicity with which Horace is confronted dramatizes his dilemmas and the guilt they entail as well as the subsequent "need of reconstruction": "The terror for Horace in all of this doubling and redoubling lies in the recognition of what he believes is the 'truth' about himself, which he can no longer escape: he is a clown, he wears a mask, he only plays a role, he betrays the communities of which he is a part" (85). The passage evokes the connection between Horace, his family and the community and the understanding that he has of his acts by symbolically dramatizing the erasure of his family features into an aseptic whiteness that would be interpreted by them as the effacement of their Black heritage.

The implicit connection between Horace's sexuality and race is made more explicit in another scene that appears in symbiotic relation with the present one, an intra-textual relation that is structurally marked in the novel. One of the theater scenes embedded in Jimmy's confessional chapters revolves around the confrontation between Horace and his family on account of his new ear piercing which takes place during the Thanksgiving dinner in the year previous to Horace's suicide. The racial antagonism that was brewing throughout the novel explodes when his entire family, with the exception of Jimmy and Lester, accuse his white friends of being a pernicious influence that will certainly have a tragic end for Horace: "Who knows what them boys will have this fool doing next. Having him out stealing. Wind up in jail. Dead. And them sitting back laughing at him" (185). While their concern is anchored on their lived experience, it is fundamentally faulted inasmuch as it invalidates Horace's and

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erases any kind of agency on his part. When Horace calls them out on their bigotry, Jonnie Mae stresses the segregationist view of race relations the family bears as banner and recriminates Horace for his defense invoking her own experience: "Do you have any idea how many white men have called me girl and aunt? Out of disrespect? Out of hatefulness? [...] Don't even get the idea in your head to call me a bigot, boy. I don't qualify for prejudice. I know all the facts already" (187). Her words, while bearing the scars of inhabiting a second-class citizenship, espouse a categorical understanding of race relations that precludes any criticism and accentuates the essentialism that defines the community and ultimately nurtures the hatred that Horace feels for himself.

Furthermore, key in this exchange is the connection that the family draws between whiteness and homosexuality as they assess Horace's behavior: "He just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts" (184). Their comment seeks to emasculate Horace at the same time that it implicitly adopts the homophobic view of homosexuality as a white disease. This evidences, as Brannon Costello states, that "to stray even slightly from the family's traditional ideals of masculinity is tantamount to perversion and racial treachery" (134). This leads Horace into a conundrum with no easy solution: although he has attempted to sacrifice his sexual desire and play the part allotted by his family, he begins to understand that they will require absolute and unquestioned compliance with their worldview and their models. Aware that, by virtue of who he is—his sexuality essential among the traits that define him—he will never fit into their ideal conception, he erroneously assumes that he must be the one fundamentally wrong. The most painful aspect of Horace's situation comes from the incorporation that he makes of his family's ideas into the view he has of himself. Horace recounts how the friendship he had with his white companions had turned into an escaping mechanism, "a reprieve from his anxiety" (236). Nonetheless, this resource is also frustrated by the doubts that emerge about issues of tokenism and the backlash he receives from his Black friends and his family, as illustrated in the Thanksgiving dinner. When the spectral scene of the theater carries him to the memories of this occasion, Horace's stance bears the marks of all these imposed views and the apparently misplaced comparison of himself to his white friends seems to goad his hopelessness: "And Horace, enchanted by their singular, infectious freedom, identified with their sense of entitlement, believing the world owed him what it owed them. Believing wholeheartedly he would receive it at the end" (237). This retrospective assessment is dominated by a flagrantly tragic misinterpretation of possibilities and unveils one of the many pernicious facets of essentialism. The connection between the mirror scene and that of the Thanksgiving dinner, which, in chronological terms, happens before the night of spectral remembrances, functions as well as a foreshadowing element. Horace's expulsion from the dinner table on account of his defensive comments, which are understood as a challenge to the patriarchal authority, can be read in metaphorical terms as the projected expulsion from the family and the community that he would experience if he came out. Wester explains the extent of this action arguing that "The implication is that Horace is no longer a Cross after the encounter, but something Other, outside of the Cross patriarchal identity. For Horace to know who he is, then, he must be both heterosexual and racially segregating" (231).

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Straddled between the spectral reproduction of his life among the theater crew and his own ruminations about his family, Horace witnesses the spectral reenactment of another kind of scenes that, if never lived in the first person, point at the very heart of the African American community. The same graveyard where the actors' bacchanal took place is now turned into a site for the narration of Black and American history through disarticulated passages. This begins with the sight of men and women "shackled up and loaded onto ships like barrels of syrup and made to sit there crouched in chains, to defecate and urinate and choke on their own vomit, in the heat, in the stench of days and weeks and months" (232), a scene that evokes the Middle Passage and one through which Horace observes the foundational trauma of slavery. The images of the Civil War, "Of men who raise up arms against their own brothers and die like so many insects, men who, out of greed, power lust, envy, honor, jumbled and misplaced seek to rule" (233), stands as an ambivalent landmark of the slave's liberation and the continuation of oppression. Then, the last two scenes evoking wars (possibly the First and the Second World War) and the building of the contemporary capitalist society, are invested with a new universal force. The first speaks about the continuous penance of human beings, and the second introduces a criticism of the economic structures and the general impoverishment of humanity dominated by a physical and spiritual hunger, a world where men and women have turned into slaves of the economy and "slaves of themselves" (234).

The social critique articulated through these visions is further emphasized in the primary locus of the spectral scene: the theater. The production for which he had worked during the whole summer, entitled *Ride the Freedom Star* and advertised as "The saga of an American family" and "The American Story" (210) is a piece authored by Philip Cross, the last male of the white Crosses who refused to follow his predecessors' business in corporate America and became a playwright instead. The whole production process illustrates the silencing of the African American experience from the national narrative as instantiated in the rewriting of the lives of slaves through a prism of the institution's benevolence. Kilpeläinen claims that "the play seeks to resolve the fundamental historical dilemma of slavery by trivializing the exploitation and suffering that it entailed and, by extension, repressing its traumatic cultural memory" (314). One of the few works that acknowledge the white Crosses' slave-owning and slave-trading past, both visually and textually transforms Black characters into mouthpieces for the Lost Cause narrative of the South. The advertising posters offer the first visual approach to this pantomime through the contrast in the representation between the ante-bellum white men, "men [who] were hearty and robust like comic book characters, their chests barreled and near to bursting through their shirts," as well as women, who were "either voluptuous or petite, big-boned and buxom or frail and feminine. They all had shiny white teeth and wide smiles;" and the Black characters: "A man, shirtless, horse-muscles, and bronze, and a woman, her head beragged, both with an out-of-place grin on their faces. Standing beneath them was a young boy, his eyes much too big, the smile on his face lost somewhere in the conflagration of counterfeit glory" (211). Poor in terms of form and content, the play offers a problematic view of slavery where concessions to hardships are downsized in favor of a positive view of bondage and a stereotypical depiction of Blackness:

> He had tried to create a picture of domestic bliss for the house slaves and of jolly camaraderie for the field workers. Despite the interjection of a speech here or there that reflected the reality of the hard life of the slaves, the blacks were mainly there for buffoonery and hijinks that brought laughs and chuckles from the audience, for the church scenes with their raw and dynamic singing, and for the minister's sermon, which was the most passionate, hell-raising moment in the entire play. (213–214)

The primary space of the theater and the secondary space of the cemetery that feature in this final spectral scene become the battleground where two forces, artificially positioned as antithetical, are unnaturally pitted against each other. These serve, in James Crank's words, as a "haunting remainder of Horace's conflict in the novel, caught between the poles of white/black and family/community" (25). The rendezvous with his white-faced double offers a distorted lens through which to apprehend his situation, but the possibilities it offers are never materialized. As Wester argues:

> An encounter with a doppelganger literalizes Horace's self-alienation and destruction. Horace's climatic meeting with his (re)mirrored self is his last chance at redemption. [...] Unfortunately, Horace is unable to accept and embrace this reflected self or the disruptive potential it signifies. The reflected Horace shows him that his place is as a destabilizing figure whose difference allows him to circulate among various group identities. Horace can neither conceive of nor accept such a subversive and complex definition of self. (234)

In Wester's view, Horace's rejection of the possibilities that the vision might have contained is tantamount to his possibility of transcending the rigid binaries that have defined him. Once he has discarded the potentiality of subversion, and his attempted escape through transformation into a bird has failed, he begins to ponder about a definitive alternative. As Holland pointedly asserts, "In all the spaces he occupies, there is no space in which his many (queer) selves exist. Horace's answer to this is to escape the harsh fact of his life for the more pleasant, and therefore agreeable, realization of (him) self in death" (122). In this process the secondary locus of the cemetery is of the utmost importance, not only because it is a classical Gothic space associated with transgression, as explained before, but because it serves to lay out Horace's plan of death:

> Horace thought of life beneath the ground. He did not wish to die, but the things he had witnessed and remembered this night caused him only more confusion and ache that led him to wonder: *Where will it end? Will it end?* He thought of his family, of what they wanted of him; of his friends and what they offered him; and of himself... what did he, Horace, truly want? Suddenly life beneath the ground had a certain appeal it had never had before. It was becoming attractive in a macabre way. No more, no more ghosts, no more sin, no more, no more. (231)

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This internal division of the character is externalized through the choice that he must make between himself and the alternative that has begun to take shape in his mind. Moved by a self-

loathing he had never felt before, he turns to his double in anger and, in Poesque fashion, shoots him dead. As explained by Tettenborn, this could be considered a "metaphoric suicide" that precedes the actual one: he loses a part of himself without which "his identity is incomplete, and he is not able to survive" (262). Indeed, the uncanny double disappears but what is left in its place is a distraught Horace escaping from a disembodied voice that softly reminds him that "you can run, but you cannot hide" (235). The specter might have perished but the trauma that it embodied will haun Horace to his grave.

3.2.1.4 Horace's Spectralization

This long night of visitation of spirits leaves Horace plunged into absolute despair: what remains beyond the memories of illusion and disillusionment, self-discovery and repression, happiness and anger is the irremediable pain. Each of these haunting images has confronted him with the distressing perception that his is a doomed path whose only destination is alienation from his family and community, or from himself. Having exhausted the possibilities, even of supernatural transformation, Horace is left with "a deep sense of futility, of uselessness and failure, [...] a feeling of weariness, deep and old" (236) that draws him to find a solution in death. Naked and armed with his grandfather's rifle—an item that holds strong symbolic significance as a phallic and familiar element—standing for what Tettenborn calls the powers of the "patriarchal dynasty" (263), Horace shoots himself. The event of his suicide is rendered from two different perspectives that allow an introspective exploration (through the first-person renderings of Horace himself and Jimmy) and an external depiction that deeply contrasts with the previous one by virtue of its ultra detailed and realistic account of the act. The final part of the novel opens with an anomalous confessional chapter narrated by Horace, instead of Jimmy. This segment, which could possibly belong to the autobiography that Horace had planned on writing about his conflicted existence, becomes the most direct vehicle into an ample conception of the self that transcends his sexual condition and explores the complexities of his character. Horace's confessions are constituted by a collection of memories articulated through an anaphoric structure initiated with the sequence "I remember" that render a nostalgic retrospective. Beginning with the memory of the first time he saw his grandfather kill a chicken, the narrative engages first with the community. This fragment (which is intratextually linked with the collective section of "Advent" with which the novel opens) describes this activity as a ritual of masculinity and symbolically demonstrates the standards of gender espoused by the group that should be followed by the protagonist. From this act of collective resonances, Horace focuses on himself as he reminisces about his happy moments: his love of his home's music and food, his reconciliation with sports, his various hobbies and interests (that ranged from comic superheroes, to fantastic creatures, science fiction and the projects he himself designed for a superhero suit, a reactor and a teleportation machine), which deepen into his individuality and contrast with the atmosphere of the rural Tims Creek.[49]

[49] Costello offers a comprehensive analysis of the references to popular culture embedded in the novel, especially regarding the topic of superheroes. He describes minutely how the main attributes of each of the characters that appear in the posters of

Inevitably, his musings lead toward the discovery of same-sex desire and the incipient shame that are coupled with the memories of his first sexual encounter, where the pleasure was perennially tainted by a guilt that makes him want to mutate into another being not subjected to the norms of his world. The final tract of his confessions is devoted to religion and the church, and Horace wonders about the theological teachings and precepts. This part seems to subtly question them, an attempt that was introduced earlier in the novel when he described his shift toward "books and tools of modern information" in search for answers that escape his family's doctrinal reality of "faith, hope and believing" (88). At the same time, we see the emergence of the possibility of a new form of spirituality where the individual is directly in contact with God. However, in the end, the hegemonic view takes over and Horace adopts it and comes to see himself as someone unclean, unworthy, and too weak to follow the rules that would grant his salvation. The confessional chapter ends with the words "I remember me" (251), which are also the last words of Horace in the novel, and that can be interpreted as both his last statement and an anticipatory element of his permanence in the community's collective memory. As a statement, they forcefully draw attention toward the view of the self as an integrative whole that must be apprehended beyond the marks that position him as a sexual or racial Other, a claim against relinquishing any part of his identity (McRuer 78) that ultimately underlines his humanity. In its foreshadowing dimension, the closing words introduce the question of memory and hint at the haunting that Horace's death will unleash, which will be explored in what follows in relation to his cousin Jimmy and the whole community.

Jimmy is the second most important character in the narrative, one connected to Horace not only by familial ties, but by the parallelisms between their lives and their shared conflicts. It is for this reason that he is the first object through which the second directionality of haunting in the novel can be ascertained. McRuer claims that "After his suicide, Horace survives to haunt Jimmy and open up the meanings that have hitherto grounded the life of this community" (111), and this is a fact that Jimmy himself obliquely recognizes when he claims: "I have never lost my fear of the dead. [...] In my dreams the dead rise, and they wear armor and are armed with bows and arrows and swords and guns and knives" (189). The other, more material if paradoxically invisible proof of this haunting, is that Horace's memory is what prompts the narration itself, one that both in its narrative and confessional formats reveals his presence beyond death. According to McRuer, "Jimmy's own writings betray an ironic anxiety about Horace's influence" (97). These two characters are directly linked in the novel through two events that are fundamental to Horace's plight. Desperate before the possibility of not being able to restrain himself, Horace confesses to Jimmy that he is gay in a scene that is rendered in the form of a play. In his confession, Horace demonstrates a certainty—"I like

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Horace's bedroom appeal to the conception he has of himself. As such Doctor Strange could work as Horace's "superheroic alter ego," a man who turned to magic to control his body; the uncontrollability of Hulk evokes Horace's "repressed sexual urges;" and Wonder Woman epitomizes the ambivalence of Horace's attempt "to conform to a heteronormative ideal of adolescent masculinity" (138). In his view, for Horace, far from being an escapist mechanism, these come to represent the different anxieties he holds about mutability, self-control and repression regarding his identity and his body and, therefore, alternative models of existence (140).

men. I don't like women. There's something wrong with me" (113)—and fear—"What if I can't change?" (113)—that Jimmy undermines and obfuscates. His answer mobilizes a homophobic rhetoric that first conceptualizes his condition as a "phase," "something that will pass" (113), and then resorts to the threat of the Bible to condemn it, impelling Horace to pray to God for strength and reflect on such a "serious matter" (114). Thus, in his role as both pastor and cousin, Jimmy tragically fails when he deprives a profoundly vulnerable Horace of any alternatives to live his faith and his life that do not imply self-denial. The situation worsens when the pastor attempts to use himself as an example admitting to having had homosexual leanings only to discard them as youthful experimentation that must be vanished in order to fit into the standards of normalcy. Thus, as Tucker explains, "while Jimmy's view of Horace's queer desire is more liberal and compassionate than that of other family members, his response to Horace's confession consists of predictably homophobic reassurances" ("Gay" 312).

The most straightforward event, however, comes from Jimmy being the selected witness of Horace's suicide: the first play slot that disrupts Jimmy's confessions portrays how a seemingly-possessed Horace, naked and holding his grandfather's rifle, forces Jimmy to go with him to the woods under violent threats. The very last chapter of the novel iterates the exchange between the cousins by reproducing Jimmy's sterile attempts at dissuading Horace from killing himself. The duplicity of the events is concerned with the more pervasive topic of the double that was introduced through Horace's *doppelgänger* and here is brought to the fore through the apparent split in Horace's personality. The demon that had guided Horace throughout is described as "what men despise. Or think they despise. Themselves" (252) and comes to represent no other than everything which Horace, restricted by the allegiances to his family and community, was not able to articulate. As Tuire Valkeakari points out, "Horace's assault on James—an embodiment and mediator of local values—ultimately represents the young gay man's long-suppressed reaction to the sexual norms of the entire black evangelical Tims Creek community" (143). Jimmy is thus confronted with the consequences of the standards that he has adopted and enforced on his cousin:

> Whether or not the malevolent spirit existed is irrelevant, in the end. For whether he caused it or not, they boy died. This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lightning crack. This did happen. (253)

The narrative renders in ultra-scientific language the abhorrent spectacle that Jimmy witnesses. At this point in the narrative, the ambiguity represented by the demon and the host of creatures that coexists in the same space of Jimmy's unsaid words to Horace is no longer important, and what remains are the very facts of an unnecessary bloodbath. In all its crudeness, the fragment forces Jimmy and, by extension, the whole community, to grapple with the materiality that ideas and ideologies produce.

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The connection between Horace and Jimmy is also expressed indirectly through a number of personal traits and other aspects that are duplicated in each character. It is for this reason that different critics have noted how, in line with the motif of duplicity in the narrative, they could be read as doubles of each other (Valkeakari 146;147). As Crank explains, these "two main protagonists are meant to be a kind of double for each other: Horace, the young boy caught between the two poles of his faith and his bodily desires, and Jimmy Greene, who also works through a similar struggle" (21). Such connection is marked externally through the comments of Zeke, who compares both characters and concludes that they are alike in their quietness and politeness (55), and those of Ruth, as seen in the previous section. Even Jimmy himself, as he ponders Horace's suicide, attempts a comparison between the two of them: "That is what finally got to Horace, isn't it? I keep asking myself. He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was concerned" (188). Internally, these characters are brought together through shared textual references that denote a similar yet distinct frame of mind that reinforces their shared point of departure and the concomitant differences. Like Horace, the school of which Jimmy is principal also reminds him of a plantation, "a prisonlike place of learning" (40), but, unlike his cousin, in this metaphor Jimmy positions himself as the master. This shift draws the parallelism between both characters, inasmuch as they both associate the school with a repressive space, and yet, somehow, it establishes a fundamental schism between them whereby Horace is just the victim and Jimmy a figure of public authority that is, nonetheless, powerless in his own life.[50] This frustrated parallelism is, furthermore, amplified in the consideration of the lives of both characters that share the fundamental experience of homosexuality. In fact, Littler goes as far as to argue that Horace and Jimmy could be considered a single entity with trajectories placed in diametrical opposition. As she explains, "While Horace will refuse his role, Jimmy accepts it, and Kenan's text plays out the consequences of both choices" (42). The information that the narrative provides about Jimmy comes from two different sources: the road trip storyline, which takes place after Horace's suicide; and his confessions, prompted as well by the haunting that his cousin's death unleashed on him, and both deepen on the manifold manners in which the two characters reflect each other and offer fundamentally different options. The latter shade light on two aspects that had been extensively treated in relation to Horace: homosexuality, and the dyad Cross family-community.

While Jimmy hints about the experimentation of acts of sexual transgression, same-sex desire is explored only in his confessions, where it becomes a paradoxically ubiquitous and unnamed topic, another ghost. The first references appear in Jimmy's confusion of a college

[50] An intertextual element that links Jimmy and Horace is their botanic interest, which the latter explores in his project with Gideon, while the former shows it through his extensive footnotes in Kenan's short story "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," discussed in the next section. In this story, there is yet another character who is a botanist by profession and shares with them his sexual orientation, turning botanical references and discussions into a proxy for homosexuality. This association is further emphasized with Kenan's coinage of the term "tropism," i.e. "an orientation of an organism, usually by growth rather than by movement, in response to an external stimulus" (155) as the main topic of Horace's project (Hovis, "Randall" 266–268).

professor's attention as a sexual advancement which is epitomized in his misinterpretation of what the teacher identifies in him as "curiosity with a capital C" (33). Unlike Horace, Jimmy is unable to articulate his own sexual leanings and, instead, subscribes to this definition and uses it to describe Horace as well—"[...] he had something more, that damned curiosity...with a capital C" (36)—turning it into a surrogate for same-sex desire. His relationship with his deceased wife, Anne, provides further and more blatant evidence of his sexual orientation. After a long period as friends, Anne directly interpolates him about his sexuality, something she does again when he is impotent the first time they have sex, bluntly asking: "Are you sure you're not a faggot?" (176). Indeed, Jimmy's feelings toward his wife are described as "affection" (171) and "admiration, wonder, awe" (175). Sexual attraction is replaced by a mystic hold that Anne seems to have over him, and lovemaking becomes a procedural and mechanic act. Their marriage appears as a convenient arrangement (Littler 46): Anne, the militant daughter of accommodated Black northerners intent on upsetting her parents, makes of Tims Creek her civil rights project; and Jimmy secures Anne as emblem of his status as a heterosexual male and the heir of the Greene-Cross alliance. Within Jimmy's confession Anne's voice remains the one closest to the articulation of his sexual identity; the haunting questions—"Do you even want to, really? [...] Are you even capable?" (172)—that interrupt the narration of their sexual encounters as a married couple hold an explanatory force that resists direct explicitation, as does her affair with another man and Jimmy's subsequent response characterized by paralysis and distance. To further the list of signs, Jimmy juxtaposes these memories to a passage where he concedes to his own untruthfulness: "I have lied. To myself" (172), which functions as yet another veiled proof or testimony and outlines the extent to which he has repressed the truth about his sexual orientation.

The second aspect that becomes absolutely pervasive throughout these confessional chapters is Jimmy's position in the Cross family and in the community of Tims Creek. Given the absence of Zeke's son, Jonnie Mae chooses for Jimmy to continue the legacy fortifying a bond between the Cross and the Greene branches of the family that will secure their status. Out of loyalty to his grandmother, Jimmy forgoes everything that does not fit into their standards to become the receptacle of their actualized expectations which are embodied in his role as the first African American principal of Tims Creek and the community's minister. It is especially in the assessment of the latter that it becomes apparent how he performs these roles just as a means to fulfill his family's desire, and never out of personal vocation. When reminiscing about his years in college he remembers the "intoxicating rush of freedom" (174) that allowed him to break free from the strict impositions of his family. However, the guilt and fear with which he was raised eventually take over and he returns home (against the advice of his siblings and teachers) to fulfill his role:

> It actually began with her grandfather, Ezra Cross, who had given the land on which the present First Baptist Church of Tims Creek stands. It was his dream that one of his own progeny would stand before the altar as His, and his, minister. So it was a familial, dynastic hope for the both of them. What better gift to the Lord than your begotten son? How fitting. How Godlike. How

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> worthy. And for the sons of slaves and of former slaves, what more did they have to give? (115)

This passage clearly depicts his taking up the ministering job as an external imposition prescribed by years of unquestioned tradition and erasing sameness. While the excerpt also registers the effects of racism at the core of this approach, it is with rhetorical irony that it reveals the paradox that the adoption of respectability politics inflicts on the generations of Crosses: his ancestors fought for liberation from bondage, only to have Jimmy and Horace perish under the impossibility of choosing and victims to the stagnant rules of their chosen freedom, turned into slaves of the family's rigid moral and religious values.

Even as a minister, Jimmy's relative power is constantly undermined both by his family and his congregation. The first becomes apparent with Zeke and Ruth's chastisement of his invocations of forgiveness and indifference toward his position as their minister. A case in point for the second is Jimmy's failed attempt at introducing himself as a closer and more benevolent religious authority. On assessing this issue, he wonders: "How could I communicate that I was not, did not want to be the holy and pious dictator of a pastor they had been used to for all their lives, that my very presence had nothing to do with my condemnation of their way of life" (110). This echoes what will become a constant in Jimmy's life: the inability to express himself and the subsequent paralysis which is tantamount to the absolute silence about who he really is and his inaction on these grounds. Littler explains how this paralyzing silence owes much to his awareness that he cannot fit into "the heteronormative mold of chosenness of his community" (49) and ultimately holds tragic reverberations: "Jimmy's silence about his own sexuality perpetuates the deafening and deadly silence in his community" (45). Parallel to Horace, this character becomes the proof that, notwithstanding his sacrifices and adoption of the family and community's standards, he will never be able to fulfill their expectations. In this respect, George Hovis summarizes the parallels between these double characters as "the stories of two gay black men [...] who tragically fail in their attempts to re-envision their lives within the boundaries of their traditional African American community" ("Randall" 253). Departing from similar conflicts (homosexuality and its intersections with race and religion), the trajectories of these characters differ in the fundamental fact of acknowledging it and the outcome that this produces: Horace recognizes who he is and he finds respite only in death, whereas Jimmy cannot and survives doomed to a life of silence under the steel structures of a system he himself upholds. Despite this differential outcome, the invisible bond between these characters is stressed after Horace's death, which prompts the reflective cascade that captures what McRuer has described as the destabilization of secure meanings that had organized the pastor's life (99).

While the passages that follow the depiction of Horace's death seem to restore an apparent façade of normalcy, in this final part I will argue that his suicide is of paramount importance to explain the future transformation of the community. Several critics have described Horace's suicide as a sacrificial death (McRuer 92; Wester 237–238), a reading that is stressed by the symbolism encapsulated in his last name and reinforced by his nakedness that evokes the image of Christ's passion. As Littler points out, "Horace's last name clearly

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connects him to the biblical narrative of Jesus carrying the cross, a representation of the sins of the world, to his crucifixion" (53–54). When considering this reading of Horace's death, it is imperative to discern a symbiotic interaction between him and the community through this act: Horace gives himself up for the group and thus his death must necessarily change the community forever. In her assessment of the novel, Tettenborn considers this double pull:

> Because of the societal prohibitions regarding homosexuality, Horace dies the death of a sacrificial lamb; in the eyes of the community, his death can be read as a sacrifice for its continued heterosexual homogeneity. Theoretically, Horace's death also offers the ironic and unique possibility for the community's acknowledgement of homosexuality as something that must not necessarily remain melancholically repressed and that can be socially mourned by mourning Horace. However, the novel [...] keeps this possibility in the realm of the hypothetical. (264)

While this critic rightly emphasizes that the possibilities of transformation are not explicitly actualized, I contend that these can be apprehended by considering the community as the second object through which the second directionality of haunting is displayed in the novel. To borrow from Wester's assessment of this phenomenon, "Horace haunts back and defies the silence his community imposes upon him" (Wester 218). In other words, like Jimmy, the community is also haunted by Horace's presence. Throughout the narrative there are several moments in which Tims Creek appears as a locus metaphorically haunted by the past, be it through the spaces that hold the physical resonances of the plantation,[51] the oral accounts of living characters, or the more elusive inter- and intra-racial dynamics. The presence of spectrality in connection to historical memory acquires through this lens a new layer of meaning. In the novel, such reading is articulated through both form and content: very much in line with *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, Kenan puts before us a text where liminality, ambiguity and multiplicity are structurally defining elements. These characteristics of what I have previously called structural spectrality produce a profoundly fragmented narrative that allows first for what Sheila McKoy calls "Horace's temporal permanence" ("Rescuing" 20), inasmuch as his becomes a pervasive presence throughout the narrative; and second, it allows for the configuration of the multidimensional understanding of haunting espoused throughout the analysis.

In terms of content, the undead presence of Horace in the community is metaphorically marked by the "queering," with his presence, of each of the spaces he visits, which, as Kilpeläinen points out, "are provisionally transformed into imaginary Queer spaces where idealized heteronormativity, and, by extension, the ideology of fixed identities, is disrupted by

[51] The history of the city is reflected on the slave market that sits at its center which Zeke compares to the hospital. His assessment stresses the unfathomable humiliation that such displaying must have had for the slaves on sale and introduces the present debate surrounding the building: "And he had heard that the city council wanted to tear it down, said it just stood there dredging up old hurts but there was a lot of ruckus over the fact that it was none of two or three left. Some people felt it was necessary to preserve it. As a warning" (65). With this subtle reference, Kenan echoes the ongoing debates about memorialization in the United States, and how these have exposed the fundamental difference between the importance given to white and Black (hi)stories.

the Queer presence" (303). More tangibly, however, this presence is framed textually through the opening and closing segments, respectively entitled "Advent" and "Requiem for Tobacco," with a different narrator that invokes the collective voice of Tims Creek. The fragment that prefaces the storyline revolves around the hog killing, an event that acquires a ritualistic significance. It recounts how a boy is selected by the older men to perform the task: "Some older man will give a young boy a gun, perhaps, and instruct him not to be afraid, to take his time, to aim straight" (8). The detailed narration of the process of selecting and killing the animal as well as separating its parts and preparing them for consumption reveals a rigid gender division in the chores, with the women taking care of the processing and cleaning, and the men in charge of the killing. This entails a closed vision of masculinity associated to violence and emotional repression. As Kilpeläinen explains, "this clearly appears as an initiation rite toward manhood, involving triumphing over one's fear of killing a living creature and suppressing one's feelings of pity in order to be qualified as a man" (304). Thus, this seemingly detached narration relates to the core themes of the novel by unveiling the traditional patterns that regulate gendered relations in the community and precluding alternative models of existence within its parameters. In fact, Wester identifies Horace's death with that of the hog itself, inasmuch as both are presented as "sacrifices in the service of the mythic community" (237). Hoefer tackles the naturalization of arbitrary norms and explains how this process implies an absolute compliance with the definitions, rules and standards of the society:

> Within this ritual, the members of the community easily assume their roles, determined by age and gender, almost as if by instinct. Of course, it is not instinct but rather the process of acculturation that informs the passing of the gun from an old man to the boy. However, the collective knowledge of the process and its origins are repressed—pushed back into the unconscious until the ritual becomes an ontological certainty. Here (as elsewhere) flux is rejected as an element of place; the community craves stability, both at its center and along its margins. (105)

The narration that comprises "Advent" engages more directly with the question of tradition through an ambivalent approach to the dichotomy between past and present. This ritualistic death, which seems so fundamental for the community, is relegated to the past, "a way of life that has evaporated" (9) and, still, the fragment finishes by acknowledging the very survival of the past in the present: "But the ghosts of the past are stubborn" (10). This opening passage thus functions as an anticipatory element that singles out the relevance of the community and tradition in the narrative. Elusively, it problematizes the perpetuation of the old ways of life when associated to restrictive and outdated viewpoints and it introduces the spectral as a vehicle to express the hold of memory.

If, as McRuer notes, the title "Advent" encapsulates the hopefulness for the birth of the Christian sacrificial lamb (93), "Requiem for Tobacco" evokes Horace's death as it is placed "inescapably in dialogue with the suicide that immediately precedes it" (90). Written as a counterpart to the "Advent" fragment, this closing section engages again with a seemingly

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nostalgic view of a traditional and rudimentary way of life that has been lost amid modernization through the depiction of the manual harvesting of tobacco that used to take place in Tims Creek. This segment places at the fore a more nuanced and ambivalent view of the past that is intrinsically linked with the conception of memory. With the words "It is good to remember, for too many forget" (a construction that evokes the all-too-familiar ending of *Beloved*), the narrative implicitly acknowledges and inscribes the spectral presence of Horace in the community. With the disruptive force of the spectral, such presence prompts a profound revision based on "the destabilization of the absolute boundaries of community and its patriarchal center" (Hoefer 121) and the stagnant binary opposition in which it was grounded (McRuer 95). At the same time, it shifts what had been the imperative focus of the narrative from the apparent "inadequacy" of Horace to that of the community itself, thus demonstrating the imperative "need for transformation of this community on the margins of the queer world" (McRuer 90). In their symbiotic relation, these two fragments therefore outline from a new perspective the boundaries of the rural Black South marked by the everlasting tension between the past and the present and the uncomfortable presence of too many different ghosts that forcefully resurrect individual and collective trauma. The nostalgic tone honors the work and hardships of the African American citizens that made it possible for them to survive, and to create and nurture a community. Together with this acknowledgement, however, is the pressing need to revise the essentialist, separatist and heterosexist conception of identity and transmission that constitute its very foundations, and to adapt to a new world governed by diverse modes of kinship and interpersonal relations. Thus, as Hoefer points out, the excavation of the past here is used "not in order to maintain a stable identity but rather in order to create a usable history that will guide these exchanges and that will be accessible to all who wish to claim it" (129). The connection between the queer and the spectral can be further inscribed in this part of the narrative through the notion of queer temporalities. Elizabeth Freeman defines queer time as a "nonsequential form of time" (xi) instantiated through the phenomenon of haunting and epitomized in the disjointed figure of the ghost, perennially in the limen between past and present and thus disrupting chronology. Judith Halberstam explains how these "queer uses of time" contravene the idea of a teleological historical progression and the model that nurtures it and are, thus, placed "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (1). In this respect, Freeman identifies the two foremost effects of this haunting mode as being the crafting of a "different modality for living historically, or putting the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present" (xvi). The ramifications of this concept serve to stress the understanding of Horace's presence in the novel from this perspective, since the ending seems to provide him with a new 'life' that is vindicated through the reevaluation of the past. Interestingly, this novel, with its celebration of ambiguity and multiplicity, opens with the description of a flock of red-tailed hawks that "rose, as one, squawking and chirping, into the air, a sheer black cloth caught up in the wind, the tips of their wings crimson flashes" (5). The birds, the same as those Horace would have chosen for his transformation, symbolize this alternative existence that Horace has been given through his haunting, one that allows him, as it was his wish, to remain close to his homeland but free.

3.2.1.5 Concluding Remarks

The textual analysis carried out in previous sections has attempted to provide a comprehensive account of spectrality as a multi-layered metaphor. At the core of this discussion we have considered a number of spectral objects, uncanny creatures configured as outcasts, which haunt the protagonist through the nightmarish last night of his life. From this, it becomes apparent that these monstruous ghosts pale in comparison to the traumatic forces that nurtured them into existence. These personal traumatic memories harbored by Horace intersect with and are developed alongside a collective haunting rooted in the foundational trauma of slavery, its subsequent iterations through various forms of oppression and discrimination and, most importantly, the distortions it provoked at the bosom of the emergent African American communities. In Tims Creek these become hyperbolized to the extent of a fundamentalism and separatism that thwart the progress of its many members toward the construction of a truly diverse and egalitarian society. However, the bidirectional employment of spectrality in the narrative allows for the configuration of Horace as an active agent of haunting able to settle the grounds for the future transformation of the community, so no other person must sacrifice any part of themselves to uphold communal values. In this sense, spectrality turns into a tool of reconstruction. This same duality present in spectrality is consciously used by Kenan in his novel in relation to the invisibilization that the queer collective suffers within the African American community. When asked about the tragic ending he chose for his protagonist, Kenan stated:

> In terms of the situation, if you're looking at it from a political angle—which is what I do at the very last moment—the situation has not gotten that much better for a lot of people. It seemed, and it seems—because I think it is still true—that for that community to change they have to understand the devastation that they're wreaking on certain people. And so I felt that tragedy was more effective at disturbing, and in moving, people. So that they might understand a little more fully. That's what tragedy does. You *should* be upset. ("A Conversation" 416)

Through this statement, Kenan emphasizes the political dimension of his work as a conscious attempt to stir people's consciences by showing the humanity behind the stereotypical construction of homosexuality as monstrosity or perversion, and by indicting the forces behind the physical and psychological erasure of these individuals. In this light, the expansive use of the spectral metaphor on the part of Kenan serves to address invisibilization and underscore the mechanisms that set it in motion. As Joanne Chassot explains, "In relation to sexuality, the trope conveys the abjection and invisibilization of the queer subject by patriarchal, heteronormative society. Yet because the repressed is also that which keeps returning, the ghost not only signifies what, or who, has been effaced and silenced, but also exposes the workings of this effacement and silencing" (*Ghosts* 153). Writing in the late 1980s, Kenan, like the other authors studied in this dissertation, engages in dialogue with social changes that were taking place in America at the time. In fact, McRuer points out the connection between the novel's stand and the conservative efforts to relegate victims like

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Horace to oblivion: "*A Visitation of Spirits* appeared in the same year (1989) that right-wing religious and political leaders attempted to suppress the findings of the department of Health and Human Services' Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, which claimed that gay teenagers account for 30 percent of all teenage suicides" (89).[52] Against this suppression, Kenan gives voice to the silenced and resurrects their presence so they can articulate, even beyond death, what society deems unspeakable.

3.2.2. The Short Fiction

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, within the realm of fiction Kenan published two collections of short stories that share many of the themes found in *A Visitation of Spirits.* The first of them, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* appeared in 1992 and, in 2020, *If I Had Two Wings* came to light, a compendium of stories published in different journals and magazines during the eighteen-year span together with previously unpublished materials. Comprised of, respectively, twelve and ten stories, these collections expand the world of Tims Creek, where the majority of the stories take place, that Kenan had introduced in his debut novel and delve into the multiple dimensions of the intersections between individual and community. Among these, the representation of non-normative and transgressive sexual affinities becomes omnipresent. This includes the exploration of the differential generational approach to homosexuality in "The Foundations of the Earth," where a grandmother must come to terms with her deceased grandson's male lover; a blackmailing plot based on the outing of a married homosexual man in "Run, Mourner, Run," in the first collection; or, in the second collection, the rendering of the lives lost to the HIV crisis in "I Thought I Heard the Shuffle of Angel's Feet;" as well as the experience of a lesbian couple in "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel." In addition to this, the collections engage also with other problematic sexual relations like that of a man falling for a child he believes is possessed by his late wife in "Clarence and the Dead;" a Reverend's impious sexual affair with a woman from his congregation in "Ragnarök! The Day the Gods Die;" or incest in "Cornsilk." Similarly to in *Visitation,* this representation of sexual transgression and taboo desire within the community works toward the destabilization and problematization of its fixed structures. In this line, all the stories are embedded in a magic realist world that accommodates the talking and haunting hogs of "Clarence and the Dead" and "How Why Come That Is?," the miracle performing of "The Acts of Velmajean Swearington Hoyt and the New City of God," a man fallen from the sky in "Things of This World; or Angels Unaware," Lena's disappearing young lover in "What Are Days," or Ed Phelp's unlikely turn into a music star in "When We All Get to Heaven." These apparently fantastic experiences coexist in contrast with the more dire events such as the one narrated in "The Strange and Tragic Ballad of Mabel Pearsall," where a woman is drawn toward infanticide as an outcome of troubled depression. This, together with the previous one, offers an insight into the sexist oppression of women. In the same line, "The Origin of Wales" explores intergenerational friendship and the

[52] Robert McRuer cites these data from Suzanne Ruta's article "On Why Gay Teenagers Are Committing Suicide," published in *Wigwag* magazine (March 1990, pp.12–14).

process of aging; and "Ain't No Sunshine" focuses on religion, especially as it intersects with manhood and maleness, and the frustration of life's expectations. Although Black representation and race relations are present throughout, the collections engage more directly with these matters in stories like "This Far; or A Body in Motion," about a self-made Black man who is running for office; "Mamiwata," which introduces marronage in connection to magic realism; or, in a more oblique manner, in "The Eternal Glory that Is Ham Hocks," which provides an important reflection of social status and racial relations in connection to food; as well as "God is Gonna Trouble Water or, Where is Marisol?," a story that spreads to the African diaspora in the Caribbean and considers other racial oppressions of the United States such as those affecting Latinxs.

Similarly to his novel, the past and the history of the Tims Creek community are a pervasive presence in the collections, which often find an outlet through the mobilization of the spectral in either its metaphorical or literal forms. Before moving to the examination of those stories where the spectral has a central role, it is important to consider the title story of Kenan's first collection "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," subtitled "Being the Annotated Oral History of the Former Maroon Society called Snatchit and then Tearshirt and later the Town of Tims Creek, North Carolina [circa 1854–1985]." The relevance of this story within this study resides in two fundamental aspects: first, it epitomizes the author's style and thematic foci as present in both his novel and these collections; second, it is a story that was first crafted as an additional part of *A Visitation of Spirits* (Kenan, "A Conversation" 417–418) and, through common characters and loci, comes to complement and enrich the complex landscape of Tims Creek and the Cross family. The narrative stands out due to its formal and generic development: it appears as an ethnographical text written by the Right Reverend James Malachai Greene, Horace's cousin, who apparently died in 1998 without having published his monograph. Thus, the version presented to the reader has been abridged, edited and introduced by an unknown Reginald Gregory Kain (a name whose initials clearly recall the author's, Randall Garret Kenan), and published in 2000 (both dates are posterior to the actual publication of the collection). The story evokes all the conventions of academicism (including proper acknowledgement of institutional funding) and, similarly to *Visitation*, it straddles the line between the factual and the fictional, the tangible and the intangible heritage, which can be best seen through the juxtaposition of the oral history developed by Zeke and Ruth to the myriad scientific footnotes added by Jimmy and Reginald. Put succinctly, a sequential arrangement of the story narrates how a slave named Menes ran away from his master, Owen Cross, re-named himself Pharaoh and founded a maroon settlement first named Snatchit, and later called Tearshirt. The extant information about this character describes him as a slave brought directly from Africa where he was believed to have occupied an important position as a witch doctor or medicine man. According to Zeke's account, this cunning and intelligence will allow him to draw a plan of escape that relies on a profound knowledge of the environment and alliances with other subjugated groups such as the Waccamaw Indians.

Zeke's narrative simultaneously locates the institution of slavery at the core of the community by further developing the white branch of the Cross family, and stands witness to

the acts of resistance enacted by slaves that dismantle the narrative of harmony and bliss reproduced in the white rhetoric and illustrated in the theater production in which Horace partook. This maroon settlement thrives and expands under the guidance of the self-emancipated slave who creates an African-based religion based on the commandment to love oneself, until a year after his death the "preacher man" arrives in town. Described as a man of light complexion, enigmatic green eyes and great eloquence, he becomes the agent that introduces white religion, undermining Pharaoh's teachings with a "crusade of evangelizing, building churches, baptizing, [and] teaching Sunday school" (Newhouse 242). The disruption he effects on the congregation comes from the wave of insanity that spreads among its members, especially those who are believed to have been in unholy communion with the preacher, and the subsequent paranoia that corrodes the settlement. His capital sin, nonetheless, seems to emerge from the ruthless trashing of the figure of Pharaoh epitomized in the orders to desecrate his tomb and take hold of his sacred book. This profanation unleashes a curse over the community whereby the dead rise and accost the living, sometimes to greet them and others to seek vengeance. Among them, their former leader resurrects to save a baby from the hold of the preacher and to doom the rest to capitulation amid a storm of fire of which only a mysterious mound stands as a testament. Making use of the supernatural, the contrast between Pharaoh and the preacher man continues to articulate the criticism of religion initiated in *Visitation* by confounding and inverting religious views on miracles and magic: Pharaoh, who is associated to paganism or black magic, works toward the liberation and growth of the enslaved into a free people; whereas the preacher, associated to sanctioned Christian miracles, wreaks havoc in the community with his transgressions.

The only physical remnant of this marvelous story is 'the mound' located at the center of the town, which works as the originator of the narrative and symbolizes the inherent multiplicity and subjectivity of historical accounts. The events that constitute the plot are primarily articulated through the elaborate answers that Zeke Cross gives his nephew, a presence that has been relegated only to the notes of the narrative, as well as the continuous interruptions of Ruth, that undermine the veracity of the old man's story and provide an alternative version of events. Tucker explains how this allows for a "dialogic structure" that provides "repeated challenges to the dominant narrative" ("Gay" 316). However, this already fragmented narrative is further ruptured by three different textual elements that are instrumental in the project of historical revision and deconstruction with which Kenan engages. In addition to two fragments that briefly reflect on Zeke and Ruth, the first component of relevance is the aforementioned copious footnotes authored either by Jimmy or Reginald. Working as in any other academic text, Jimmy's notes provide further information, documented proof and even bibliographical references about a variety of points raised through Zeke's account—including marronage, Africanist retentions or the possible identity of Pharaoh—and an extensive explanation about the persimmon tree that appears referenced several times. Reginald, in turn, points out the several cases in which some of the information provided cannot be corroborated and thus further extends the veil of doubt over the whole narration. This illustrates the tension that is paramount in the story between the institutional historical record and personal or collective memory, problematizing the existence of an

objective historical master narrative. The second textual component that deserves attention is Rebecca Cross's diary entries that provide further insight into the figure of Menes through the perspective of the white woman from the antebellum South. In her account, she narrates how her husband Owen won a slave named Caesar whom he renamed Menes in a gambling game and took an incomprehensible liking to him, which she ambiguously attributes to a mixture of voodoo tricks and a possible repressed sexual desire. She, likewise, registers how, taking advantage of this situation, Menes organizes an insurrection dated sometime before March 1856. This is further described in the narrative as a feat where Pharaoh conjured a storm and left with eighteen other slaves after killing the eldest son of the Crosses and five other overseers, a plan that he repeats on three other occasions where he makes incursions in different plantations to raid them of slaves and resources. Rebecca's account constitutes, as well, a rare document that speaks to the reductive models of white femininity encapsulated in the figure of the southern belle, relegated to the private sphere and deprived of any power of decision over the family's material resources. However, with the coming the war in the year 1862, she will endorse the rhetoric of the institution's benevolence, condemning slaves for their ingratitude and demonstrating her loyalty to the patriarchal model of white supremacy.

The third textual incursion in Zeke's account are the letters written by the Crosses' younger son, Phineas, to his English lover, Nigel. Similarly to his mother's, these provide a contemporary account of slavery, but his views on the institution differ from hers inasmuch as he places himself against its existence and laments how it deprives enslaved people of a fundamental claim to humanity. Nonetheless, in the recounting of an accidental running into Pharaoh's settlement, he displays a condescending and paternalistic attitude toward a slave girl and an Orientalist view of Black people that turns them into mystic and hermetic objects. Through this approach, Phineas is constituted as a demi-outsider: a man who understands and commands the workings of the plantation system in which he was reared, and yet has opted out of the family tradition to pursue an intellectual career in Europe that will turn him into one of the most renowned botanists in the world. Fundamental to this configuration is his homosexuality that functions as yet another characteristic that sets him apart from his patriarchal culture of origin. His letters constitute an open acceptance of his condition and they enter into the complex gears of the treatment of the topic throughout the texts analyzed, thus offering a new layer on the game of invisibility and visibility that complements the exploration of repression and acknowledgement discussed through Horace's plight. In Phineas' case, although homosexuality becomes an ineluctable presence, as his existence in the narrative as a professed homosexual and the open acknowledgement he makes of it attest, this sexual condition remains an invisible element in the present-day community of Tims Creek. In the narrative, this is codified through the juxtaposition of one of Phineas' letters that finishes with an anticipation of the sweet reunion with his lover with Zeke's injunction to "Hush now" (Kenan, "Let" 327). While his words are theoretically addressed to Ruth, the omission of her comment and the distance from his previous narration approximates them to a silencing of what Phineas has just narrated, another attempted erasure of the homosexual subject. However, the testimony of this character is difficult to overlook, and the narrative finds a subversive way to reinforce it by establishing his implicit connection to Horace and

Jimmy through the interest in plants and the botanical, which is inscribed in a more general tendency toward the intellectual sphere and that, as explained before, becomes a proxy for their sexual orientation.

All in all, "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" is a project that revolves around the mythical origins of the community where multiplicity cannot be contained and becomes, instead, a structural narrative force. The defining oral multivocality of the story speaks about a process of recuperation and destabilization. Wester points out Kenan's effort of unearthing a number of voices and subjectivities that have been obliterated from the hegemonic discourse: "In reclaiming such an array of voices, Kenan illustrates how the creation of a stable historical and racial metanarrative inevitable erases numerous bodies from its story and therefore proves incomplete" (217). In her assessment, this critic points to the essential issue of stability and fixity that is one of the major preoccupations found in Kenan's fictional and non-fictional writing. Complementing the critique articulated in *Visitation,* the author uses the subversive potential of parody (Tucker, "Gay" 321) to demonstrate the futility of monolithic discourses of community, the self and, by extension, of any other identity that he effects through the formal deconstruction of dominant narratives. Just in the same way that a slave like Pharaoh could not be reduced to the definition that slavery attempted to impose on him, or each fantastical event that takes place in Tims Creek cannot be accounted for by the laws of rationality, the multitude of identities that configure its community cannot be made into fixed staples of a tradition that, as the story demonstrates, is always and, necessarily, in transformation. The very title of the story and the collection captures this tension: taken from Jesus' injunction to a would-be disciple to leave behind his dead father and follow him, it has been interpreted as "speak[ing] to the nature of true discipleship" and "as a critique of the living who are deadened to the spirit" (Tucker, "Gay" 326). Thus, the title implicitly references the ascription to a dogmatic truth that is subverted with each of the stories, and it problematizes this approach by introducing the importance of paying heed to the dead. These become a pervasive presence in the collection that constitutes a key venue to explore the employment of the spectral.

The mobilization of different forms of spectrality, be it in a figurative form (the use of spectral language to render spiritual death) or literal form, as well as recurrent ideas associated to it, chiefly death and the hold of the past in the present, are common in the two collections. As mentioned before, the title story of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* engages with the resurrection, a trope used in another of the stories analyzed below as well. In this regard, "Clarence and the Dead" stands out in this first collection as a story that iterates the intersection of queerness and death explored in *Visitation,* to present the case of a boy who serves as intermediary between the dead and the living. The story renders the implications of Clarence's ability for the community of Tims Creek whose members suffer the destabilizing impacts of the truths he reveals as well as a forbidden sexual approach by one of its members to the boy, springing from the conviction that he is the manifestation of his deceased wife. In *If I Had Two Wings,* the presence of the spectral is more marginal, being reduced to one of the stories under analysis in this section and a second case that should be briefly noted. "Now Why Come That Is," a story that first appeared in 1998, revolves around Percy Terrell, a

white man suffering the beatings of age, who is haunted by the apparition of a hog. Desperately searching for a solution to this condition, Percy decides to appeal for help to Miss Tabitha McElwaine, a Black woman who works as a rootworker and midwife. Their exchange becomes a portrait of the racial dynamics of the community—best shown through Percy's entitlement even in a vulnerable position: "When had someone told him flat out no? [...] Refused him anything?" (Kenan, "Now" 189)—and a history of racial dispossession inscribed in the landscape. As the story progresses, the haunting unleashed by the hog is outlined as a repressed confrontation with Otherness, an alterity represented by the racialized self (in opposition to the white self), the animal (in opposition to the human), and that codified as female (in opposition to masculine attitudes and rituals diminished by age). However, there are two stories that can be singled out in these collections as deploying a literal use of the spectral metaphor in connection to questions of repression and recovery. When considered alongside each other, furthermore, these narratives will contour the importance of memory and commemoration at a personal and national level as an ethical imperative.

3.2.2.1 "Tell Me, Tell Me"

This story puts forward two plot strands that revolve around the character of Ida Mae Perry, a white middle-class woman, widow to the late Judge Theodore, "Butch," Sturgis Perry. The primary plotline deals with Ida's uncanny sightings of the ghost of a Black boy in key scenes and moments of her everyday life and the final realization of his identity by retracing her past. In turn, the secondary plotline is anchored on the present-day situation of the aging woman, alone in an imposing house and frightened by the possibility of suffering from cancer. These two strands develop alongside one another pitting the past against the present and provide further insight into the racial dynamics and social configuration of the southern town of Tims Creek. The story opens *in medias res* with Ida's desperation at the latest sighting of the kid in her own bedroom and proceeds backwards to explain how her situation came to be. This is done mainly through the retelling of five preceding sightings that are mixed in the broader depiction of the widow's lonely and withering life and the memory of her late husband. Throughout this analysis, I will contend that each of these occasions functions as a structural device and sheds light on the purpose of the specter. Furthermore, these six spectral sightings are organized around two spheres of action: the public and the private, and their progression from the first to the second illustrates the individual and collective dimension of the haunting.

Ida recalls that the first time she saw the youngster, an "African shape: too large for his thin frame and shaped like a peanut" wearing "faded blue dungarees" and a "red-and-black shirt" (246–247),[53] barefoot in the street, was when she was having the dinner of the meeting of Friends of the Crosstown County Library, which had among its guests such important figures as the state senator's and the mayor's wives. The banquet takes place in the tellingly named Old Plantation Inn, a place inspired in the aesthetics of the Old South: "a restaurant oozing quaintness and doilied charm, with bright-red gladioli, and cross-stitched pillows on

[53] Randall Kenan. "Tell Me, Tell Me."*Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories.* 1992. Harvest, 1993. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

wicker chairs, under portraits of belles and horses posed beneath pines dripping with Spanish moss" (246). In this scene of exultant whiteness and richness that the Perrys seemingly strove to achieve, the glimpse of the Black boy "beneath the ugly orange-and-blue pharmacy sign" (246) appears as an interruption, "a bad feeling, a moment of disquiet in her hard-won quietude" (246), that is codified in the contrast between the spaces each of the characters occupies. Indeed, this moment of visual contact maps the differences between both of them at the same time that it excites a reaction from Ida that will be perpetuated throughout the narrative: "They peered at each other, over the distance, through the rain and glass, and Ida—warm, richly fed, impressively dressed, and comfortable—became unaccountably angry with the boy—probably cold, definitely wet, unshod, black—staring at *her*. She flinched" (247). This scene both reproduces and actualizes the structures of the ante-bellum plantation model where prominent white men and their families thrived on the exploitation of Black labor. By introducing the disruptive figure of the boy in an overly stressed contrast with this setting, Kenan is both indicting the benevolent view of slavery that the South often expounded and also ascertaining the hold that the ideology of white supremacy continues to have. This is especially emphasized by showing how the present social roles continue to reinforce the racial order: the former enslavers have now become judges, mayors and senators and the African Americans continue to be, to a larger extent, at the lower stratum of society. This is perpetuated through what Wilkerson has defined as a caste system—what she calls "the architecture of human hierarchy"—described as "An artificial construction that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of another group on the basis of ancestry and immutable traits" (17).

After this encounter, Ida forgets about the boy, a moment that is stressed in the narrative as an act of deliberate obliteration: "Of course Ida didn't think of the boy again after that. Why should she? The embarrassing moment lingered, but the reason, *like a price tag, had been discarded without thought*" (247; emphasis added). This excerpt functions as an anticipatory element of the story's climax and evidences the character's indifference, entitlement and hostility. This willful obliviousness is present in the two subsequent sightings that Ida registers: the first of them, when she is running errands at the Crosstown Shopping Mall and she "paid him no mind" (247), and the third when she drives up the Beauty Parlor. Resembling the first instance, on both occasions she is obfuscated by her own feelings of being "annoyed, angered and invaded" (247–248), but these emotions are ultimately erased by her disdain. Despite this, it is important to note how, together with the first one, these spectral sightings are inscribed in common places of the public sphere associated to the daily life of the widow, where it is easier for her to evade the boy's uncomfortable presence. As pointed out before, this signals the collective dimension of the social criticism articulated through the ghost in the story. The shift from these public spaces to the private sphere is epitomized in the fourth sighting that takes place when Ida is tending to her vegetable garden, and it initiates a progressive closing of the haunting over her that will culminate with the presence of the ghost in her own bedroom. This progression from the public to private spaces, from the social to the personal, parallels a deepening in Ida's memory that will conclude with the final moment of realization of the boy's identity. Moved by the anger of seeing him in her own garden, Ida

accuses him of being a trespasser and is answered with a "look full of accusation" (248). This is the first, subtle concession that the old woman makes to a trait of the ghost that goes beyond the mere referencing of his presence and that will constitute the central venue through which her memory will be awakened. However, she refuses to go beyond this and iterates the response of previous occasions: she "tossed the memory aside" and refused to see him as anything but a stereotyped "impertinent, trespassing Negro" (248).

This cycle of confrontation and disavowal begins to erode in the fifth spectral sighting which is pivotal in the narrative. One night when Ida is driving home with her friend Bela after celebrating Dr. Henderson's retirement party at the country club in Crosstown, the kid appears in the middle of the road, Ida gets off the way and crashes into a tree utterly convinced that she has run over him: "She knew she had hit the boy. In her mind's eye she could see him. See the placid look on his face, almost as if he could see her through the windshield, through the headlight beams; as if he recognized her. It was silly, she knew. Impossible. *She refused to get out of the car*" (240; emphasis added). This excerpt shows two crucial elements of the spectral sighting: first, the look of recognition that will initiate Ida's memory cascade and, second, her inability to be moved or changed. In spite of the certainty that the youngster is dead, she never gets out of the car to help him, and the few moments in which she dwells on him are soon displaced by her concern for herself. When the police arrive she asks the white officer about the boy but, throughout, her focus is on her wellbeing by assuring him that *she* can take it. By the time she arrives home, Ida feels relieved that at least she did not leave the scene or she would otherwise have been harshly punished for a hit-and-run; instead, she already feels "exonerated in her own mind" (244). Likewise, the never-actualized need to tell somebody about the supposed manslaughter does not draw her to his hypothetical family or community, but rather to a priest that will absolve *her*.

In fact, Kenan masterfully juxtaposes each of these threads that Ida draws upon to construct a valid image of herself, with different situations in which her true self comes to light. First, in opposition to the elder white doctor honored in the dinner to which Ida attends, there are two young female doctors with whom Ida interacts in a very different manner. She does not trust Dr. Soh, the woman doctor who had replaced Dr. Henderson: "Ida did not trust that new doctor—too young a woman; […] Ida simply could not put all her faith in that woman. And it had nothing to do with her being Filipino. Nothing at all" (251). The ironic excusing of her behavior displays her sexist and racist views that are further emphasized when she meets Dr. Harriet Bridge, an expert gynecologist recommended by her own son who, to Ida's dismay, is African American. In this instance Ida is not even able to look the doctor in the eyes, her Blackness too much of an obstacle for the widow to overcome:

> She looked directly into the doctor's eyes only once. For the remainder of the consultation she peered at the diplomas; glanced at the curtains; fixed her gaze on an ashtray, […] but not at the exquisite cornrows that boldly arched up and slid down like two fat snakes behind the good doctor's smiling, autumn-leaf-toned face or her broad nostrils or her magenta-painted and full lips; Ida could look at her open white lab coat and the beige blouse underneath but could not look into her eyes. (257)

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Dr. Bridge's complexion and physical traits are the evident racial markers of a person that defies Ida's reductionist racial hierarchy and racist worldview, resists classification and unearths all of her sexist and racial biases. Ida's approach to the doctor is merely utilitarian, only turning to her because she has been endorsed by her own son (a clear instance of her misogyny) and because her own life depends on it. In fact, this constitutes another missed opportunity that Ida has to reassess her views, but it never comes to fruition, as seen through the immense relief she feels when she receives the test results that assure her never having to see the doctor again. The end of their acquaintance excites a reflection on Ida that stands as a testament to an unwillingness to change enveloped in condescension: "The world is a strange place, Ida, and changing every day, every day, and you must change with it. *To be sure*" (258; emphasis added). This display of what Brian Norman has called "racial paranoia" (144)—probably associated to the fear of miscegenation as a threat to the pillars of white supremacy—is reduplicated when Ida tries to relieve herself by talking to Reverend Clemmons and he introduces her to the new Black preacher in charge, Reverend Peterson: "What an awfully nice gentleman—she did not once make note or mention of the fact that he was black" (261). The very presence of the Black preacher is enough to convince Ida that resorting to external help was a mistake and she leaves the church.

The "physical" collision between Ida and the ghost on the day of the accident can be read symbolically as the confrontation of the widow with her past actions, for it is after this moment when the wall built by "Reclamation, doubt; swirling and opaque obfuscation, nagging presentiments, dread fear, deep-rooted arrogance, proprietary pride, all thick and treacherous and ever-present" (265) between the present and the past is finally knocked down and she realizes the identity of the nameless Black boy. Unable to keep clinging to ignorance, Ida is plunged into the memory of a summer day on Emerald Isle in 1937 spent with her soon-to-be husband Butch Perry and another couple, Clarise Williams and Rafe Terry. That fateful day a Black kid accidentally ran into the couple having sex on the beach and was paralyzed by the intrusion: "the little nigger just stands with his eyes wide and his mouth hung open, what a sorry sight, like a scared possum" (266). Furious, Butch lunges at him and beats him almost to death and, aided by his friend Rafe, throws him into the ocean to let him drown. At this point, the narrative evokes with a startling aseptic relentlessness Ida's witnessing of the boy's entrapment and eventual brutalization without moving a finger:

> Butch grabs the boy: begins punching: kicking: kicking: […] Rafe kicking: the boy crying: Butch down on his knees: Butch pushing the boy's face into the sand: Butch's face a wild boar's: punching; kicking: […] Butch carrying the boy high over his head: one hand on the neck, firm: one hand on the thigh: the boy yelling: yelling: a wordless holler from the back of his throat: […] the boy no longer struggles; no longer yells: his chest convulsing in sobs: the body makes a graceful arc, a dark parabola: Ida cannot judge just how far: she barely hears the sound the body makes as it enters the water. (267)

Together with the ruthlessness of the men's actions and their dismissal of Clarise's screaming for them to stop, what stands out in this passage is Ida's response. Her faint attempt to make

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Butch reconsider never goes beyond her hardly inaudible articulation of his name and the manufacturing of his redemption. This is based on the excusing of Butch's actions and on the absolute devaluation of the boy's life: "Butch with a peculiar grin on his face: like he has just made a touchdown or shot a great buck: Ida forces herself to smile: […] he is just a bad boy, her Butch: tsk, tsk: Butch, no you shouldn't have—: […] Just a nigger: Just a nigger" (268).

If Ida's silence speaks of her involvement and acceptance of her boyfriend's actions, the narrative also explores another facet that is directly related to the gender oppression she suffers. In the moments preceding the incident, the narrative draws a dire picture of the power imbalance between Ida and Butch: described as the epitome of white, American maleness, domination is part of Butch's character and surrendering is part of the role that society has prescribed to Ida, for whom "submitting is not a question, only enduring" (266). Defined through the patriarchal model, first of her father—Frank McTyre, a self-made man who provided her with an education and a good marriage—and later of her husband, Ida is a vivid example of the conservative gender roles and values ascribed to white women in the first half of the twentieth century, deeply influenced in the South by the model of the "southern lady" and its adjacent ideology. This will become apparent in the development of her marriage to Butch that is referenced in the text through interrupting fragments that introduce the man's own words. The story offers three such fragments that are prefaced by the ironic title "The Honorable Judge Theodore Sturgis Perry" that underline his white supremacist ideology and serve to unveil the tentacles of structural racism focusing on his authority as a member of the judicial system. These are concerned with a variety of topics: the first, addressed to Reverend Clemmons, speaks of his self-satisfaction and the pride he takes in the work he has done in the community and his lack of remorse for a past mistake thus unveiling his hypocrisy. The second takes place upon the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment—that granted citizenship to African Americans and protected them legally—and is directed at Joe Abner Chasten, the family's Black gardener; here, he lectures Abner about the harms of this piece of legislation and mobilizes the trope of the extraordinary Black to praise the assimilationist approach of Booker T. Washington in opposition to the "average" African Americans who are no more than "a quorum of problems which need to be addressed" (254). Thus, he espouses a view of Black inferiority that blames them for their disadvantaged social position and disregards structural or systemic racism. This racially charged fragment appears in the narrative alongside Ida's musings on Abner and denotes the similarity between her and her husband in relation to racial views that brings them together on account of their white privilege. Ida's representation of Abner approximates him to the stereotype of the "Sambo;" his behavior toward her is understood as a "silly black man's affection" (253), and she values among his positive qualities his deference toward her. In spite of knowing him for twenty-five years, she does not truly perceive him as a complex person, and she harbors no desire to remedy that misconception. The last of the Judge's fragments is a profoundly paternalistic comment to Ida where he praises her compliant role in the marriage as the means that enables his individual triumph, which complements the portrait of their imbalanced relation.

In spite of her situation, Ida opts for the racial solidarity that will uphold her white privilege and her status in the community. In this context, the ghostly presence of the boy

emerges as a disruptive element that seeks to destabilize her accommodated position. In the story, spectrality becomes a means through which to bring to light the abuses of the past that have been mangled in the narrative of progress espoused at a regional and national level, and to re-inscribe these violences in the present through the indictment of a representative of the criminal justice system—one that has turned into a major agent in the perpetuation of racial oppression—as well as of white innocence. The most flagrant action in this regard is Ida's reaction to the discovery of the ghost's identity: "She knew who that boy was: finally. *Then she wiped the thought from her mind, like wiping mucus from her nose,* and stepped inside and about her daily life" (244; emphasis added). The abrupt frustration of the expectations created by solving the mystery of his identity is stressed by the absolute indifference and disdain with which the news is received. Far from using the opportunity to reassess and assume responsibility for her actions, Ida discards her memory in the same way she has discarded him every time he unsettled her. This not only demonstrates her dismissive attitude but it also serves to denounce the disposability of Black life in America, one of the most powerful critiques put forward in the story that is emphasized through the waste imagery that punctuates each dismissal that Ida makes in the story, repeatedly codified as the aforementioned "toss[ing] the memory aside" (248), as well as "banishing to the detritus of unpleasantness" (249) or "like a price tag, [had] discarded without thought" (247). Thus, this sighting works as well as the spectral reiteration of the situation in which she found herself years before: while back then she was not the actual perpetrator of the crime, her silence and compliance with the norms of a white supremacist social order were equally pernicious. In this second iteration of violence exerted against the Black body, she is the one unequivocally responsible and yet she again opts for silence and inaction. Therefore, she not only failed to avoid the brutal murder of an innocent child in the past, but years later she dejectedly refuses to recognize the identity of that boy to whom she denies subjectivity, to acknowledge the events and come to terms with her own responsibility.

At this point, the narrative's tone shifts and the ironic remarks are replaced by an unambiguous evaluation of Ida's behavior that deprives her of any claim to redemption:

> But some things you forget to remain innocent; some things you forget to remain free; some things you forget due to lassitude. Moral lassitude, intellectual lassitude, human lassitude. However, Ida had not cared to remember; not to remain innocent, not to remain free, not to spare herself worry, but because she simply did not care. She did not care to remember. (268)

In his assessment of the story, Norman states that "To remember is to accept culpability, even in inaction. To remember is to forfeit white innocence. And yet to forget is to remain hostage to the dead" (145). The final spectral sighting, the one with which the story begins, is a precise representation of this: the ghost appears in Ida's own bedroom and she, alone and in danger of being declared senile, cannot but run away from him. It is at this point that her isolation becomes more apparent: her daughter Carol has grown into a staunch critic of her parents and the order they upheld, and her son, Ida's source of pride and joy, has started his

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own family away from the South. With the single distant company of Bela, a friend whom Ida, deploying her classism, sees as her inferior and yet envies for the fulfilling life she has, she is left alone in her "plantation-style house," "a house of loneliness" that symbolizes the inevitable decaying southern power and the values it represents. This sixth spectral sighting, which at once opens and closes the narrative and whose fragments are interspersed throughout the tale, portrays Ida's entrapment in a vicious circle. Even at this point she holds close her prejudice: she criminalizes the presence of the boy by employing the racist rhetoric that reduces him to a potential robber or rapist, which becomes ironically flagrant in light of past events. The denouement of the story, thus, provides a reflection on haunting and personal responsibility. The last image of Ida running away from a wordless and harmless ghost could lead us into arguing that she is perpetually haunted because she has chosen not to give heed to the specter. In this sense, the ghost could be understood as a marker of the protagonist's repressed unacknowledged guilt. This notion of white guilt has been a point of contention in past and current debates of race relations in America. James Baldwin's essay "The White Man's Guilt" (1965) taps into key issues put forward by the story that continue to be relevant to this day. He denounces the existence of what he calls "a curtain of guilt and lies" (725) behind which white America hides. According to him, for whites, the Black body stands in for an "appallingly oppressive and bloody history" (722) which they are unwilling to confront and prefer to relegate to the oblivion of forgetfulness. These attempts prove futile as "the guilt remains, more deeply rooted, more securely lodged, than the oldest of trees" (722). The project of historical revision that he defines as imperative to overcome the present legacies of racism would entail an honest reckoning on the part of those vested with the privilege granted and condoned by history, but their paralyzing resistance proves detrimental to the self and the nation as a whole (723). This seems to be precisely the position embodied by Ida and, as such, the haunting exerted by the ghost needs to be further qualified as materializing the inescapable hold of the past in the present, rather than a productive exchange that would lead to individual and social transformation that the protagonist of this story repeatedly rejects in spite of the many chances she has been given to confront the ghost and to question herself.

Thus, the ending does not differ much from the beginning, an idea that is textually marked through the use of the same spectral sighting at the beginning and at the end of the story, which approximates the tale to an Afropessimist portrayal. Therefore, while the transformative potential of the ghost is thwarted by Ida's attitude, its function is to render the multiplicity of ways in which a nation like the United States has, for the most part, chosen to shroud the past in a narrative of progress and colorblindness that refuses to reckon with individual and collective responsibility, an attitude that is the most aggrieving on the face of the iteration of these oppressions. As Norman explains, "literary exhumations reject historical amnesia and equip us to understand injustice in the present" (147). In this context, the silence of the ghost could be interpreted as imposed by the obliviousness of its witness, but also as one that signals that the responsibility to come to terms with the Other should lie with the oppressor, not with the oppressed (Norman 147). The story, therefore, effects a historical revision of white America's approach to race relations by recovering through the figure of the specter those who were systematically silenced and foregrounds the precarious state of race

relations. Thus, in a parallel process to the unravelling of the Perrys' past, the narrative raises awareness about the erasure of the African American collective as well as the racial violence its members endured and with which they continue to struggle decades later.

3.2.2.2 "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*"

Originally published in 2018 in the magazine *Oxford American*,[54] "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*" was later included in Kenan's second collection, *If I Had Two Wings.* Similarly to "Tell Me, Tell Me," the narrative weaves two plotlines: the return of Randall, a Black homosexual, to his native Dumplin County, North Carolina, to settle there after working as a professor and magazine editor in the North, and a haunting that develops through different spectral scenes in his newly-restored property. Despite the similarities in the outline of both narratives, this story presents a deeper integration of the sightings with the internal and external space and issues of subjectivity that are fundamental for the outcome of the tale and provide a differential approach that re-signifies the events of the previous story. These six spectral scenes appear as photographic snapshots of a parallel story whose fragments acquire meaning as the protagonist immerses himself in the history of the house and the town and are incorporated to the rendering of his personal life. These latter configure an individual who, by virtue of his race, gender and sexuality, is placed in diametrical opposition to Ida. Kenan introduces a character that speaks of matters that preoccupied him throughout his oeuvre, especially sexuality and race, and aims to provide a space of representation for individuals that have often been written out of literature. Randall is a character with autobiographical overtones: he does not only share the name of the author, but also his home state, education, jobs, interests, sexual orientation and friends (for instance, Kenan dedicates the story to Alexa, and Alexa is also the name of one of Randall's friends with whom he attended college and with whom he ended up working in a magazine). Randall's account of his life provides a first-person rendition of the structural racism that governed the South of his childhood, the "school politics and altercations in the years just after forced integration" (116),[55] and stresses the efforts of his family to abate this social hatred with love. Likewise, his account also engages with homosexual representation through the depiction of Randall's relationship with Siddiq, his Egyptian boyfriend twelve years younger than him. After meeting him in the Settlement House, an organization where both volunteer, they begin going out and eventually move together to North Carolina, even though at the time of the narration Siddiq has relocated to the Carolinian coast to become a scuba instructor. This personal relationship confronts the protagonist with his own implicit racial bias, which became apparent to him through the stereotypical approach to his lover. This contact with Otherness and the subsequent deconstruction of his Orientalist views will be paramount in his approximation to the ghost.

[54] This can be accessed at <https://oxfordamerican.org/magazine/issue-100-spring-2018/resurrection-hardware-or-lard-and-promises>

[55] Randall Kenan. "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*." *If I Had Two Wings. Stories.* 2020. Norton, 2021. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

The narrative opens, in the mode of a preface, with a scene that introduces the main spectral object. This marks the beginning of the protagonist's haunting and qualifies the type of relation that will be established between them. Draped between the mutable reality of the waken world and the possibilities of the oneiric, one morning Randall's attention is called by a mysterious figure hidden in his room:

> I heard him before I felt his presence or saw him. A panting, a mild groaning as if from pain. […]. He was not hiding in the curtains, but rather on the floor, crouched, the gossamer fabric poorly hiding his dark skin. And he was so very dark. *I could see him panting, his body not quite heaving but rising and falling as if in distress.* A quilt, made by my mother was folded at the foot of my bed. That is what I used to cover his nakedness and urge him into bed. He relented, eyeing me somewhat panicked, yet soothed by and by. *I petted him, cradled him*. (113; emphasis added)

This opening registers a stark contrast with "Tell Me, Tell Me" inasmuch as it offers an utterly different approach to the spectral object defined by the openness of the protagonist to the alterity the ghost represents. This is shown at three different levels: in opposition to the silent drowned boy, this specter is both seen and heard first by the narrator, who provides an accurate description of his state, and, in subsequent sightings, by his partner and friends. Furthermore, the narrator's responsiveness is translated in his physical approach that seeks to provide solace and shelter for the distressed guest and is iterated throughout the narrative. This could be understood as a literalization of what Bianca del Villano has called "(g)hospitality," that is, the understanding of the ghost as a psychic guest of the witness that disrupts and questions the system it enters (82) and that in this particular story will be reduplicated toward the end. This literalization ultimately elevates the presence of the ghost to a prosthetic bodily materiality as means of reinforcing the acknowledgement of his presence that was absent in the previous case. In addition to that, this sighting is placed in diametrical opposition to that of "Tell Me, Tell Me," with respect to the process it sets in motion. Far from the indifference espoused by Ida, the new owner begins a research process about the history of the property that will simultaneously explain and prompt the rest of the spectral scenes. The entirety of this initial spectral scene, furthermore, foreshadows the importance of memory and commemoration in the story. The room in which the specter first appears is described as crafted as a reproduction of "certain museums" the narrator "visited in the countryside of France" (113). Erased from the community's history, the specter is configured as the embodiment of a memory that the region and the nation have resisted commemorating and paying homage to.

Coupled with this initial sighting, Randall observes a second spectral scene that features the same Black boy and introduces a second agent:

> There stood a white man, dressed in black with a black hat, save for a white shirt and a large and quite brilliant white beard. He waved to the man sitting on my porch. It was a casual wave. The black man in white rose slowly and

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> without apprehension and walked slowly toward the cornfield. They did not run, but simply walked away. (120)

Moved by the need to understand what is happening in his property, Randall seeks answers by digging up the history of the house. This process will bring the internal setting of the story, turned into the paradigmatic Gothic trope of the haunted house, in close relation to the broader external space of the South and its history. The expert on the county's history with whom he contacts in the Alamance County Historical Museum turns out to be a British woman "transplanted but fiercely dedicated to the Southern past" (126). This woman is ideologically removed from the type Randall had imagined, someone like his "fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hollingsworth, a card-carrying member of the Daughters of the Confederacy" (126). Pitted against each other, these two characters seem to stand, respectively, for a sanctioned and upheld, and a silenced and unsanctioned historical narrative. The first appears as a mouthpiece for the narrative of the Lost Cause and the nostalgia for the Old South further inscribed in the monuments to the Confederacy spilled throughout the landscape, such as the one at the university which Randall describes as follows: "Silent Sam, the dubious old Confederate statue who guarded the entrance to the campus. Talk about ghosts" (134). In turn, the second is a foreigner who harbors a deep knowledge of the state's sins and offers a critical view on a generalized lack of interest in history. This permeates her assessment of the realtor who sold the house to the protagonist without informing him about its past: "She views local history as a nuisance. Only interested in MacMansions and her fee" (126), a statement that stresses the process of erasure that characterizes capitalist commodification. Along with the information that the previous owner was a university Professor who taught history, the woman tells Randall about the origins of the building: the Holt House used to be an inn run by Quakers that was believed to have been used as a station to "smuggle slaves to freedom" (127) through a man-made canal adjacent to the house. She further explains how the Quakers were "exterminated" due to their opposition to slavery and had disappeared from the region by 1860: "You know Quakers were staunch abolitionists. Many were persecuted because of it. A great many were run off the land here" (127). Her historical testimony, therefore, unearths two elements that have been obliterated from official history: first, the acts of resistance of the enslaved, embodied in their tortuous escape from the plantation, hiding and transportation to the North; and, second, the oppression exerted against the facilitators of freedom, both of which problematize the aforementioned rhetoric of benevolence and harmony that the South espoused during and after the Civil War. Thus, the Holt House is one haunted by the historical inscriptions of the region in its very architecture, and it stands as epitome of the ambivalence that African American individuals have toward the naming of the region as "home" (140).

The disclosure of this information provides Randall with a renewed vision of the structures and recesses of his house and a full understanding of the haunting: "A false wall. A panel. A compartment smaller than a closet. I imagined a body or two cramped in there. I wondered for how long" (128). In symbiosis with the awareness that has just emerged in the narrator and, as if stressing his empathetic approach, the haunting becomes more vivid and, together with Siddiq, he watches how the spectral forces take hold of their home: "After I found this room the noises and lights started. Outside. Voices really, and the sound of feet

trudging around in the yard. Murmurings each to each, and the lights flickered as if by flame" (128). The third sighting evokes the clandestine nature of the runaways and the Quakers' endeavor, and denotes the danger in which their business was carried out as well as the losses they had to endure. The latter are implicitly alluded to through the appearance of a patch, almost a fourth of an acre, of periwinkle that Randall finds near his property: "I remember having read that the graves of the enslaved were often marked only with periwinkle to keep the ground free from all else" (130). These become more evident in the fourth spectral scene that the couple attends to; after being awakened by an insistent knocking on the door at three in the morning and finding nobody, they end up in the attached barn where they see the stage of a long-gone bloodbath:

> As a student of modern Russian history, I have always conjured up an image of what the czar's family looked like the moment after their ignoble assassination. […] The sight in my barn was akin to that. The man in black, a woman in a black dress, three girls all askew, and a boy-soon-to-be-a-man. All expired, all teetotaciously exflunctified. (135)

This scene provides another staple in the history narrated by the British expert where the retaliation against the Quakers is shown in its full crudity. The comparison with the Russian czars seems to evoke their theoretical privileged position on account of their race, and the use of the term "assassination" points out the political motives behind their murder: to uphold the status quo by maintaining racial hierarchy and to deflect and deter any prospects of escape on the part of the enslaved. After this, there is a brief spectral scene witnessed by one of Randall's friends, Ron, who finds the ghost boy hidden in the bathroom. This can be interpreted as a representation of the concealment that those that would be smuggled went through, but its relevance for the narrative resides in the fact that its presence is matter-of-factly acknowledged by another individual who shares a similar background to the narrator and, thus, it reinforces the idea of being haunted as associated to a particular subject position defined by their shared alterity.

These brief spectral scenes reach the climax in the coda of the story, with the final spectral sighting that constitutes the last stage in the ghost boy's journey to freedom as well as in the narrator's haunting. This develops in two acts: the first one is a testament to the full integration of the haunting in the life of the narrator; emphasizing the literalization of (g)hospitality mentioned at the beginning, Randall wonders "Do ghosts eat?" and proceeds to make "breakfast for two" (138). Indeed, the ghost sits at the table with him, but this unusual image of homely bliss is interrupted by the present reality that rings from the distance of time. The protagonist opens the door to find the uncanny transformation of his backyard into the landscape of centuries ago in which he sees the approach of an eager boatman:

> "We need to get a-going. Seen two patrollers on horseback a few miles back, but past Greensboro, I reckon. Can't be too careful now." My friend clambers aboard and looks upon me, expectantly. The boatman situations him among a number of wooden barrels, bids my friend to crouch among them, and then

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> spreads a broad, rough canvas over him. "Get on in," the boatman says to me, eager to shove off. "I think I'm good where I am," I say.
> The boatman spits absently. *"It's your funeral, brother. Take your chances. I know they are a-coming."*
> "I will be fine." (139-140; emphasis added)

This scene illustrates the complex workings of what has been called the Underground Railroad, a net of connections between different social agents that were organized to transport the runaways away from slaveholding states, as well as the danger and terror surrounding the feat. The exchange ends with a misgiving that is suffused with ambivalence and speaks to the contemporary social panorama. The erroneous identification on the part of the Quaker boatman between Randall and slavery, that is, between the Black subject and a condition of enslavement, proves reductionist from today's perspective and highlights the social progress of the African American collective. In the story, Randall is defined by a multiplicity of factors that transcend his race and the institution of slavery. And yet, the history of the region, as symbolized in the haunted house he inhabits, is, as well, an ineluctable factor of definition in the configuration of his subjectivity as a Black man living in a still white supremacist order that resists a sincere exercise of memory. In this sense, the final statement of the Quaker turns into an urgent warning against rampant anti-Black violence and the vulnerability of the Black male to new forms of institutionalized racism. Set in the North Carolina of the twenty-first century, the ambivalent statement the story makes is that, in America, notwithstanding the racial conquests and achievements, Black life is always at risk and resistance is a struggle in progress.

The story ends with Randall's words "I think of my mother, I think of my lover, I think of home" (140) that seem to point out to a revaluation of his life and identity. All three elements, like the specter which haunted him, draw a continuum between his past and his present threaded by a common space that, through these two stories, is rewritten by the queer presence of the spectral. In both stories the spectral metaphor is mobilized through the disruptive presence of two unnamed ghost boys that re-introduce different moments of a past that continues to have a strong hold on the present. While "Tell Me, Tell Me" offers a crude account of the brutality that defined race relations during the period of segregation, "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*" retreats into the antebellum period to provide a chronicle of escape as one of the few options to lead a free life away from bondage. Both accounts attest the violence that marked racial relations in the United States far beyond the capitulation of the peculiar institution and draw our attention to the consideration of how this is treated in the present. Beyond this, these narratives put a special emphasis on the subject position occupied by those who stand as witnesses of the spectral objects: if Ida's unraveling ends with her desperately running away from the ghost boy, the protagonist of this story welcomes another ghost boy in his life, and, unlike her, he is ready to confront and exorcise his ghosts. Ida's dismissive stance complies with her resistance to change and her wishful advocacy for a status quo that would safeguard her white privilege. Randall's embrace of the ghost, on the other hand, seems to connect with his intersectional identity where Blackness and homosexuality mark him, as well as his creator of the same name, as an Other. This

connection between spectrality and the subject relegated to the margins is iterated through the novels analyzed in this study where those who engage with the ghost are defined by a subaltern race, gender or sexual orientation. This differential approach is what ultimately defines the haunted individual as one ethically positioned toward the social awareness of those inhabiting the margins of mainstream society. It is for this reason that, following the wake of the novels analyzed so far, spectrality enables a new way of seeing and living. In a broader sense, the stories dramatize the urgency of a national debate on historical memory and commemoration in a country besieged by what Toni Morrison has called a "national amnesia" that narratives such as these attempt to redress.

3.3 JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that. — Jesmyn Ward

Jesmyn Ward was born in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1977, but when she was three her parents, natives of Mississippi, decided to return to their state and settled in the town of DeLisle, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The town, which figures as blueprint for the fictional Bois Sauvage of Ward's oeuvre, stands as epitome of Mississippi's troubled racial history and persistent structural inequality that fuel the author's incursions in writing. The humble origins of the author stand as a testament to this reality: in various essays and autobiographical pieces, Ward describes her and her three siblings' childhood amid "a poverty so ubiquitous that it was rendered invisible" (Ward, "The Belief" 30), mitigated only by the support system of an extended family. Her mother's job as a domestic worker for rich white families funded Ward's early education which, in turn, took place in majority-white private schools where she was oftentimes the only Black girl in class, and therefore the usual target of racial harassment (Ward, *Men* 183). In 1995 Ward enrolled at Standford University where she majored in English, and graduated in 1999 with a degree in English. In 2020 she completed a master's degree in Media Studies. In 2003 she joined the University of Michigan's MFA program. After completing this postgraduate degree she returned home in 2005, the same year when hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc in its deathly trail through the Gulf Coast of the United States. This half natural, half human-made catastrophe which Ward experienced in the first person will feature prominently in the author's writing as yet another piece of evidence of the devaluation of Black life in America. Her debut novel, entitled *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), explores some of what will become her favored themes such as fraternal relationships, generational poverty and the scarcity of economic opportunities. It was her second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which brought Ward to international attention when she won the National Book Award for Fiction. Described as "one of the most compelling" and "the most critically successful novelistic dramatization of Hurricane Katrina" (Ward, "When" 206), the narrative portrays poor, rural Black Mississippi through the life of Esch, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, her three brothers and their drunken father in the course of twelve days, before and during the storm. In this second novel Ward introduces the theme of motherhood and the importance of kinship ties as a safety network, as well as the environmentalist perspective that will be further explored in *Sing, Unburied, Sing.*

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In 2013 Ward briefly steered away from fiction to work on two projects that directly engage with the racial matters that have concerned her; that year the piece of creative non-fiction *Men We Reaped* came to light. Weaving the personal and the social, the author offers a gut-wrenching account of the death of five young African American men close to her in the time span of four years. Interspersed with the stories of their lives and violent deaths, Ward writes about her and her family's life as well as about her native DeLisle, the original "Wolf Town" of Mississippi. Both here and in her fictional works, place turns into an ineluctable presence that accounts for the complex experiences of real and imagined people alike. This becomes apparent at the end of the memoir, where Ward juxtaposes the death of her own brother with a concluding chapter on the endemic poverty of her home state. Thus, the killing of Joshua Adam Dedeaux at the age of twenty by a drunk white driver, and especially the justice's treatment of the case—the perpetrator was charged for leaving the scene of the crime, rather than for manslaughter, and the sentence was five years in prison, of which he only served three and a fourteen-thousand-dollar fine, of which he paid nothing—stand, for the author, as a blatant example, especially in contraposition to the exorbitantly exacting sentences imposed on African Americans, of the value of Black life in Mississippi. In the final pages of the memoir Ward writes: "We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die. We survive; we are savages" (*Men* 250). This declaration of communal love, of bold resilience and resignification of the master's language to articulate resistance establishes a constant tension between mourning, despair and hope that will become axiomatic in both her fictional and non-fictional works. It is perhaps for this reason that in 2016, three years after the publication of *Men We Reaped*, Ward featured as the editor and contributor in *The Fire This Time*, a collection of essays born in the spirit of the Black Lives Matter movement. Similarly to Kenan, Ward borrows from and adapts Baldwin to draw attention to the persistence of racism and the precariousness of Black life in the U.S. at the present moment. She describes the enterprise as "A book that would reckon with the fire of rage and despair and fierce, protective love currently sweeping through the streets and campuses of America. A book that would gather new voices in one place, in a lasting, physical form, and provide a forum for those writers to dissent, to call to account, to witness, to reckon" (Ward, "Introduction" 8). The essays, written by mostly African American authors, poets, essayists and intellectuals of different fields, tackle a number of race-related issues ranging from death, slavery, historical revision, heritage, and identity to the budding love that trumps poverty and hatred, the confrontation with the past and the transformation of collective mourning into collective resistance.

Her third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, was published in 2017 and it won Ward her second National Book Award, making her the first woman and the first African American to be honored twice with this recognition. To her already seasoned realist and organic style, the writer introduced in the novel a magic realist component through the trope of the ghost that would be instrumental in her socially committed survey of racism. Magic realism features prominently as well in her recently published *Let Us Descend* (2023), where Ward effects a comprehensive change of scenery: in her latest work contemporary Mississippi is replaced by the antebellum South where a city like New Orleans becomes epitome of a region and a

country booming at the expense of the slave trade and racial exploitation. Despite the time gap, the forces behind Ward's creative impulse continue to be the same, in this case offering an intimate account of the brutality inherent in human commodification as well as the multiple means of resistance of those in bondage. Through Ward's brutal lyricism these are rendered in the revolutionary act of loving when humanity is denied and in the more transcendent act of stealing oneself away to found a new way of life. Alongside the previous works, Ward has also published *Navigate Your Stars* (2020), a book-form version of the 2018 commencement address she gave at Tulane University where she is now a professor of creative writing. Likewise, her essays have appeared in several magazines and journals chiefly intent on raising awareness about the persistence of racial oppression and the devaluation of Black life, giving a voice to the silenced, and drawing attention to the acts of resistance of the African American community. In these pieces she claims that "The seed of difference, and the belief in our poverty, our inferiority, persists" (Ward, "The Belief" 32) and warns against a long-held tendency to situate discrimination solely in the South, stating: "But if we suffer from a particularly Southern strain of this illness, know this is an American disease" (Ward, "My True" 48). When pondering about the seed of writing in her life, Ward remembers how "I was an invisible artist. This is part of the reason that I was so invested in writing about ordinary black Southerners, and why I felt such a heavy sense of responsibility to do so. I wanted to be seen. I wanted to write stories that affirmed my existence, that showed black Southerners to the larger American culture. That posited this: *We are here. We are human beings. We live*" ("This Was" 2016). Ward has indeed been seen and achieved prominence, as the multiple recognitions attest—the MacArthur Genius Grant, the Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a Grisham Writer's residency and the 2022 Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction, among others—and her third novel, under analysis in this section, is a testament to the importance of making the invisible visible, of the urgency of this exercise and its underlying ethical imperative.

3.3.1. Spectrality in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*[56]

Sing, Unburied, Sing revolves around an African American family from the fictional rural town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. Bois Sauvage epitomizes what Joanna Davis-McElligatt defines as "the conditions of life in the afterlife of slavery," that is, "ecological precarity, structural underdevelopment, deep poverty, early death, and carceral state violence" (103).[57] The novel is structured around the road trip in which the Black woman Leonie takes her two children Jojo and Kayla, aged thirteen and three, respectively, to get their white father, Michael, from the Mississippi State Penitentiary after he has served his sentence for manufacturing and dealing methamphetamines. This physical trip through the Delta becomes a journey "into the region and nation's past" (Lloyd 240). Marcus Tribbett explains how the

[56] Some of the discussion of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in this chapter was previously included in "Haunting Back: A Study of Spectrality in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *The Southern Quarterly*, vol.58, no.3, 2021, pp. 113-130.

[57] Bois Sauvage has been compared to other authors' fictional communities such as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County (Choi 435; Dib 137; Cucarella Ramon 90; Conroy 8), Louise Eldrich's Ojibwe reservation Little No Horse (Dib 137) or Ernest Gaine's St Raphael Parish (Conroy 8).

South "embodies the long legacy of racial oppression in the United States, bound up in a system of white on black violence, of forced labor first through slavery, then through Jim Crow segregation and incarceration, a system founded and maintained on bloodshed and brutality" (26). The polyvocal narrative is narrated by three alternating narrators: it opens with Jojo, the protagonist, a young boy forced to mature too soon who, together with his maternal grandparents, becomes the main caregiver of his toddler sister, Kayla. Leonie, the second voice of the narration, is a woman tormented by the racist murder of her brother, the lack of economic opportunities and social inequality, and the blatant racism that renders her powerless. This translates into an erratic behavior that imperils her role as a mother, a burden for which she finds a dubious outlet in the use of drugs. The third narrator, which appears toward the middle of the novel, is Richie, a ghost teenager that is linked to the family through the figure of River, or Pop, Jojo's grandfather, with whom he served time in the infamous Parchman Farm Prison in the mid-twentieth century. Ward's novel appears as an account of Black life in the contemporary South that is influenced by and actualizes a prolific body of texts engaged in similar topics. Key among this is Morrison's *Beloved*, of which Megan Swartzfager sees *Sing* as a continuation: "The novel [...] grapples with the Beloveds—the persistent haunting of slavery and other forms of racialized trauma—of an America that has attempted to bury slavery and its plurality of legacies beneath a formal history that proclaims the total and unmitigated success of the civil rights movement of the 1960s" (313).[58] Alongside Morrison's influence, which the author recognizes in the assessment of the impact that *Beloved* had on her—"I was blinded. Struck dumb. Dust in my lungs" (Ward, "I Was")—Ward has also acknowledged the importance of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* for the crafting of her novel. Hers is a conscious attempt to bring the motif of the journey that structures his novel into the present—"Wouldn't it be interesting to write this novel about Jojo where he's on a journey like that, but through the modern South, through Mississippi as it is now" (Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on the Evolution")—and to repair the "dissatisfying" character development of Black characters that she found in his oeuvre (Ward, "When Cars" 217–218).[59] Regarding the treatment of both race and region, Ward, likewise, points out the influence of Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Carson McCullers and James Baldwin (Ward, "When Cars" 217–218).

Ward precedes the narrative with three epigraphs that anticipate fundamental aspects of the plot: the disappearance of the African boy Equiano and an invocation to look for him and return him home that is taken from a Kwa chant and directly relates to the kidnapping of the would-be slaves; memory as an atemporal space where the orders of the past and the present converge, as rendered by Eudora Welty: "The memory is a living thing—it too is in transit. But during its moments, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead" (n.p.); and the "uninstructing dead" of the Gulf coast designated by poet Derek Walcott that epitomize the history of the region where the plot

[58] Connections between *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Beloved* have been pointed out by several critics (cf. Steele-Nicholson 2019; Antoszek 8; Cucarella Ramon 80ff.; González Groba 86).

[59] Several critics have noted the intertextual engagement with Faulkner's novel (Antoszek 8; Chase 210ff.), as well as with other works of his in relation to the portrayal of Parchman Farm: *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) and *The Mansion* (1959) (Chase 209).

is developed and foreshadow the importance of spectrality. Death opens and closes the novel and it becomes a pervasive presence in almost every turn that these characters make. Inexorably linked with this extensive mourning that seems to take hold of the characters' lives is the mobilization of the spectral that Ward deploys in her work. Both named and anonymous specters rise through the pages of *Sing* to convey the haunting legacies of slavery. Ward straightforwardly designates her ghosts as "embodiments of the past," especially in the South, where "the history of this region bears very heavily on the present and informs our actions. I think the ghost story form is a great way to explore and express that" (Ward, "Haunted"). The present analysis seeks to explore the function of spectrality in this novel through the interrogation of three main spectral objects, namely: Richie's ghost, one of the main characters of the story; Given-not-Given, the ghost of Leonie's brother who appears to her whenever she is high on drugs; and the multitude of nameless ghosts perched on trees that appear toward the end. To this end, Chassot's spectrographical model, discussed in the first chapter—whereby the ghost appears as vehicle of historical revision, traumatic rendition and diasporic bond—will serve as a guide that enables the distinction between a primary and a secondary function of spectrality in the novel. I will contend that, since through these specters Ward effects a historical rewriting and a narrativization of violent memories, the dominant function of spectrality is outlined in connection to traumatic repression. In addition to this, and in a secondary place, the novel describes a number of African-based beliefs and practices that offer a subsidiary means of interpretation and add a new layer of complexity to the spectral metaphor that approximates it to the Africanist dimension discussed in the second chapter. This could be best apprehended by considering the third function of Chassot's model that broadens the role of the spectral to encompass diasporic connections.

In order to remark the ubiquity of death, the novel opens with Jojo's assertion "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (1).[60] From this point onward, the young boy will attempt to stay true to his words and demonstrate that, at the tender age of thirteen, he has become a man worthy of the title. This initial chapter, which draws a picture of the Stones' humble life in the southern Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage, emphasizes the centrality of this character in the novel. This begins with the celebration of his thirteenth birthday for which his grandfather has decided to kill a goat that will serve as food for a feast. Similarly to *Visitation,* the slaughtering of the animal, described in painstaking detail, becomes a rite of passage for Jojo who fails to fulfill his duties in an aseptic manner. He struggles to keep the appearances with his grandfather, but he ends up vomiting outside the shed due to the smell of "rot coming from something just alive, something hot with blood and life" (6) that overpowers him. This episode has ample resonances for the character and the narrative in its totality, for it works as a poignant marker of the materiality of death, what Patrycja Antoszek calls "a confrontation with death in its purely, physical, bodily aspect […], the abject" (11); as an anticipatory element of the multiple forms of violence to which these pages bear witness; and, most importantly, as the initial descriptor of Jojo's characterization and positioning in the novel. The explicit and

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[60] Jesmyn Ward. *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* 2017. Bloomsbury, 2018. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

iterative link that the young boy makes between the slaughtering scene and his growing up—"I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday" (1)—renders the rite of coming of age as one that necessarily entails coming to terms with death. The narrative underlines from the very beginning the idea that for an African American kid death is part of the accelerated maturation process imposed by a racist society that transforms Black boys into potential menacing predators. This scene emphasizes as well a conception of manhood based on the repression of emotions and seeming indifference to the perpetration of violence. Ultimately, Jojo's bodily rejection of the ritual (a motif that appears throughout the narrative and that will be examined in further detail below) functions as both a frustration of the assertion he has just issued, and also as a repudiation of what this reality entails in terms of identity, which, in Jojo's case, is in the process of being reworked. This ideal that Jojo seems intent on attaining contrasts greatly with his depiction throughout the novel and it renders, with dramatic irony, the true process of maturation that he has before him. This will be articulated through the trope of the journey, both what Sodam Choi calls his "odyssey to the traumatic past of the dead and the living" (434) and the events that mark his return, where the spectral will play a fundamental role.

Anna Hartnell describes Jojo as the "material and moral centre" (298) of the text and, indeed, in his role of enabler and object of transformation he becomes the canvass through which Ward pits the past against the present, the self against the other. He is a character defined primarily in relation to his positioning in the family structures to which he belongs: he lives with his maternal grandparents, Philomène and River, his mother Leonie and his younger sister Kayla. In view of Leonie's carelessness, disinterest and poor mothering abilities, his grandparents have assumed the role of surrogate parents. To this, Jojo has responded not only with acceptance (as shown through the epithets he uses to refer to them, Mam and Pop, which contrasts with the use of proper names to refer to his biological parents, Leonie and Michael), but with respect and something close to veneration that corresponds the unconditional love they have given him and his sister. At the beginning of the story the last stages of cancer have taken the grandmother to bed, and the grandfather to a tortuous automatism diverted only by his violent memories of the past. Nonetheless, the lessons and care provided since Jojo was a baby have nurtured him into a sensitive young man who provides for his sister the love and parenting his mother is unable to give. As Antoszek points out, for Kayla Jojo becomes a "surrogate mother" (10), a role that suffuses the exchanges that take place between them and are shown on several occasions when Jojo tends to the toddler, protecting her even from their own mother. The relation with Leonie is one of the most complex among those drawn in the novel: in Jojo's view, she has lost all claim and status as mother, as she repeatedly chose Michael and drugs over her children. The love that he once felt for her and the expectation that she would love him back seems to belong to a long foregone past, a period "Before she was more gone than here. Before she started snorting crushed pills. Before all the little mean things she told me gathered and gathered and lodged like grit in a skinned knee" (7). In this initial account Jojo focuses on the injuries his mother has perpetrated, choosing a seeming obliviousness to her pain and despair that is only tangentially alluded to. As Choi explains, this offers yet another layer to the relation between

both characters, as it emanates from "a longing [...] distortedly expressed in distrust" (441). The first chapter also introduces Michael and his parents; the latter a duo that stands in diametric opposition to Philomène and River. Big Joseph, Jojo's paternal grandfather to whom he refers as "the man who ain't never once said my name" (10), is outlined as a domineering patriarchal and racist man who repudiates Leonie and his mixed grandchildren. While his wife Maggie is not herself in favor of her husband's attitude, she ends up submitting to his will and thus effaces herself from the life of Jojo and Kayla as well.

When asked about the character of Jojo, Ward stated that "as a mixed-race child, he contends with the past and present of the South all at once" ("The Carnegie" 29). These fragmentations and contrasts in family relations speak to the personal and social conflicts that Jojo must learn to navigate as part of his process of maturation. By the end of the novel, the protagonist will have refurbished his worldview to encompass the sensibilities of that which is not apparent to the eye. At this point in the novel, we learn that the young boy possesses a gift that allows him to understand animals: "But it was impossible not to hear the animals, because I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once" (15). This ability that seems to come naturally to Jojo denotes a special sensibility to listening that will be instrumental in his exchange with ghosts. In close connection to the liminal space he occupies as a mixed-race child, Antoszek contends that "rather than being self-contained and separate from the world, Jojo's subjectivity, with its porous and permeable borders, is susceptible to affective influences and transmissions" (10). This will turn him into the primary seer or witness of the spectral in the novel, notwithstanding the fact that each of these spectral objects is associated to different witnesses. In the upcoming examination of the three aforementioned spectral objects, I will follow a criterion of historical progression as well as narrative relevance. Unlike in previous novels, the two main ghosts that appear in the pages of *Sing* are not sequential, but they make their presences known in the story simultaneously, each to their chosen witness, and eventually converge with a host of unnamed specters. For this reason, the early examination of Richie will lay the grounds for the articulation of a central point in the novel: the perpetuation of racial oppression, which will be further explored in the discussion of the second spectral object, Given. Reaching the ending of the narrative, the analysis of the third spectral object will reinforce an atemporality informed by the reverberations of trauma and the underlying resistance of witnessing.

3.3.1.1 The Ghosts of the Past: Richie

The information we have about Richie's past and his current state emanates from two sources in the novel: River's memories and Richie's own ghostly account, shared with Jojo. This polivocality is one of the novel's structural characteristics and is common among narratives of trauma where, as San José Rico has observed, it mirrors the passing of memory from one generation to another through different accounts of the same traumatic event (53). River's account of his time in Parchman prison and his meeting Richie there is present from the very first chapter of the novel, but the story he aims to tell his grandson is far from an organized composition. Instead, in the chapters told from Jojo's perspective we find bits and pieces that

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are slowly assembled to create an ominous picture of racial oppression in mid-twentieth-century Mississippi. The story's fragmentation and open-endedness, for River resists the telling of Richie's ending, are directly associated to its traumatic nature. In fact, Jojo's description of the way in which his grandfather proceeds evokes traumatic permanence and pervasiveness:

> […] he always seemed to tell me part of his Richie story when we were doing something else: eating red beans and rice, picking our teeth with toothpicks on the porch after lunch, sitting in front of the television in the living room watching westerns in the afternoon, when Pop would interrupt the cowboy on the screen to say this about Parchman: *It was murder. Mass murder*. (72–73; emphasis in original)

In this sense, despite the fact that River is never able to see the apparition of the dead Richie, he seems to be under the effects of a metaphorical haunting that will be embodied in the ghostly apparition of the boy. As hinted at in the previous excerpt, this haunting is inescapably associated to Parchman, which has been described as both "the origin point of trauma" (Lewis 274) and the "traumatic centre" (Petrelli 330) of the novel.

At the age of fifteen, Jojo's grandfather was sent to Parchman Farm with his brother Stag after the latter had got into a bar fight with a white navy soldier stationed on Ship Island and attempted to escape. When the white authorities came to the family house they took both brothers: Stag with an accusation of assault and River for harboring a fugitive. Pop remembers how "all them White men came to get Stag, they tied both of us and took us up the road. You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is going to Parchman" (18–19). This declaration of intentions reflects the social panorama of the period (where an underage boy can be incarcerated without prior trial or defense); it confirms River's parents' distrust of white authorities (see, for instance, their resistance to engage with census workers, of whom they say that they "came around sniffing out that information to control them, to cage them like livestock" [18]); and anticipates the nature of their punishment as akin to forced labor. The consequences of this unjust sentence loom large in the novel: while Pop's experience is unveiled as the plot progresses, Stag's is only referenced tangentially but it draws an equally terrible picture. If before his imprisonment he had somewhat of a reckless behavior that often got him in trouble, at present he is the caricature of the madman, roaming around town singing and aimlessly swinging his stick. His mental illness is thus partly linked with the traumatic aftereffects of his stay at Parchman and the destruction it produced in an already sensitive self ingrained in the strict mores of the Jim Crow South.

Parchman Farm is famous in the South as a prison farm of 20,000 acres set up in 1904 and resembling a slave plantation where most inmates were Blacks doing hard labor in the

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fields,[61] a place which functions in both structural and ideological terms as both prison and plantation, as River describes in the novel:

> When I first got to Parchman, I worked in the fields, planting and weeding and harvesting crops. Parchman was a working farm right off. You see them open fields we worked in, the way you could look right through the barbed wire, the way you could grab it and get a toehold here, a bloody handhold there, the way they cut them trees flat so the land is empty and open to the ends of the earth, and you think, *I can get out of here if I set my mind to it. I can follow the right stars south and all the way on home*. But the reason you think that is because you don't see the trusty shooters. You don't see the sergeant. You don't know the sergeant come from a long line of men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog—and bred to think he can make you like it. (22, emphasis in original)

In this assessment, River remarks two essential aspects that constitute the prison as functional iteration of the plantation: the exploitation of mostly Black bodies through forced labor, and the racial ideology of white supremacy. He goes on to describe the endless days of work intent on extracting the highest economic profits at the expense of torture. In his book about the prison, tellingly entitled *"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1996), Oshinsky provides the historical data that complements the details of inmate numbers, acreage, physical organization and the hierarchy of prisoners that River provides in the fictional account. Oshinsky describes the prison as "the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War" (2), a depiction that fits perfectly with Ward's grim portrait of a postbellum South where the specters of slavery lingered in the Black population's subjection to a tyrannical economic and social order that effectively curtailed their exercise of freedom through a coercive legal and economic apparatus. According to the data provided by Oshinsky, the prison itself extended over an area of more than twenty thousand acres and its plantations covered forty-six square miles of the Mississippi Delta (137). The prison was divided into fifteen camps segregated by race and gender (138) and surrounded by fields of crops where the convicts worked from four in the morning until dusk (143). The circumstances were brutal: in the 1920s, the lash was still used as a punishment for refusing to work or not being productive enough (149). Just like in slave plantations, violence was the motor behind the economic boost of the region. Sometimes referred to as the Kingdom of Cotton, at peak productivity it accounted for almost thirty percent of the state's production of the crop (112).

[61] Another (in)famous example of these so-called prison farms, modeled after plantations, is Angola in Louisiana (currently the Louisiana State Penitentiary) named so after the origin of slaves that used to work those lands. Similarly to Parchman, it functioned as a major coercive mechanism of the criminal justice system during the twentieth century, and it continues to reflect skewed racial trends in the present. In regards to Parchman, there are different references to the prison in popular culture, both in literature, for instance August Wilson's critically acclaimed *The Piano Lesson* (1987), and in music, with Bukka White's "Parchman Farm Blues" (1940), or a recently released gospel album entitled *Some Mississippi Sunday Morning* (2023) that was recorded with inmates.

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It is in these dire circumstances that River meets Richie who, at the age of twelve, is the youngest inmate. He is condemned for stealing salted meat to feed his younger siblings ailed by the red flame, an illness produced by malnourishment. A child, Richie is put to work like an animal in the fields, suffers sexual abuse, and becomes the bait of trained dogs. The circumstances that led Richie to prison and to his eventual death epitomize the ordeals and tragic experiences of the poor Black sectors of rural Mississippi in the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow. River's account emphasizes the "criminalization of poverty" (Chase 210) by assessing the pervasiveness of the phenomenon that afflicts Richie: "Lot of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn't get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it" (21). The extreme poverty imposed by the segregationist order is referenced throughout and implicitly compared to the structural poverty that continues to be flagrant among the Black population of Mississippi. The former are present, for instance, in River's warnings to Jojo to wear shoes that tap into his memory of how he and his siblings "got worms" (2) for playing barefoot outside because they lacked a spare pair of shoes. More deathly, he remembers hearing about the harsher living conditions of the Delta where poverty took even a harder toll and some people were forced into cooking dirt patties to survive (24). Richie's body, corroded by hunger, is a testament to endemic poverty: "He had a big head shaped like an onion, the kind of head seemed too big for his body: a body all bones and skin. His ear set straight away from his head like leaves coming off a branch, and his eyes was big in his face" (23). This accentuates his youth and circumstances, thus prompting a sort of dissonance between his vulnerable self and the nightmarish punishment he receives in prison. From this moment onward, Richie and River will be bound together: the former seeking his protection, and the latter acting like a surrogate father and elder brother. River describes the dehumanizing conditions of hard labor as a slow process of shutting down to the exterior world:

> 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 like he want to stop moving. 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. (68–69)

Amid this draining desolation River invokes the memories of maternal figures that shed light on the duality of his predicament. He remembers that one of his ancestors, his grandmother's great-grandmother, was an African captive brought to be enslaved in America. Her experience of the Middle Passage, transmitted from one generation to the next turns into a story with which he can tragically relate: "She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked. That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made an animal" (69). The invocation of the Middle Passage as foundational trauma and the

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appropriation of her experience to describe his present situation speaks of continuity in the racial oppression that constitutes the core of the novel. As Nicole Dib notes, this "links the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade with the neoslavery of the prison system" (136). Despite the atrocities she endured, this woman was able to create a family with branches that reach into the very present and that are symbolized by River's mother, the woman who turns into his solace and sustenance. He states that: "The dream of her was the glow of a spent fire on a cold night: warm and welcoming. It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields. I had to, or being in jail for them five years woulda made me drop in that dirt and die" (23). The referenced split between body and mind/soul as a motif that often appears to describe the condition of bondage under slavery serves to further characterize Parchman as a spectral iteration of the slave plantation. However, it also introduces the restricted forms of resistance to which prisoners can appeal to hold on to their humanity in a system that is intent on dehumanizing them.

Nonetheless, it is Richie who turns into an unlikely avenue through which River is able to resist the commodification that has taken over his body and threatens his mind: "I found myself thinking again. Worrying about him. Looking out the corner of my eye at him lagging crooked like a ant that's lost scent" (69). As Yesmina Khedir argues, "The extreme inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow is juxtaposed with the ultimate humanity that brought together Richie and River" ("Ghosts" 22). River extenuates his body working both his and Richie's share to protect him from the mercilessness of the gunmen. He manages to keep him safe until he is ordered to join the crew of the infamous Kinnie Wagner, a violent recidivist loved among poor white southerners for being "lawless in the lawless South" (76), as a dog caretaker. Richie becomes the target of the officer's rage when one day he accidentally breaks the hoe with which he was working:

> [...] I knew the boy wasn't ready for the whip. I knew he wasn't ready for Black Annie.
>
> Sun went down, and after supper, sergeant tied him to some posts set at the edge of the camp. So hot the sun still felt like it was up, and the boy laid there spread-eagle on the ground in the dirt with his hands and legs tied to them posts. When that whip cracked in the air and came down on his back, he sounded like a puppy. Yelped so loud. And that's what he kept doing, over and over. Just yelping for every one of them lashes, arching up off the ground, turning his head like he wanted to look at the sky. Yelling like a drowning dog. When they untied him, his back was full of blood, them seven gashes laid open like fillet fish, and sergeant told me to doctor on him. So I cleaned him up as he lay there throwing up with his face in the dirt. I ain't tell him to stop. Sergeant gave him a day to heal, but when they sent him back out in the field, them lashes on his back wasn't anywhere near healed, and they oozed and bled though his shirt. (120–121)

The crude description enunciated by River constitutes a form of witnessing that testifies to the atrocities committed in Parchman. Through it the young Richie is rendered an animal, but in the novel the pervasive animalization of characters does not speak of downgrading; instead, it

becomes somewhat of a sympathy-inducing mechanism that highlights their helpless subjection to human power. Ward's novels seem to repeatedly describe a world where animals and racialized subjects share a similar plane of coerced agency. In *Sing*, furthermore, animalization and, in more general terms, other-than-human existence is used as a way to render humanity, with its emotions and lived experiences, intelligible and to make it empathetically proximal. This is at the crux of Jojo's ability to see and listen to both the animals that surround him and the ghosts and what will, at the end of the story, draw him toward Richie and the host of unnamed specters. A mistreated puppy, a "drowning dog," Richie looks at the skies for mercy but none is granted, a clear anticipation of his denied freedom to enter the realm of salvation when he dies.[62] River's account finishes with images of revulsion: him vomiting and the blood and pus oozing through his shirt. These work as a new iteration of the vomiting motif that pervades the novel, one that "demonstrate [s] the psychological resistance of blacks against socio-political injustice of (white) Mississippi" (Choi 443).

This inability to digest the violence on the part of Richie will take full shape in the traumatic nightmares that besiege him after this incident. He dreams of an existence where dirt takes hold of him and becomes his sole sustenance: "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" (126). Dirt acquires a metaphorical significance that most immediately denotes the traumatic despair that has seized Richie, numbing his senses and slowly killing him by oppressing his breath. In relation to this, it is also interesting to point out the reflection that Jojo makes about the name Parchman on their way to the prison: "Sometimes I wonder who that parched man was, that man dying for water, that they name the town and the jail after. […] wonder what that man said before he died of a cracked throat" (63). This musing of the kid, despite its light tone, seems to correlate with Richie who is the one metaphorically dying from the parched throat the dirt blocks. In his exploration of hydrological haunting in the novel, Cydney Phillip further argues that Jojo's etymological interpretation belies a long-lasting problem of water deprivation and contamination in the prison that extended as far as to 2015 when "in the scorching heat of midsummer Mississippi—in a facility without air conditioning—inmates where incarcerated in cells without functioning water supplies" (289). Beyond this, the dirt

[62] Due to the relevance of the natural and animal components in the novel, a number of ecocritical and ecofeminist readings of the story have been put forward. Applying "shunned space theory," Barry Cole (2019) examines Bois Sauvage as one such space whose marginalization along class and racial lines transforms it into a locus of Black safety. Other approaches include the examination of the relation of nurturance established between the characters and the land (Dillinder 2020); the rendition of ecological changes in the region in relation to the broader concepts of the Global North and the Global South (McKisson 2021); or, the constitution of Bois Sauvage as a biotope (McMahon 2023). In this context, the novel's pervasive references to animals in relation to humans could be apprehended from an ecocritical perspective as denoting the linkage between the animal body and the racialized body in their position of subjugation within the Western, white androcentric hierarchy. Michelle Stork argues for the understanding of Ward's alternative paradigm of human-animal relations in light of the African-based spiritual belief system that upholds natural and human spirits. As she contends, "the novel repeatedly conflates the categories of human and animal. This, I suggest, is rooted in the creolised belief systems on which the novel builds. Richie's and other ghosts are prime examples for this blurring, but even the characters are constantly likened and compared to animals" (265).

seems to allude to the aforementioned dirt patties, thus standing for extreme hunger (one that for Richie is both literal and metaphorical), and it works as well as an anticipation of his imminent death and the hold that Parchaman's soil will continue to have on him after his passing. It is in these circumstances that Richie makes his decision and informs River that "I'm going home" (126).

It is at this point of the story that the fragments of River's account falter, bringing Richie's story to a halt. In the novel this coincides with the first chapter narrated from the ghost boy's perspective. From this moment onward, the memories of Parchman narrated in the novel will come from Richie, until both his account and River's are brought together through Jojo. This shift implies an actualization of River's haunting through the literal "embodiment" of Richie's ghost. Thus, as Rebecca Evans points out, "Richie, then, is both the ghost of an individual who experienced violence and the ghost of the spatial legacies held within the site of Parchman, and the shifting regimes of violence that the prison represents" (456). With the emergence of the spectral Richie as one of the main narrators in the novel, Ward further pinpoints the process of giving a voice to the voiceless that the entirety of the narrative enacts. In this regard, his testimony bears an added collective dimension that deals with country's history and the perpetuation of racial oppression. As Khedir notes, this "endows him with the agency to re-create the past, shifting the focus from traumatic memory to narrative memory" and, therefore, "The ghost becomes in this sense a political tool through which Ward not only gives power and agency to the oppressed but also revises history and refreshes memory to challenge oblivion and forgetfulness" ("Ghosts" 20). Faithful to the multiplicity and ambivalence discussed in previous works, the specter is outlined here as a complex entity harboring a dual dimensionality that conveys the individual traumatic experience alongside the collective social implications. In doing so, it articulates an act of resistance that testifies to "a people's struggle to survive and affirm its cultural identity" (Khedir, "Ghosts" 19). This seems to be at the core of Ward's devising of the character about whom she said: "Reading that [the atrocities of Parchman] is when Richie [...] became real to me. And that's when I knew that Richie had to speak, and that the novel had to be a ghost story" (Ward, "The Carnegie" 29). Indeed, the young boy's account complements the already ominous picture drawn by River. His account tackles his individual experience as well as the more general dynamics of the prison that shed light on the social panorama. He reminisces about the multiple times in which River attempted to save him, both from the physical punishment and from rape, and the futility of doing so: "They beat you in there. Some people look at boys our age and see somebody they can violate. See somebody who got soft pink insides. Riv tried to keep that from me. But he couldn't keep it all, and I was too small" (180–181). Likewise, he explains how the little power that was granted to River when he was put in charge of the dogs after Kinnie Wagner made his third escape from the prison in 1948 is received with great opposition: "But it was something about a colored man running the dogs; that was wrong. There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries—slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them" (138). This epitomizes the history of violence against the Black body and the resistance to integration that characterized the Jim Crow South. As Greg Chase explains, "The

resentment bred by River's promotion resonates with the way in which broader dynamics of Jim Crow racial segregation extend into the prison as well, insofar as the convicts who were granted authority over other convicts were mostly white men" (211). In fact, when Hogjaw, a seasoned white murderer and potential rapist, arrives in Parchman he immediately takes over from River, a Black man imprisoned for a minor, non-violent crime, a decision that bespeaks the disparity among sentences and the racial bias of the criminal justice system.

The exterior world does not offer much relief either. Engraved in one of Richie's memories stands the day in which the Sunshine Woman (a prostitute who serviced men in prison) told them about a lynching that took place in town because a Black man had refused to get off the sidewalk and was accused by a white woman of molesting and disrespecting her. His outcome constitutes an abhorrent picture of southern justice:

> Said the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too. (188)

The scene of lynching is a testament to the regime of terror that took hold after Reconstruction. This shows not only the barbarous brutalization of the Black body but also its being turned into a public spectacle where all members of the community (including women and children) attended the event as if it was another means of entertainment, a participation tantamount to condonation. As the Sunshine woman finishes her account, she declares her intentions to go North to escape from this violence. Her decision replicates the millions that constituted the so-called Great Migration, an exodus prompted by the search for economic opportunities as well as seeking refuge from a form of justice tantamount to domestic terrorism. Beyond its value as an accurate social comment, this is yet another occasion on which Richie is witness of the affection River has for him when the latter desperately calls the woman out for sharing the story before the young boy. However, immersed in a profoundly racist society that criminalizes the Black male from a very early age and thus deprives him of childhood's innocence, Richie had long been acquainted with the particular justice of the South and the strange fruit borne by its trees. Despite the ever-present threat of violence inside and outside the prison's walls and River's attempted alleviation of these extreme conditions, for Richie Parchman "was no place for hope" (139). For him, only the idea of leaving behind this corrosive wasteland, a sense of freedom that seems to be somatized in his body, returns him to his humanity: "I felt a stinging in my toes, in my soles, in my legs, up my butt, and through my back, where it burst to fire in my bones, licking all through my ribs, a loose powerful feeling, like a voice freed from a throat, a screaming note all through me, and it was then I knew I was going to run" (190). Partly fueled by this wish, partly due to the circumstances, Richie effects his escape with a fellow prisoner named Blue.

This is the point to which Richie can return in memory when he sees Jojo arriving at Parchman and identifies him as related to River. The impulse to complete River's account that

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has been undertaken by Richie reveals a missing piece: "The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased. I could patch those holes. Make that shirt hang new, except for the trails. The end" (137). The metaphor employed by the ghost boy addresses the traumatic fragmentation and discontinuity that has characterized the previous account and the intent of covering these gaps is akin to an attempted healing process for whose completion, as he hints, he will need to know his own ending. This necessity is what ultimately prompts his haunting and it turns into the central event through which we can explore the theory of spectrality that Ward devises in her novel. In the sixth chapter, the first narrated by Richie, we are introduced to what could be considered the first part of Ward's approach to haunting. The origins of Richie's existence as a ghost can be traced back to the outcome of his escape. He never references his death, thus positioning his spectral existence in a continuum with the obscured events of his escape. When he wakes up, in magic realist fashion, a white snake converses with him as it transforms into a black horned vulture that offers the possibility of taking him far away from that spot. However, as the bird is about to take flight with him, he begins to remember:

> I spread my arms and legs and felt a laugh bubbling up in me, but it died in my throat. Because I remembered. I remembered before. I remembered being spread-eagle in the dirt, surrounded by hunched, milling men, and a teenage boy at my shoulder who stood tall under the long shadows. River. River, who stood as the men flayed my back, as I sobbed and vomited and turned the earth to mud. I could feel him there, know that he would carry me after they let me loose from the earth. My bones felt pin-thin, my lungs useless. The way he carried me to my cot, the way he bent over me, made something soft and fluttery as a jellyfish pulse in my chest. That was my heart. Him my big brother. Him, my father. (135)

The memories of his brutalization under Black Annie at the hands of prison officials invade him, "pulling [him] to the earth" (136). This is the first account of the ordeals he suffered told from a first-person perspective, one in which he deliberately chooses to erase the perpetrators and focus instead on the witnesses and his providential helper, River. This turns into the first mechanism of revision through which the violence to which Richie will testify through his account is eclipsed by the love and care selflessly expressed by a fellow prisoner to whom he gives the status of father and brother. Then, he remembers his own self, Parchman and River, and these memories turn into elements of paramount importance as he goes on to assert: "To be blind to the men above. To memory. It came anyway. I was no more and then I was again" (136). This captures the impossibility of forgetting and opens a new dimension of remembering where memory is not solely associated to an iteration of trauma, but it becomes a constitutive element of identity. This notion is at the very core of the novel, the leitmotif behind the deployment of spectrality and a lesson that will be central in the maturation of the protagonist.

Richie is left with the sole company of the bird's burning scale, one vested with multiple symbolic implications: it stands for the frustrated dream of transcendence but, at that, it is also a reminder of the objective he is intent on reaching. Furthermore, the failed shape-shifting

into a bird accentuates the aforementioned connection between human and other-than-human entities that pervades Ward's landscape. As such Richie's ghostly existence is linked to the figure of the bird that will be acknowledged by Kayla upon their arrival at Parchman. With this, Richie begins his afterlife at Parchman and Ward provides a detailed description of a spectral existence that speaks of broader conceptions of spectral temporality and articulates an urgent social comment. He describes his ghostly experience in Parchman as inhabiting a never-ending day, a "quiet haunt" (134) where he seems to sleep and wake up to different historical moments that are subsumed into a continuum of repression:

> I despaired, burrowed into the dirt, slept, and rose to witness the newborn Parchman: I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks for gunmen and trusty shooters. I thought I was in a bad dream. I thought that if I burrowed and slept and woke again, I would be back in the new Parchman, but instead, when I slept and woke, I was in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball and smoke. Bewildered, I burrowed and slept and woke to the new Parchman again, to men who wore their hair long and braided to their scalps, who sat for hours in small windowless rooms, starting at big black boxes that streamed dreams. Their faces in the blue light were stiff as corpses. I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time. (186–187)

In this excerpt Richie describes different historical moments—except for his own time there which he considers "a small mercy" (187)—that draw the picture of the prison's origins and evolution (or lack thereof) as it develops a parallel strong socio-historical criticism. The second awakening takes him to the land before it was conquered by white men, a place inhabited by indigenous communities where they carried their lives in freedom; the first one tangentially references the invasion and removal of Native Americans and advances the construction of the prison; finally, Richie witnesses the present moment when mostly Black prisoners are described through the spectral language of the living-dead. As Evans argues, "As he slips through history, Richie's spectral reverie identifies Indigenous dispossession, post-Emancipation Black convict labor, and the contemporary carceral state as part of the same historical system—and as inexorably tied to the sites on which that system's violence manifested" (457). By juxtaposing these historical periods, the narrative outlines a critique that compromises America's national narrative of exceptionalism by disclosing the underbelly of claims to innocence and progress. Instead, we are implicitly faced with America's capital sins: the massacre and removal of indigenous people, stolen land, an imperative of repression embodied in the carceral system that stretches back centuries, and the continuation of a extenuating capitalist exploitation of land and Black people through mass incarceration that goes back to slavery. As Khedir explains, "Through the ghost trope, Ward challenges mainstream narratives about the present by negating the end of racism and shedding light on one of the major institutions that preserves it: the prison system" ("Ghosts" 19).

It is precisely this permanence or iteration that constitutes the central axis of the mobilization of spectrality in the novel. In his historical account Oshinsky provides the details

that reinforce this idea. Segregation on the Farm violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the violence endured by inmates that infringed the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment (246) led to complex and prolonged legal action. As a consequence, the Farm was finally shut down in 1972 and transformed into the Mississippi State Penitentiary, one of the largest penal institutions in the U.S. However, as Oshinsky explains, at the end of the twentieth century, the former Parchman Farm remained "a mixture of the present and the past" (253) pointing to a continuity of the punitive practices regarding race. Today, the idea of rehabilitation continues to be a point of contention, in that punishments, following national trends, have increased in severity with the establishment of mandatory sentences, harsher penalties for repeat offenders, and tighter controls on probation and parole; moreover, the penitentiary is slowly becoming part of the prison-industrial complex through privatization (Oshinsky 251–55). Likewise, the incarceration numbers for Black people have remained stable at a staggeringly disproportionate seventy percent (Oshinsky 252) since the 1930s. In this decade, the number of white inmates increased, reaching thirty percent. This was mainly due to the Great Migration that sparked an exodus of millions of Black people from the South to the North and the Great Depression that spread poverty to the white middle class (Oshinsky 164). Aside from Richie's comment, the present-day exploration of the prison in the novel comes from Michael, Leonie's white partner. As I wrote elsewhere, through this character, Ward not only provides a white perspective on the prison, but also depicts a broader demographic picture of the living conditions of many poor white people in Mississippi (Lado-Pazos 123). Michael used to work as a rig welder on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, but he is unemployed following an explosion there in 2010 which caused an ecological catastrophe and took the lives of many of his coworkers. Once his severance money is exhausted, Michael turns to drugs as a means of evading the traumatic nightmares of the accident as well as the poverty and lack of job opportunities that he faces. He is eventually arrested for possession and trading of methamphetamines and sentenced to three years, two months and ten days in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. As recounted to Leonie, inmates continue to work the land and tend to animals, since the warden in charge considered "it was a shame all that good Delta soil was going to waste with all them able-bodied men there, with all them idle hands" (144–145). This accentuates the connections between plantation, prison farm, and the prison industrial complex represented by the new penitentiary which Michael describes as follows: *"This ain't no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference. This is a place for the dead*" (96). It is in this general inhumanity and, especially, in the flagrant racial imbalance that suffuses Richie's account that the prison embodies present racism. In fact, Constante González Groba reads the prison along Michael Taussig's concept of "space of death" that designates contexts dominated by a state of terror emerging from violence and torture (89).

Richie bluntly addresses this reality in his assessment of the present Parchman as a place haunted by racial violence, where remnants of the past are still all too evident: "Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none. [...] It's like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same" (171–172). In this respect, Evans' concept of "gothic geomemory," one she

coined in her critical examination of this novel, provides a productive means to explore the connections between memory, spectrality, and place. She describes it as a form of "spatialized rememory" (446), a phenomenon of "infrastructural violence that appears to haunt sites of slavery in the US South, the interruption of otherwise mimetic texts by a fantastically ominous gothic animacy" (452). With this term, therefore, Evans seeks to account for a common tendency in contemporary African American fiction where otherwise realist texts register the disruption of the supernatural. As she explains, "Geomemory is especially evident in contemporary Black literature, where it takes various Gothic forms: explicitly or implicitly cursed sites, ghosts and other uncanny spectral hauntings whose presence is narratively tied to specific places, and spatiotemporal oddities in which locations take on nonlinear or anachronistic temporal features" (452). Through this concept Evans vindicates the tradition of the Gothic and its relevance to situate the historical and contemporary realities of the racial Other along the same continuum. As discussed extensively in the first chapter, this genre has been historically mobilized in African American fiction both to depict the horror of an existence that surpassed any fictional monstrosity, as well as to articulate the repressed through the denunciation of an oppression that keeps reproducing nightmarishly across generations.[63] As a matter of fact, Ward addresses the deployment of the Gothic in her novel by considering the aftereffects of anti-Black violence and Black death: "For me, the Gothic comes out in wrestling with that darkness, wrestling with trauma, wrestling with grief, wrestling with loss, wrestling with this idea that there is more to the world than what we see on the surface" ("Something"). What Evans calls "genre frictions," or the "formal shifts between realism and the gothic" (452–453) are juxtaposed to a form of memory that is geolocalized in spaces which, like Parchman, turn into haunting sites where such oppression is inscribed in the larger canvass of history, undoing any of its claims to teleology. As she explains, "This is rememory as infrastructural violence, haunting as geomemory, and gothic as a form of historical imagination that refuses presentism and situates contemporary injustice in long American legacies of the violence of the plantation" (458). Thus, the Jim Crow Parchman of Richie's youth contains, in Evans' words, "both the legal/juridical/ideological and the spatial/infrastructural/environmental continuity between plantation slavery and the carceral state" (458), the ones represented on its mutation into the Mississippi State Penitentiary.[64]

[63] In her coinage and discussion of the New Black Gothic (examined in the first chapter), Sheri-Marie Harrison considers *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as an apt representative of this reformulated tradition where what she calls "the new black Gothic aesthetic" functions as a "tool for representing black life in its own terrorized terms" and to "bring into sharp focus the near constant vulnerability of black life" ("New"). Siding with a clear pessimistic perspective, she addresses the ending in these tragic terms: "Ward's new black Gothic does not offer correctives or hope for a brighter future, nor does it exorcise the ghosts from past brutality. It instead lays bare the realities of our time and their roots in systems that depend on the criminalization and disenfranchisement of black people" ("New").

[64] Evans' putting forward of this concept and its general discussion bears a notable ecocritical perspective. From the outset she considers her theory along the concept of the Plantationocene as a framework that "identifies the violent and extractive capitalist systems that worked against Indigenous groups, as well as enslaved Black people, in the early modern world as the root of contemporary global environmental catastrophe" (447). In her view, the relation between both concepts is indelible, as she defends that "geomemory is a literary strategy uniquely attuned to the logics of the Plantationocene" (447). This

In this respect, Choi goes one step further in the consideration of the complex time-scheme put forward in the novel. This critic argues that Ward creates "an atemporal space for ghosts" where "the artificial flow of time disappears and [an] atemporal site is created" (Choi 445). According to Choi, the novel presents two such spaces: the portal that seems to open at Philomène's death; and Parchman, which she describes as "an atemporal space where history is obliterated" (446). The critic further qualifies it as follows: "The Parchman experience is the condensed prototype of the [male] black experience. [...] Black male identity is constantly questioned, repressed, and challenged in the American South, and black history is annihilated" (446). While I agree with the notion of atemporality as used to describe the creation of these two space-moments (or haunt[ing]s), I would further narrow the notion of annihilation to avoid a dematerialization of the Black experience and to emphasize the agency of the spectral in creating a productive site for the articulation of a large-scale denunciation of the unending oppression of Blacks. For this reason, I would argue that they represent a mode of temporality proper of haunting that is ongoing because the permanence of oppression in contemporary social conditions of Black life defines it as fluid and defies the ascription of trauma to a limited past time period or event. In this sense, Kirsten Dillinder's discussion of the conflation of temporal orders along Christina Sharpe's concept of "hold time" may prove more accurate. As explained by the critic, hold time derives from the hold that the slave ship had on the enslaved, effecting their ontological transformation into property. She defines this as "a space outside time, a place of rupture that completely alters the world and that continues to orient life in opposition to blackness" (Dillinder 136). Stressing the structural anti-Blackness that lays at the core of this temporal convergence, Dillinder emphasizes the emergence of the ghost as the chief marker of such violent iterations: "Hold time transcends linear timelines that posit a beginning, middle, and end to antiblackness and so Ward's ghosts continue to drift among the living, reminding them of their enduring vulnerability" (136). Thus, at the root of Richie's haunting figures not only his traumatic experience in Parchman but its perpetuation in the present. As Khedir explains, "The memory of Parchman is for Richie just like the memory of slavery for African-Americans, a painful and poignant experience that never ends, due to its everlasting traumatic effect and the absence of a real change" ("Ghosts" 19). After "so many turns of the earth at the new Parchman" (186), Richie finally seeks an opportunity to leave when he sees Jojo at the gates of the Mississippi State Penitentiary. He needs to know the truth about what happened to him, because these are the only means for him to "get home" (182). As he explains to Jojo, this transcends a physical space and is a different order altogether: "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 like your heart. Same time" (182–183). This he conceptualizes as a song in which he desperately seeks to insert himself: "The place is the song and I'm going to be part of the song. [...] It's why you can hear animals, see things that ain't there. It's a piece of you. It's everything inside of you and outside of you" (183). What he needs, in other words, is closure,

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approach, while it falls outside the scope of this dissertation, would prove a productive framework to approach Ward's sensibility toward the natural and the animal in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as well as the rest of her oeuvre.

so on the day of Jojo's arrival at the prison, he is woken by the snake impelling him to follow the young boy: "This place binds you. This place blinds you. [...] Go south, to River, to the face of the waters. He will show you. Go south" (191). So, as soon as he identifies the scent, the looks and the protectiveness of River in his grandson, he decides to embark with him on the trip that will return him to River, and to the truth.

When the party arrives at the Mississippi State Penitentiary to retrieve Michael, Jojo's attention is called by his sister's surprise at the eerie sighting of countless birds in the expanse of the fields:

> I look out at the field but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second I see men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One, shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me. "See the bird?" Kayla asks, and then she lays her head on my shoulder. I blink and the men are gone and it is just fog rolling, wisping over the fields that stretch out endlessly [...]. (125–126)

Jojo's informed viewpoint allows for the uncanny spectral vision that alludes to the prison's history. Amid the thousands of men toiling in the fields is Richie, who minutes later appears crouched on the car next to them and declares his intentions to go home. Jojo is instrumental in Richie's intended completion of his plan; as the only person who can see him in his ghostly form and communicate with him, he becomes Richie's "agent" (Choi 444). The relationship between both characters is troublesome: from the beginning Jojo is resistant to Richie's companionship and wishes he would disappear. However, to all extents and purposes Richie is outlined as a presence with which Jojo *must* reckon as part of his maturation into adulthood. The parallelisms between both characters—from more straightforward aspects such as their race, age or gender, to personal traits, especially their relation of parental surrogacy toward their respective siblings, the love for River as well as the hunger for parental love—are evident, and Rachel Ewing goes as far as to read Richie as Jojo's "uncanny double," one that "embodies the threat of erasure Jojo does not want to face" (147).

One manner in which these connections become explicit is in Richie's anticipation of Jojo's luck when a police officer that had been tailing them stops the car. Michael, who had been driving since they left the Penitentiary without a license, exchanges places with Leonie who, in turn, has just swallowed the entire "small white baggie" (161) of meth they had been transporting to avoid the police finding out. The exchange between the policeman and the car crew takes an unpleasant turn when Leonie tells him they are coming from Parchman and the officer immediately handcuffs her and orders everyone out of the car. Events accelerate dramatically after the policeman handcuffs Michael and opts for using the spare pair of handcuffs on Jojo—a thirteen year-old Black boy—instead of Misty—Leonie's adult white co-worker. Jojo panics and attempts to reach into his pocket to touch the gris-gris bag his grandfather had smuggled in his clothes for protection and events unchain with a seemingly tragic foregone conclusion that both characters and readers alike know too well:

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> I feel Pop's bag in my shorts, and I reach for it. Figure if I could feel those things running through me. Maybe I wouldn't cry. Maybe my heart wouldn't feel like it was a bird, ricocheted off a car midflight, stunned and reeling. But then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me. Kicking me. Yelling at me to get down in the grass. Cuffing me. (170)

Lending itself once more to the exploration of the victim's perspective instead of the perpetrator's, the narrative reproduces the event from Leonie's perspective who assesses the whole situation in the following manner:

> It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It's easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he stars 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. (163)

This retelling of the events is worth considering for different reasons: from a character's insight perspective, it constitutes the most unequivocal proof of motherly love that Leonie feels toward her children which is never verbally uttered. As Tribbett explains, "throughout the story, it is clear that Leonie does love the children. She is simply incapable of expressing it, often falling into silence and inaction when those feelings well up in her" (34). As the events unfold, the narrative registers her reaction to the policeman's actions: "I snap. Imagine my teeth on the officer's neck. I could rip his throat. I don't need hands. I could kick his skull soft" (164). The animal viscerality embedded in this fragment paradoxically serves to underlie the humanity of mother and son that the officer sought to erase. Focalizing on the fundamentality of the maternal-filial bond, the narrative seems to implicitly allude to all those discourses implemented since the period of slavery that imperiled and pathologized these connections. At a different level, Leonie's infantilization of Jojo serves as a counter-discourse to the rhetoric that defines the Black male body as a menace. As Dib points out, this works as a "bitter rebuke of the refrain that individuals who murder black boys and young men invoke in their own defense: that they were threatening" (147). Lastly, and more poignantly, the excerpt renders a tragically, all-too-familiar reality; this incident, together with Given's death that will be discussed in the following subsection, constitute two key moments of the novel's rendition of the iteration of oppression in close connection to the role of the criminal justice system. In fact, Tribbett considers the case of Jojo alongside those of Given and Richie when qualifying the continuity of violence that the novels seeks to highlight, with "all three representing forms of racial violence toward young black males in three different eras: state sanctioned racism with white mob violence in the form of lynching; lightly punished murder born of lingering racist bigotry; and murder-by-cop as the result of systemic racial bias against African American youths" (36).

Ultimately, Jojo's life seems to be saved partly by Kayla who, to her brother's dismay, had been fighting fiercely to protect him. When escaping the embrace that separates her from him seems insurmountable, "a golden toss of vomit erupts from Michaela's mouth and coats the officer's uniformed chest" (166). As Choi explains, Kayla's vomiting becomes a

"symbolic gesture of not taking in unjust treatment of blacks. When, realistically speaking, subversive resistance is almost impossible, vomiting is a subconscious rejection of the white power over black men's body" (443). In this respect, Christopher Lloyd analyzes this and other instances of vomiting in the novel through what he terms "corporeal legacies," that is, "representations of embodiment in contemporary culture that index or register the ongoing and historical subjugations of, and violence done to, Black lives in the US South and beyond" (240). According to him, Kayla's vomiting, and more extensively the presence of this motif in the novel, "testifies to violences and unarticulated traumas" (243). After this, the officer hurries to end the situation: he inspects Jojo's pockets where he finds the gris-gris bag which he interprets as a "damn rock" (166). If the appearance of this object is already telling of the Afro-syncretic forms of spirituality that are present throughout the novel as makers of resistance and that will be explored in further detail in the third subsection, this misinterpretation abounds on the schism between the white and Black sectors of society and the ignorance of the former about the latter. The fact that something that Jojo relies on (to the extent of inadvertently putting his life in danger) is considered no more than trash speaks, in James Mellis words, "to the wide cultural differences between Jojo, Pap [*sic*], Leonie, Kayla and the deadly white power structure they must survive within, here embodied by the young police officer" (11). Despite Jojo's safe outcome, the narrative testifies to what Dib refers to as the "creation of a new haunting story in the aftershock" (147), one that embodies the aftereffects that this encounter has for Jojo as a survivor:

> The image of the gun stays with me. Even after Kayla throws up, after the police officer checks my pants and lets me out of them biting handcuffs, even after we are all in the car and riding down the road with Leonie bent over sick in the front seat, that black gun is there. It is a tingle at the back of my skull, an itching on my shoulder. [...] I rub the indents in my wrists where the handcuffs squeezed and see the gun. (170–171)

This describes a traumatic hold that is present also in Richie, whose "carceral anxiety" (Dib 146) leads him to anticipate the events that unfold in the traffic stop and to briefly warn Jojo. As Sara Loomis explains, "Jojo is still forced to grow up too fast and is unable to shake the trauma of racist police harassment, which traps him in the temporal moment of the pullover even after he leaves the space where it happened" (198). This seemingly atemporal rite of passage marked by violence adds to the reduplication of Richie's and Jojo's experiences and, as if their roles were reversed, this time it is Richie who bears witness to Jojo's (Lewis 279). Thus, Jojo's experience, as embedded in the context of his double's and his uncle's, serves to underline the legal treatment of Black people as one deeply flawed that constitutes a paramount mechanism of racial oppression. In turn, this could be interpreted as the initial step in Richie's interactions with Jojo where he will function "as the guide into the awareness of his personal connection to the traumatic history of his race" (González Groba 87).

Richie arrives in Bois Sauvage to a much-anticipated encounter with his protector, one that bespeaks an affective vacuum incapable of being fulfilled:

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> The boy's face shows in fire, and I ain't never seen that look before. Ain't never seen somebody look at someone else like Richie looks at Pop: all the hope on his face, plain in the circle of his mouth, his wide-open eyes, the wrinkle of his forehead. He step closer and closer to Pop, and he's a cat then, fresh-born, milk-hungry, creeping toward someone he'd die without. (220)

In Jojo's account, Richie's hope for closure and his hunger for the love River professed him are a single entity that, in clear evocation of Beloved's rage, turn into resentment. Richie blames River for not acknowledging his presence and bring about his desired peace: "My wounds were here. Right here. From Black Annie. And you healed them. But you left and now you *won't* see me" (223; emphasis added). The old man cannot see him, but for Richie this is a deliberate choice that makes his feeling of abandonment all the more pervasive. This is iterated mercilessly in these first phases of their encounter when Richie rebukes him: "See your face every day. Like the sun [...] *You left me*" (221–222; emphasis added), and then, finally, "'You was the only daddy I ever knew.' Richie's voice was soft as a mewl. 'I need to know why you left me'" (222). While Jojo continues to put all his efforts into ignoring Richie's presence, the narrative deepens in Richie's spectral nature and connects it further to his marginalization: in the dance of day and night, Richie camouflages with the darkness until Jojo is willing to see him for whom he is—"just a skinny boy, too narrow in the bones, the fat that should be on him starved off. Somebody that I can feel sorry for until his eyes widen" (20). He is pinned to the limits of the garden and moves only with great difficulty due to the fear he has of dogs, inherited from his time at Parchman.[65] When he defies fear and moves, he wanders aimlessly waiting for Jojo to fulfill his wish: "He takes a step before me but parts no grass, squelches no mud, and his face is furrowed: a piece of paper crumpled over on itself, a smudged ball hiding words" (231). For Jojo, Richie is an undesirable presence he wants to exorcise; he wants to discourage him from "lurking around the house, around the animals, stealing all the light, reflecting it back wrong: a warped mirror" (231). These metaphors through which the young boy tries to account for the effect that the ghost has on his life stand as testament to the resistance inherited in his spectral form: he sees him as harboring a story to share, a presence that distorts his everyday routines, stealing what could be understood as the little light left on the Stones' household and replacing it with a pervasive darkness that threatens to swallow them. Through the metaphor of the warped mirror, however, Jojo subtly acknowledges Richie's appeal to him. It is for this reason that, despite all of Jojo's efforts, he cannot escape the hold of the spectral presence: "I feel Richie's eyes tightening up my shoulders: a line pulled taut between us, razor-sharp" (231). In Antoszek's view, this constitutes the (literal and metaphorical) psychoanalytical phantom: "Never properly mourned or buried, Richie returns as a ghostly apparition not to Pop himself, but to Jojo, who is not even aware of his grandfather's psychic wound but takes upon himself his grief. In this sense,

[65] It is worth mentioning that the dog's name is Casper, probably a pun on the figure of the popular animated ghost of the same name. Drawing on folk knowledge, the dog can see ghosts; beyond the human and other-than-human connection explored in the novel, this seems of special relevance for Richie because it constitutes a mechanism of re-victimization as it brings about the traumatic memories from Parchman.

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Richie becomes what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok refer to as 'the phantom'—a phenomenon resulting from the transgenerational transmission of an undisclosed secret" (13).

As if emphasizing this notion, when Richie becomes desperate at Jojo's lack of collaboration, he begins to craft a song that escapes the boy's understanding. As he explains, "there are words in it but I can't understand them, like language flipped inside out. A skinned animal: an inverted pelt. I can't help it. I gulp against the feeling I want to throw up all the food that I ever ate" (237). The literalization of the phantom through the specter seems to carry with it the subsequent literalization of its inarculatedness. Antoszek further explains that "The phantom, then, represents how unspeakable and unspoken trauma(s) of previous generations haunt and disturb human lives in later ones" (13) and, in Richie's case, this is epitomized in "the songs without words" (240) that he composes. The metaphor that Jojo uses to describe it, however, speaks further of the insufficiency of language to convey this traumatic reality. For Richie, however, this becomes the projected integration into an afterlife that he glimpsed, "a golden isle" (242), an atemporal space that he wants to reclaim as his own home, the one that has been denied to him in life and in death. He describes this afterlife as follows: "Ever present is their singing: they don't move their mouths and yet it comes from them. Crooning in the yellow light. It comes from the black earth and the trees and the ever-lit sky. It comes from the water. It is the most beautiful song I have ever heard, but I can't understand a word" (241). It is for this reason that Richie's imperative need to know, which is forcibly expressed through the assertion "I want to remember" (240), puts pressure in Jojo. While the boy's resistance emanates from the visible effect the retelling of the story has on River, Richie's indefatigable insistence takes over and Jojo pleads with his grandfather to tell the ending of Richie's story, with the sole hope that peace will be restored to his family. At this point, the narrative puts forward a meta-textual reflection that addresses traumatic narrativization: "Whenever Pop done told me his and Richie's story, he talked in circles. Telling the beginning over and over again. Telling me the middle over and over again. Circling the end like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals, possums or armadillos or wild pigs or hit deer, bloating and turning sour in the Mississippi heat" (248). Closely resembling the situation in Morrison's *Beloved,* the description provided by Jojo centers on circularity as a means of avoidance and employs animal imagery to convey the difficulty of approaching such a difficult reality. In this context, Richie functions as "a catalyst for the character's confrontations with painful memories and uncomfortable truths" (Antoszek 8), forcing out the part of the story that River has more difficulty to deal with. From a narrative point of view, it is equally noteworthy how the accounts of River and Richie begin to overlap, complementing each other.

On one fateful day after Richie makes his decision to escape, a mentally-ill prisoner named Blue violently rapes a Black female inmate and runs away:

> She was a strong woman, hands near as callused as his from all the picking and sewing she did, but she wasn't no match for him. Hit anybody in the head hard enough, it knock them out. Her face—you could barely recognize her. And maybe nothing would have happened to Blue for doing it if she hadn't

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> been the sergeant's wife's favorite. Always the one she called to hang wash and scrub floors or mind the kids. (250)

River's memories introduce the female presence in Parchman, a prison that, according to Oshinsky, also housed women, although between 1870 and 1970 they never exceeded five percent of the total population: they were almost exclusively Black and frequently victims of sexual abuse and rape (Oshinsky 169). As Chase argues, by doing this, "Ward emphasizes the particular kinds of sexual violence and trauma to which the prison's Black women were liable to be subjected" (212). Likewise, it also stands as a testament to the little value of Black life, when the punishment they seek for Blue is only dependent on the sergeant's wife's almost slave-like ownership of the raped woman. Tangentially, the narrative also evidences the lack of discretion of the criminal justice system in the treatment of Black prisoners, as seen in the fact that they imprison a psychologically impaired man with an undiagnosed mental illness alongside the rest of the prison population, instead of seeking proper treatment and sending him to a facility tailored to his needs. Richie weighs in to explain how he found Blue in the crime scene and he threatened him, so he decided to leave the prison partly because of the fear for the man, partly because he was "sick of that place" (251). When the white authorities find the raped Black inmate and the runaway prisoner, she is quickly transposed into the figure of a white woman, another element that adds to the devaluation of Black life referenced above: "The warden yelling at everybody, his clothes wet as if he'd went swimming in them. *A White woman next!* He said" (252; emphasis added). In Richie's last intervention in this dialogical account, he remembers how on their running spree they found a white girl and Blue attacked her, ripping her dress; when Richie attempted to defend her, Blue turned his attack on him, and the girl was able to escape.

From this point onward, River continues with an account that will finally unveil Richie's end, a process where the internal torment has a visible impact on a demeanor transformed by memory: "every part of Pop moves: his hands as he speaks; his shoulders folding forward as softly as a flower wilting at the hottest part of the day. I've never seen them do that. His face, all the lines of his face, sliding against each other like the fault lines of the great fractured earth. What undergirds it: pain" (253). The story progresses bound toward a terrible end: River provides a detailed account of the configuration of a white mob that moves parallel to the official investigators, and he begins to fear for Richie's outcome if they find him:

> Word was out by then. Richie and Blue had run long and far enough for the sun to set, and White folk was gathering. All the menfolk. Little boys younger than Richie in overalls hanging by one strap on the backs of pickups. What seemed like a thousand of them. […] I could see it on them: the way every damn one of them seemed to lean forward, eager as hounds to the hunt. And the laughing. They couldn't stop. And I knew then that when it came to the two of them, when it came to Blue and Richie, they wasn't going to tell no difference. They was going to see two niggers, two beasts, who had touched a White woman. (253)

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In his depiction of the formation and operations of the white lynch mob, River emphasizes the component of white masculinity behind the assemblage of the participants, notwithstanding their age, as well as their thirst for Black blood epitomized in the reference to the hounds. This draws on the long history of the Black male stereotyped as Black beast rapist and the white men as safeguarding female purity that is tantamount to the preservation of racial purity and white supremacy. It is precisely the keeping of this order and the opportunity to terrorize the Black population that permeates their efforts, rather than the real protection of any member of their community, as can be seen through the festive atmosphere of their terrible gathering. This materializes when the mob catches up with Blue and immediately proceeds to lynch him and brutalize his body: "Wasn't five minutes passed before I saw the bonfire they lit, and I knew what was happening. I knew before I even heard Blue start screaming. [...] One of the trusties told me later they was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him" (254). River soon realizes that the same fate awaits Richie at the hands of the bloodthirsty mob, so, when the dogs finally track the young boy down, River decides to kill him himself:

> They was going to do the same to him. Once they got done with Blue. They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing, and they was going to string him up from a tree. [...] He wasn't nothing but a boy, Jojo. They kill animals better than that. [...] I said: *It's going to be all right, Richie* […] *I'm a take you home*, I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he was still. (255)

This mercy death that River grants Richie is the last thing he can do for him; similarly to the situation in *Beloved*, River kills Richie so the lynching mob or the officer cannot murder him, and the fact that this is the only saving he can offer speaks of the atrocious order in which they lived. After killing him, River orders the dogs to rip him apart and so upon the arrival of the searching party from prison only a bloodbath remains where once used to be his surrogate son, his brother. As a compensation for his deed River is set free, something that shows the unbalanced dynamics of the criminal justice system where a Black man is imprisoned for stealing meat or protecting his brother, but only released when turning against their own. As Chase points out, "for a Black inmate to receive early release from Jim Crow-era Parchman, simply staying out of trouble is not enough; rather, one must take such extreme action as tracking and killing another Black inmate—an act that could easily be read by prison authorities as contributing to their project of racial control" (212).

While the excruciating prison sentence is brought to an end, River's guilt and trauma accompany him for the rest of his life. Disgruntled by rememory, he confesses to Jojo:

> I washed my hands ever day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out. Hold my hands up to my face, I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it when the warden and the sergeant came up on us, the dogs yipping and licking

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> blood from they muzzles. They'd torn his throat out, hamstringed him. Smelled it when the warden told me I'd done good. Smelled it the day they let me out on account I'd led the dogs that caught and killed Richie. Smelled it when I finally found his mama after weeks of searching, just so I could tell her Richie was dead and she could look at me with a stone face and shut the door on me. Smelled it when I made it home in the middle of the night, smelled it over the sour smell of the bayou and the salt smell of the sea, smelled it years later when I climbed into bed with Philomène, put my nose in your grandmother's neck, and breathed her in like the scent of her could wash the other away. But it didn't. When Given died, I thought I'd drown in it. Drove me blind, made me so crazy I couldn't speak. Didn't nothing come close to easing it until you came along. (256–257)

This fragment is a first-person account of the traumatic permanence of these events in a wounded psyche. The parallelistic structure serves to channel the ubiquity and fluidity of this haunting traumatic memory that lives on his mind unchallenged by time, happiness or hope. Toward the end of his reflection, River invokes the death of his son as an iteration and deepening of a grief that he was never able to work through. This explicit connection between both incidents further positions them in a continuum of racial violence that extends to the life of his grandson, the only alleviating element for his pain. This becomes a most distressing reality when considering that Jojo himself has been close to extinction, to become one of those many names that make the lists of the myriad young men and women who perish under an oppressive racist system, unable to be protected by their closest kin, always the potential victim of a white supremacist racial order that keeps perpetuating itself. River's confession discloses his vulnerability, one that prompts a role reversal between the grandfather and the grandson with the latter's taking up the role of the former and caring for him in the same manner he does for his young sister Kayla. Earlier in the novel, Jojo appeals to the healing power of storytelling based on the narrativization of memory: "Hearing him tell them makes me feel like his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever makes me feel like I'll never be able to stand as tall as Pop, never be as sure" (17). Therefore, this represents a key moment in Jojo's maturation, one in which his grandfather, as Vicent Cucarella Ramon points out, plays a central role, both for his "awakening to adulthood" and for his "tak[ing] on his role as the family guide" (91). This connection between grandparents and grandchildren, which is present in most of the stories analyzed in this dissertation, bespeaks the intergenerational dimension of trauma characterized by the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next and contextualized by the persistence of these violences. Most accurately, this can be accounted for with San José Rico's notion of "concatenation of traumas" discussed in the first chapter through which she explains how later generations can experience the collective trauma of their parents while enduring a new traumatic situation in their communities and how this makes them liable to transmit these memories, modified and even magnified, to future generations (26). In the African American case, there is an amalgamation between the

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foundational trauma of slavery and subsequent traumatic experiences that can be collectively accounted for as the "traumatic experience of racism in the U.S." (26).

For Richie, however, learning the truth does not bring the desired peace: the rationale behind River's act is not enough for him, who could have never fathomed his death at the hands of his protector. As Swartzfager explains, "Though Pop intended his killing of Richie as a merciful act [...] this knowledge inspires in Richie a sense of betrayal rather than one of closure" (325). As Jojo consoles his grandfather, he records the simultaneous transformation of Richie into another being, something that at first barely resembles a bird but that ultimately effaces with a heartbreaking "whine that rises to a yell that rises to a scream, and the look on his face is horror at what he sees" (256), into a black hole in the middle of the garden: "Both of us bow together as Richie goes darker and darker, until he's a black hole in the middle of the yard, like he done sucked all the light and darkness over them miles, over them years, into him, until he's burning black, and the he isn't" (257). The longed-for closure is not achieved by Richie, and the place beyond the water from which he heard singing is replaced by the shriek of darkness that disintegrates him. In this mutation it becomes apparent how both language and corporeality of any kind (be it human or animal) are denied and his undoing codifies a truth and a reality that cannot be conceptualized in the common order. In considering Richie's outcome, Tribbett surveys the socio-historical background in which his story unfolds and hints at the possible reason behind his lack of integration in the order of the peaceful dead. As he explains, "knowing the facts of his own demise does not bring Richie's ghost peace, or allow him to find his harmony part in the song, because the act of mercy River undertook was corrupted by the larger dominating violence of the system in which he was trapped" (Tribbett 38). This allows for an emphasis on Richie's collective dimension, an inherent part of the mobilization of spectrality as part of what Brogan calls "cultural haunting" in the context of African American literature. In this regard, Lloyd explains that "The haunting he has been enacting is not merely of his own death but, [...] a larger memory of violence done to Black people in the US South. The particular remembrance of Richie's death is synecdochal of the novel's broader role in cultural memory of the region's history" (249). Richie's predicament is inscribed on a broader period of history that recounts the brutal and legally-sanctioned forms of racism deployed during the first half of the twentieth century to coerce and control African Americans in the aftermath of slavery and Reconstruction, as well as to express their collective response to this racism. Furthermore, in its intersection with Jojo, Richie's ghost puts these spectral memories in conversation with the present, emphasizing their survival. In this regard, Marco Petrelli states that "Richie stands as the point of spectral accumulation of the pain, death and grief that have been weighing on the African American community, especially in relation to the perverse action of the prison-industrial complex in the twentieth century" (322). Despite his apparent evanescence, this is not the last time the character of Richie will appear. Instead, as Swartfager points out, after learning the truth his "haunting only becomes more pernicious" (326) and he will make his return at the moment of Philomène's death, when he disputes the space with the second spectral figure under consideration in this section: Given.

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3.3.1.2 The Ghosts of the Present: Given

The second most prominent spectral object in the novel, and one that inevitably interlocks with Richie, is Given or, as Leonie refers to him, Given-not-Given, the ghost of her elder brother, a miracle son who "came too late and left too early" (47). If Richie's ghost is anchored in the Jim Crow South and appears to Jojo as a form of intergenerational memory, that of Given is deeply rooted in the present and embodies the indictment of slavery's afterlives. As Antoszek explains, "Since Given was a tragic victim of racial hatred, his specter proves the continuity and pervasiveness of racist ideologies" (15). In addition to that, his main witness is Leonie, a complex character through which Ward explores the myriad legacies of racial inequality. In this regard, Choi points out how the author "unfolds the social and cultural problems that the black South faces from poverty and violence to meth epidemic and to intractable racism; and uncovers traumatic personal experiences of the blacks of the rural South little by little, calling the apparitional figures wandering around between the living and the dead" (434). Parallel to Richie, the motivation behind Given's spectral existence seems to be the traumatic violence of his racist murder. As a teenager, Given had met and become friends with a group of white boys, a decision which River, based on his own personal experience, had warned him against: "They look at you and see difference, son. Don't matter what you see. It's about what they do" (48). This call for precaution around whites (that appears either directly or indirectly in many of the works analyzed) alludes to the process of Othering that is inherently subsumed in a society living in the wake of racial segregation. Dismissing the warnings, Given goes with the crew to a hunting trip where he commits the grave error of winning a bet. Moved by the rage of seeing themselves defeated by their Black companion and intoxicated with alcohol, one of them shoots him dead and the whole group runs away abandoning the body in the forest. The perpetrator turns out to be none other than one of Michael's cousins who runs to his father looking for help to avoid a prospective arrest. This, in turn, decides to resort to Big Joseph, a self-declared white supremacist who had been sheriff years ago and advises to testify that the murder was a hunting accident. As rendered in the narrative through Leonie's perspective:

> Big Joseph ignored her [his wife's advice to call the police] and all of them went back up into the woods, an hour in, and found Given lying long and still in the pine needles, his blood a black puddle beneath him. Beer cans all around him from the boys throwing them and running once the cousin with the bad eye aimed and fired, once the shot rang out. How they scattered like roaches in the light. The uncle had slapped his son across the face, once and twice. *You fucking idiot,* he'd said. *This ain't the old days.* And then his cousin had put his arms up and mumbled: *He was supposed to lose, Pa.* A hundred yards off, 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. (50; emphasis in original)

In this account of the incident there are different aspects that deserve attention. First of all, it outlines the characterization of Big Joseph as an authoritative patriarch moved by a profound

racial hatred, a representative of the "antiblack sentiment that still structures the United States" (Dillinder 132), and his wife's coerced complicity. This characterization transcends a comment on the racial attitudes of poor white sectors in the protection of their white privilege, to illustrate the racist nature of white authorities, as Big Joseph is called upon the crime scene as a former sheriff. This is further emphasized in a subsequent passage where the fallacy of the hunting accident is expanded to reach the highest spheres of justice:

> *Hunting accident*, Big Joseph told them once they got back to the house and sat around the table, phone in hand, before the cousin's daddy, short as his son but with synced eyes, called the police. *Hunting accident*, the uncle said, speaking on the phone with the light of the cold noon sun slicing through the curtains. *Hunting accident*, the lazy-eyed cousin said in court, his good eye fixed on Big Joseph, who sat behind the boy's lawyer, his face still and hard as a dinner plate. But his bad eye roving to Pop and me and Mama, all in a row behind the DA, a DA who agreed to a plea deal that sentenced the cousin to three years in Parchman and two years probation. (50; emphasis in original)

In this second excerpt the lie fabricated by the surrogate white authority in the scene is adopted by the perpetrator, transmitted to the official white authorities, and ultimately to a judge. In this manner, as Dib explains, "The anaphoric repetition impresses on us the layered depths of structural racism through which the truth needs to pass before it reaches the light, if in fact it ever does. The law here works together with the murderer's kin to cover up Given's murder and to speak a new truth into existence" (142–143). Thus, Ward voices a comprehensive critique of the different strata involved in the perpetuation of systemic racism through the criminal justice system and its erasure, one that acquires special relevance, as foregrounded by the excerpt, in the deal accepted by the DA. Not only does this figure of supposed defense of the victims not engage in any further investigation, but the very nature of the deal he accepts epitomizes the unequal treatment of Black and white defendants and the different value of white and Black life.

The sentence becomes a point of contention because, notwithstanding the time gap, it stands in stark contrast to Richie's and River's who were severely punished by much lesser offenses. Thus, as Lloyd points out, "the ghost of the brother is also a social figure for the subjugation of Black men in the United States and the ongoing disappearing of them, whether literally through murder or symbolically through the mechanics of incarceration" (247). Despite Big Joseph's reprimand to his nephew about the differences with the "old days," Ward masterfully exposes the fallacy of social advancement by juxtaposing this account of the theoretical workings of justice with the final verdict of a trial that accepts the fabricated story of a hunting accident, substantially reducing the sentence of the culprit. Instead, she renders a reality where the avowed social progress is replaced by an iteration of events that, generation after generation, renders Black life disposable, turning Given into "a victim of Mississippi's long history of anti-Black violence" (Petrelli 322). This is, precisely, the second point that Given's murder, and these two excerpts more specifically, illustrate: underlying the whole situation is the apparent triviality of the motivation behind the murder which is reduced

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to a dumb "He was supposed to lose." And yet this encapsulates the racist worldview that justifies taking a life because it endangers an unsustainable vision of biological inferiority. This is an aspect that is not treated lightly in the narrative, for the bet becomes an epitome of the working of a white supremacist hierarchy. Rendered from Leonie's perspective, the narrative describes the training his brother undertook that was dismissed by his companions because they had never truly seen him beyond his skin color, and had assumed (and ultimately enforced) his inferiority: "He won that bet one cold overcast winter sunrise, in part because he was so good, in part because everybody else, all the boys he played football with, tussled in the locker room with, sweated almost to breaking on the stadium field with, woke up drinking beer like orange juice that morning because they figured Given would lose" (49). The incident, therefore, speaks metonymically about the African American experience in the United States. No matter the personal and communal effort put into proving one's value according to white standards, when a Black person succeeds and transcends the boundaries of his or her constrictive allocated space, they are put in their place violently, sometimes paying for such transgression with their lives. In addition to this, the devaluation of Black life is further emphasized when, in a situation reminiscent of the real case of Michael Brown, the deceased body is denied respect and is left for hours in the forest surrounded by trash and to the mercy of possible predators. Given's death and his permanence as a spectral entity thus speaks of contemporary forms of physical and metaphorical lynching that mark racial relations in America and the fight against erasure.

Parallel to the way in which Richie was attached to Jojo, Given is strongly connected to Leonie who, until the end, becomes his sole witness. As Evans notes, "Given is linked specifically to Leonie's own memories and experience […]; he embodies direct violence" (456). What she considers to be no more than a "chemical figment" (34)—even, as Misty notes, the drugs she uses do not produce this effect—appears whenever she is high on drugs. As she recounts, "this Given-not-Given, this Given that's been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill" (34). At the core of this connection is the "unhealed" and "festering" wound that the loss of her brother represents (Ward, "Jesmyn Ward, Heir" 59), one that, according to Ryan Conroy, is embedded in her naming of him as Given-not-Given, a term that "suggests presence and absence in the text's structure of forgetting and memory" (36). The memories of their shared childhood and the protectiveness of his brother toward her flood Leonie, and the longing for his presence pulses through a body overtaken by this spectral apparition: "I could not reach out to it, even though everything in me wanted to do so, to feel his skin, his flesh, his dry, hard hands" (37). Leonie is a complex character that often comes across as a careless and selfish person, especially when considering her role as a mother. However, the chapters that are narrated from her perspective provide ample venues to explore how these are associated, in great part, to the traumatic effects that both the death of her brother and what Swartzfager calls "slow violence," i.e. the gradual impacts that systemic racism and intergenerational trauma have on her (315). In addition to the unfinished mourning of her brother, Leonie must confront the bleak social panorama of her native Bois Sauvage, where opportunities to overcome generational poverty are scarce. Her precarious job at a white-owned bar called The

Cold Drink (which she got only after pleading with her mother-in-law to put in a good word for her and where she works very hard while suffering the racist slurs of drunk clients) does not offer many prospects for a future. In this context, her drug addiction becomes, together with Michael, the chief (useless) mechanism of evasion: "I bent to the table. Sniffed. A clean burning shot through my bones, and then *I forgot*. The shoes I didn't buy, the melted cake, the phone call. The toddler sleeping in my bed at home while my son slept on the floor, just in case I'd come home and make him get on the floor when I stumbled in. Fuck it" (33; emphasis added). This self-destructive behavior worsens when Michael is sent to prison, and she begins using everyday, even during her pregnancy, to "burn the sorrow and despair" of his absence (51). Therefore, despite the motivation behind her use, drugs do not offer the relief she seeks and, instead, she is plunged deeper into an addiction that distances her from the world and induces the nightmarish presence of her dead brother, a constant reminder of her pain and the structural racism that governs her life and that cannot be escaped. This renders her situation as one of entrapment where the transformative effects of the spectral are thwarted due to her lack of engagement and transformation. As Barry Cole points out, "Despite Leonie's apparent link to her dead brother, Given, her addiction escalates and effectively neutralizes her agency as a purveyor of feminist empowerment throughout the novel" (68).

Leonie's life and addiction provide a portrait of contemporary Mississippi ravaged by poverty, unemployment, hunger, and one of the highest rates of drug abuse in the country. As Sarah Begley points out, "the family in *Sing* deals with problems that are representative of a town in a state that set a new record for deaths by drug overdose last year [2016]. Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the country and one of the highest unemployment rates, and is often ranked among the hungriest, unhealthiest and worst-educated places to live" (qtd. in Ward, "Jesmyn Ward, Heir" 59). The collective implications of the drug epidemic are best seen during the road trip to Parchman, in which Leonie and Misty transport drugs that will pay for the expenses of the journey. The group makes a detour to the North of Hattiesburg in North Forrest County to get the meth from a couple who are Misty's acquaintances. The pervasive poverty is codified on the dilapidated house where an equally disgruntled family lives amid trash and violence. On assessing the situation, Jojo remarks that "The man is cooking, moves as easy and sure as a chef, but there is nothing to eat here" (89). The double meaning of these words sheds light on the distressing reality of drug abuse among the poorest: the ironic depiction of the professional chef contrasts with the hunger that pervades his home, since his deftly manufactured product cannot feed children, but plunges them deeper into physical and spiritual starvation. As pointed out before, throughout the novel hunger becomes an expansive metaphor that transcends the physical dimension to speak about spiritual or affective starvation. Food, moreover, has a great significance in the next stop the group makes at Al's house, who offered his services as a lawyer for Michael and Bishop (Misty's boyfriend) in exchange for drugs. When they stop at Al's on their way to and back from the prison, the abundance of food he offers them stands in stark contrast to the manufacturer's house, implicitly signaling how differently the drug-related poverty affects the various social strata. This acquires a symbolic significance when the white lawyer gives them sandwiches

for the trip home, "for the services rendered" (14), alongside a packet with meth, the one that Leonie will end up swallowing in their encounter with the police. This passage and the posterior concatenation of events speak of the perpetuation of poverty in a different sense: together with the food that will nurture the group, Al also gives the substance that stands as symbol of the physical and emotional starvation of Leonie. Furthermore, this act seems to have a racial subtext when considering that it is the white man that supplies the substance that will subjugate Leonie and put her at the mercy of a criminal justice system infamous for its unequal treatment of African Americans.[66]

As a representative of "Leonie's trauma that she desperately wants to ignore" (Steele-Nicholson 34) and subject to her drug use, it can be intuited that Given is a pervasive presence in her life. However, in the narrative she renders four spectral sightings in further detail—three of them in the course of the journey and a fourth one that will be considered at the end. Such selection, I argue, serves to delineate the function and source of this spectral object in more detail as well as to illuminate different aspects of Leonie's character. The first of these detailed accounts coincides with the first time that Leonie sees the ghost of her dead brother, three years previous to the time of the narration, when she was at a party in the Kill, the same place where he was murdered:

> The first time Given showed up, I was at a party in the Kill, and my brother walked through there with no bullet holes in his chest or in his neck, whole and long-limbed, like always. But not smirking. He was shirtless and red about the neck and face like he'd been running, but his chest was still as stone. Still as he must have been after Michael's cousin shot him. (51)

In this initial brief spectral appearance, Given's ghost has been restored his unbroken body, one that will suffer a spectral undoing in the final appearance; the sight of her brother as he used to be unhinges Leonie from the evasion she had been attempting all along. She renders the effect the vision has on her through the metaphor of hunger that here equates a longing that can never be satisfied: "I ground my gums sore staring at Given. I ate him with my eyes. He tried to talk to me but I couldn't hear him, and he just got more and more frustrated" (51). In this first spectral sighting, thus, Given's ghost is associated to a function of an unfinished process of mourning. Despite the profoundly intimate connection between the spectral object and the witness, this process of mourning must be carried out by considering two different levels: first, Leonie's own working of personal loss; and second, her coming to terms with the structural factors that produced such loss. At this point she superficially understands the serious countenance of his brother and the overall sensation that he came in a rush, as an urgent admonishment for her to stop doing drugs. However, at this point, she fails to understand that his warning goes much deeper than that, that it seeks for her to look both inward, to the roots of her growing addiction, and to the future, represented by the developing

[66] The novel *Delicious Foods* (2015) by African American author James Hannaham engages this connection between drug addiction, food and race more explicitly through the reworking of the motif of the plantation. Here, addicts constitute the slave-like workforce for harvesting crops and are "paid" in small doses of crack cocaine that keep them hooked, producing an addiction that perpetuates their exploitation.

fetus in her uterus; and outward, to the very place where he was killed, and where she is also at risk. This lack of full understanding is best represented through her inability to verbally communicate with him, to listen to what he is saying, a move that reinforces the importance of listening to the spectral voice, as shown in the previously analyzed works.

The second spectral sighting rendered in detail by Leonie takes place when she and Michael are making love while high at Al's house on his return from prison:

> I sit, and Michael takes my face in his warm, *real* hands, and his lips meet mine, and I am opening all over again. Losing language, losing words. Losing myself in that feeling, that feeling of being wanted and needed and touched and cradled, all the while marveling that the one doing it is the one that wants, that needs that touches, that sees. This is a miracle, I think, so I close my eyes and ignore Given-not-Given, who is sitting there with a sad look on his face, mouth in a soft frown, and think of Michael, *real* Michael, and wonder if we had another baby if it would look more like him than Michaela. If we had another baby, we could get it right. (149–150; emphasis added)

This excerpt offers the key strands to reach an understanding of Leonie's state, her relation with Michael and the memory of her brother, all of them punctuated by the guilt associated to her involvement with the murderer of her brother's family for which the spectral appearance becomes a vehicle. In her communion with Michael, Leonie feels seen and wanted, chosen for whom she is. This is at the very core of their relationship, which began soon after Given was murdered, when Michael approached her to apologize. As she remembers, "from the first moment I saw him walking across the grass to where I sat in the shadow of the school sign, he saw me. Saw past skin the color of unmilked coffee, eyes black, lips the color of plums, and saw me. Saw the walking wound I was, and came to be my balm" (54). The deep grief for her brother that consumes her and her parents and that makes the latter unavailable to her draws her deeper into a relationship with Michael. Feeling seen and claimed by him alleviates her pain and despair, and so she turns him into the main mechanism of recovery: "the way I swam up and surfaced out my grief when I was with him, how everything seemed much more alive with him" (153). However, this soothing effect that Michael has on her becomes addictive and from all perspectives, except her own, their relation is rendered as a toxic one. From Jojo, to Philomène—the latter warns her daughter in the early stages of their relationship: "All you hear, all you see, is him. […] Every time you say something, you look at him like a little puppy dog. Like you waiting for him to pet you" (154)—and including Richie—"They kiss and I turn away. Something about the way Michael grips the back of her neck and Leonie palms his face seems desperate. So desperate and needy it demands privacy" (242)—all make assessments that underline the dependence that Leonie has on her lover and their self-absorption into each other. Even Leonie's phrasing betrays this reality when she assesses her children in the following manner: "The *part of me that can think around Michael* knows what Jojo is saying ain't true" (143; emphasis added). As with her drug addiction, despite realizing the impact that her toxic relationship with Michael has for the rest of the family, especially her children, she chooses him at every turn and relegates her offspring to the care of

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grandparents and each other. The close connection between her relationship with drugs and with Michael is evoked in her literal and metaphorical addiction (it is through Michael that she starts using drugs and when he is imprisoned her addiction increases) and in both cases this is juxtaposed to her role as a mother.

In this respect, it is worth considering Michael as Leonie's counterpart on the representation of the failed hopes and dreams, in this case, of the poor white sectors of rural Mississippi. Any prospects of making a family and transcending interracial bias that he might have had disappeared when he lost his job as a rig welder in the Deepwater Horizon due to the catastrophic oil spill of 2010.[67] The narrative coalesces material poverty and the traumatic aftereffects of the event and ties them to Michael's increasing use and eventual cooking of meth. Rendered from Leonie's perspective, his physical transformation becomes a literalization of the hunger that Jojo identifies in the road trip detour:

> When he started getting skinny, I thought it was because of his nightmares. When his cheekbones started standing out on his face like rocks under water, I thought it was because he was stressed out over money. When his spine rose under his skin, a line of knuckles punching up his back, I thought it was because of his grief and the fact that he couldn't find another welding job anywhere in Mississippi or Alabama or Florida or Louisiana or the Gulf of Mexico. But later I found out the truth. Later, I learned he'd figured everything out without me. (93)

Through the portrayal of the effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster on an individual, the narrative draws a connection between the human and non-human world that Michael will appropriate as metaphor to address the imminent peril of Jojo's life as an African American male in a white supremacist society. Michael is the first to disclose the truth about Jojo's uncle's murder, although somewhat veiledly. He partially concedes to the wrongdoing of his family and inserts the doubt toward official records in the young boy's mind. In an excerpt that is worth quoting at length Jojo is thus introduced to the bleak reality that will unfold as he grows older:

> *Some scientists for BP said this didn't have nothing 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.* And then Michael looked at me and said: *And when that scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals.* And 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. (226; emphasis in original)

[67] Davis-McElligatt explains the real referent of this fictional account and the tragic consequences in ecological terms, which adds to the environmentalist undertones present throughout the narrative: "a BP-operated drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico off of the coast of Louisiana exploded and killed eleven workers; in the four-month-long oil spill that followed, already-fragile ecosystems harboring animal and marine life were destroyed, and precariat, coastal communities were devastated" (112).

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In what appears to be an expression of extreme desire of mutual intelligibility, Michael uses the animals to convey the pressing warning to Jojo, the boy who understands all creatures. By making obvious the fallacious and interested account of the scientists working for the oil company, Ward deftly dismantles an implicit master narrative intent on proclaiming colorblindness and obscuring the effects of structural inequality and anti-Blackness. As pointed out by Kelly McKisson, Michael's account "aligns environmental damage and police brutality as similar kinds of racialized structures that direct the uneven operation of power" (487). In a reading with profound environmental overtones, Given and Jojo's racialized bodies are equated with the corpses of the marine animals that kept flooding the coast. Here capitalism and racism are the unspoken realities that, like specters, make themselves apparent in the historical exploitation, subjugation and erasure of African American bodies, land and animals from the era of the slave trade to that of the prison industrial complex. Through this characterization, Michael will appear more socially attuned to the impact of the external conditions on their lives, albeit not sufficiently so. This denied agency will become, in turn, a constant into his and Leonie's life that plunge them in a vicious circle of drug abuse and self-absorption that renders them invalid role models for their children.

Indeed, the most striking and indigestible aspect of Leonie's character is her ambivalent relation to motherhood. Leonie got pregnant at the age of seventeen, less than a year after she started dating Michael. While going to an abortion clinic was not an option for her, her mother offered a herbal tea used to interrupt pregnancies. However, despite being psychologically unprepared to become a mother, Leonie refused it. This choice renders her immaturity for, while she feels guilty about the doubts she had, she never fully actualized her project of becoming a mother since it is her parents that ultimately have to look after the children. The narrative renders this crude reality in an exchange between Philomène, already in her deathbed, and Jojo. His grandmother tells him how she realized soon after he was born that Leonie was not going to act her part: "I don't know if it is something I did. Or if it's something that's in Leonie. But she ain't got the mothering instinct. I knew when you was little and we was out shopping, and she bought herself something to eat and ate it right in front of you, and you was sitting there crying hungry. I knew then" (233). In another instance of the expansive metaphorical use of hunger, Philomène wonders about the effectiveness of her role as surrogate mother and feels the effects that Leonie's carelessness could otherwise have had on her grandchildren: "She ain't never going to feed you […] I hope I fed you enough. While I'm here. So you carry it with you. […] Like a well, Jojo. Pull that water up when you need it" (233–234). The food to which she refers is the love, nurturance and also the cultural heritage that she strove to provide her grandson with, and it stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned instances of physical and spiritual hunger. In this regard, the exchange instantiates what Khedir considers one of the major themes of the novel: familial and communal love ("Ghosts" 22). Amid the devastation wreaked by structural racism, the family and the community become key agents in the provision of "networks of both emotional and material care" (Shelat 28). However, the love that Leonie feels for her children, one that Philomène is sure of—as she tells Jojo "No, she love you. She don't know how to show it. And her love for herself and her love for Michael—well, it gets in the way. It confuse her"

(234)—is not enough to confront the pain and trauma of her life. As such, the narrative registers a number of incidents which show the couple's carelessness as parents (as when Leonie attempts to clean Kayla and she hits the car's dashboard and starts bleeding), and violence toward their children (the slaps with which the mother sought to publicly humiliate Jojo for talking back or Michael's smacking Kayla for refusing to get off the floor, which Leonie witnesses with utter indifference). More insidious than these physical responses is the psychological violence Leonie exerts, especially on Jojo: "It feels good to be mean, to speak past the baby I can't hit and let that anger touch another. The one I'm never good enough for. Never Mama for. Just Leonie, a name wrapped around the same disappointed syllables I've heard from Mama, from Pop, even from Given, my whole fucking life" (147). This reflection reveals the depth of Leonie's wound, one that harbors also the awareness of her family's disappointment in her, and the desperate need for healing. Ultimately, this obscures the love for her children and turns them into an object of jealousy for a bond that she will never have. The connection between Jojo and Kayla accentuates the absence of Given in her life and reinforces her failure at nurturing a family of her own:

> Maybe because part of me wanted her [Kayla] to leap for me, to smear orange vomit over the front of my shirt as her little tan body sought mine, always sought mine, our hearts separated by the thin cages of our ribs, exhaling and inhaling, our blood in sync. Maybe because I want her to burrow in to me for succor instead of her brother. Maybe because Jojo doesn't even look at me, all his attention on the body in his arms, the little person he's trying to soothe, and my attention is everywhere. Even now, my devotion: inconstant. (98)

She longs for her children's affection like she longs for her brother; she longs to be claimed as a mother, a daughter and a sister but such painful longing is never actualized, as it is trampled by her ghosts.

This becomes apparent when she approaches her two asleep children and the ambivalence that has marked her role as a mother becomes explicit:

> But their faces make me feel two ways at once: their faces turned toward each other, sleep-smoothed to an infant's fatness, so soft and open that I want to leave them asleep so they can feel what they will. I think Given must have held me like that once, that once we breathed mouth to mouth and inhaled the same air. But another part of me wants to shake Jojo and Michalea awake, to lean down and yell so they startle and sit up so I don't have to see the way they turn to each other like plants following the sun across the sky. They are each other's light. (151)

As Chase points out, "the siblings' bond compensates for the more difficult relationship they have with their parents" (207). Indeed, the relationship between Jojo and Kayla is a key element through which Ward underlines the theme of surrogate parenthood and the importance of the ties of familiar kinship for the protagonist's maturation. As an elder brother, Jojo has assumed the role of protector for his sister, caring and nurturing her or interposing himself to the violent outbursts of his parents. In his view, Leonie has become a threat, as

epitomized in an episode that takes place during the road trip in which she aimlessly tries to make a natural remedy for Kayla's sickness. Jojo shows his fear, asserting that "I don't want Leonie giving her that. I know that's what she think she need to do, but she ain't Mam. She ain't Pop. She ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life, and she don't know" (107). Remembering two previous incidents that involved her mother's deficient abilities to heal—one where she killed the betta fish he had been given as a present, and another where a herbal remedy she attempted to work out for Jojo made him sicker and killed a cat who drank from it—he concludes that "Leonie kill things" (108). Thus, when the mother leaves them alone to get high with Al and Misty, Jojo forces Kayla to vomit:

> She fights me, hitting at my arms, crying against my hand, sobbing but not making no words, but I do it three times, make her vomit over my hand, hot as her little body, three times, all of it red and smelling sweet, until I'm crying and she's shrieking […]. All the while my heart beating so hard I can hear it in my ears, because I knew what Kayla was saying. I knew.
> *I love you, Jojo. Why you make me, Jojo? Jojo! Brother! Brother.*
> I heard her. (118; emphasis in original)

In this heartbreaking scene, one in which the motif of vomiting becomes central and bears a certain parallel with Richie's murder, Jojo experiences the devastating effects of harming the one that he loves to save her. His ability to hear the animals is here transposed to Kayla in a clear demonstration of the sympathy that sits at the core of his self and that allows him to communicate with ghosts and animals. This, one of the many sacrifices that Jojo will surely have to make in his life, deeply contrasts with Leonie's attitude and adds to the process of maturation in which he is embedded.

Going back to the rendition of Leonie's second spectral sighting, another aspect emphasized is the opposition between the materiality of Michael (conveyed through the repetition of the word *real*) in opposition to the spectral and thus, disembodied, presence of Given. This opposition between Michael's aliveness and Given's deadness becomes more powerful when we consider that the latter perished at the hands of one of the former's family members. The emergence of spectrality associated to the guilt that Leonie feels draws from her loving a man that is related, not just to the perpetrator of the crime, but to the man who fabricated the narrative that ultimately erased Given's racially motivated murder. Throughout the narrative, Big Joseph's racial hatred stands over Leonie like a pendulum: he, who in Tribbett's words "illustrates the ludicrous illogic of white racism" (32), refuses to talk to her and to acknowledge Jojo and Kayla as legitimate grandchildren.[68] There are two key moments where this tension reaches an apex: the first of them takes place when Leonie attempts to leave a note in Michael's parents' mailbox informing them about the imminent return of their

[68] In this regard, it is interesting to note how this tension is symbolically marked through the names: although Leonie's eldest son is named Joseph after her paternal grandfather and her youngest Michaela, after her white lover, they have *de facto* adopted the abbreviated names of Jojo and Kayla. This symbolically shows an appropriation of a "Black" name rather than the white one that speaks of the chosen bonds (Chase 204) and, subsequently, the identity of the children.

son from prison. Big Joseph responds violently driving the lawn mower toward her as he draws a silent threat:

> Fear rises to my shoulders, up my neck, a bubbling choke. What can he do but curse me? What can he do? I'm not in his driveway. Doesn't the county own the sides of the road? But something about how fast he's gunning that lawn mower, the way he points to that tree, the way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence. [...] He is taking something off the seat of the mower, a rifle that was strapped there, something he keeps for wild pigs that root in the forest, but not for them now. For me. (56)

This encounter renders the forces at work in the upholding of a *de facto* segregated society where the Black body is always rendered as trespassing. The concatenation of rhetorical questions symbolically destabilizes the certainty of safety and implicitly acknowledges that the law will never protect the likes of Leonie. As Dib explains, this act of "civilian policing proves that the road, whether public or private, is a space where black individuals are subject to regulation and are in danger of premature death" (145). The juxtaposition of Big Joseph's pointing to the tree and the drawing of the gun speak to the lynchings of the past and the present, erasing the line that separates both, and her implicit comparison with a wild pig shows the value of Black life for a man like Big Joseph.

The second moment in which Ward delves into the racial dynamics of the poor Black and white sectors of Bois Sauvage is the meeting between Michael, Leonie and the children with his family upon their return to town. The encounter provides a tragic portrait of diverse racial attitudes; Maggie, Michael's mother, endorses a less belligerent stance than her husband: she lets the group in the house and, despite her evident discomfort, she greets her grandchildren formally. She lightly rebukes her husband on his outbursts, but ultimately the (forced) loyalty toward him undermines any possibility of interracial approach. In turn, Big Joseph takes the opportunity to attack Leonie and his grandchildren calling her a "nigger bitch" (208), with an ensuing fight between him and Michael, and blaming her family as the source of some tainted blood—"All bad blood. Fuck the skin" (207)—that stands as a proxy for what he considers to be biological inferiority. In this respect, the exchange provides an important insight into Leonie's complex racial attitudes, a key element that upholds the presence of the specter of Given in her life. On the one hand, Leonie complies with Michael's wish to take her children to his parents' despite her recent incident with Big Joseph; she even forces them to greet their grandparents, an order that they refuse. This resistance of the children, especially Jojo's, stands in stark contrast to Leonie's position, and she cannot but read it as his indictment of her decision. This suffuses the hatred with which Jojo looks at her: "He's looking at me, and I see a flash of something I ain't never seen before. He's looking at me like I'm a water moccasin and just bit him, just sank my teeth into the bone of his ankle and bit it to swelling. Like he would step on my head, crush my skull, stomp me into red mud until I wasn't nothing but bone and skin and mud oozing in my slits. Like he ain't no child of mine" (208–209). Jojo's rejection of Leonie as a mother that has been brewing throughout the narrative is juxtaposed

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to her claiming of her family in the face of insult, for, on the other hand, Leonie attempts to articulate a form of contestation that is, nevertheless, never expressed aloud. When Big Joseph remarks on the bad blood of "that boy Riv" (207), Leonie silently reclaims the figure of her father, alongside that of her brother:

> So how can Big Joseph see Pop, see how stonelike he is, like Pop's taken all the hardship of the world into him and let it calcify him inch by inch till he's like one of them petrified trees, and see anything but a man? Pop would whip his ass. And I can see Big Joseph in my mind's eye, standing over Given, breathing down on him like he's so much roadkill, how he would ignore the perfection of him: the long bow-drawing arm, the high forehead over the dead eyes. (207–208)

Despite this clairvoyance, Leonie opts for silence and her act of resistance amounts to none other than leaving the two men fighting and waiting for Michael in the car. Leonie turns all this racial hatred inward and, before the profound pain that the man's words inflict on an already oozing wound, she only wishes to disappear:

> I would throw up everything. All of it out: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs 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. Not this skin, not this body. Maybe Michael could step on my heart, stop its beating. Then burn everything to cinders. (207)

This passage describes the visceral undoing of a body that is physically and figuratively torn by the legacies of slavery. The metaphor of vomiting is radicalized and throwing up is rendered insufficient when the forces at work are so pervasive that they take hold of the self entirely. The reversal of her skin, which appears as the last step in the process of getting rid of each constitutive part of her material self, speaks metaphorically about her difficult position: she wishes to turn her black skin inside out so that it shows the common humanity that lays underneath, and yet this reversal seems to equate a white assimilation, an actual renouncing of the cultural meanings imprinted on the black skin that would ultimately mark the beginning of her non-existence. The attention she pays to the heart in the next step of her projected evanescence demonstrates her love for Michael and the problematic agency granted to him over her life. In this manner, the fragment epitomizes Leonie's difficult position, her ambivalence as well as her tendency toward self-destruction.

Leonie's ambivalence regarding racial matters is explored in several instances within the narrative. One of these is the ample understanding and indictment she makes of white privilege through Misty. Her friend and co-worker accompanies her in the trip to Parchman where her African American boyfriend is also incarcerated and convinces Leonie to transport drugs so as to cover the expenses. Although Leonie agrees, she cannot help but notice the vast differences between the both of them: "The way she said it, *take advantage*, made me want to slap her. Her freckles, her thin lips, her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her?" (91; emphasis in

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original). Her assessment emphasizes Misty's whiteness in an implicit opposition to her own Blackness and codifies it as a safe passage that has been repeatedly denied to Leonie. As if to emphasize Misty's obliviousness to her own prerogative, moments later she suggests stopping at Mendenhall to visit what is advertised as the "Home of Mississippi's Most Beautiful Courthouse" (95), something that Leonie refuses as she remembers the dire depictions of life in prison provided by Michael. Despite her poverty and addiction, Misty is still vested with a white privilege that makes her blind to the history of oppression of African Americans epitomized in the courthouse, where the criminal justice system functioned as a chief mechanism of its enforcement, as well as the ramifications this has on the present through, for instance, the racial profiling and inequity of the sentences between Black and white people that would affect Leonie if they were ever stopped and the drugs found. However, despite Leonie's first-hand experience of racism as well as the workings of racial privilege and white supremacy, she renounces any form of active resistance. Instead, as Swartzfager points out, she seems to have internalized this anti-Black sentiment (237) that surrounds her. This critic considers two key instances through which this is marked in the novel: the relaxing of her hair and the abandonment of her mother's teachings. The former is disapprovingly described from Jojo's perspective in great detail, emphasizing how the shape and the tincture used to redo her hair made it look "like it didn't belong on her, limp and flowing an orange-blond down the drain" (63). The hair, with its profound racial weight, becomes a metaphor for Leonie's process of acculturation, but it also implicitly speaks to the burden of white beauty standards. In Swartzfager's view, this stands as "one way that she eschews her cultural background" (328) and, together with the abandonment of her mother's herbal lessons, it draws an "ambivalent emotional relationship with whiteness" (327). In the final part of the novel, Leonie reassesses her relationship with her cultural heritage, but, at this point in the narrative, she seems bent on forgetting. This can be traced in the aforementioned description of Given's second sighting, where her opening toward Michael is opposed to her closing to the spectral, rendered in her multiple attempts to dismiss Given's presence: "I look at Michael beneath me, and I ignore the phantom" (150). Broken by trauma and addiction, Leonie fruitlessly attempts to look at a future where she (mis)places her hope, as evidenced by the gross error of wishing to conceive a third child who, by virtue of its projected growing resemblance to its father, and thus, whiter, will save all of them. Her flaw, nonetheless, resides in the inability to realize that the future she is intent on creating is inevitably marked by the past, since history keeps repeating itself, as testified by Given's stubborn presence. By focusing on Michael, she wishes the ghost to disappear, but "the hollow figment" (150) stays, an uncomfortable reminder of her situation.

The third and final sighting discussed by Leonie takes place when she is starting to experience the effects of the drugs she swallowed to prevent the police officer from finding them. This spectral appearance of Given is associated to the cyclical perpetration of anti-Black violence which is chiefly explored through the traffic stop scene that evokes well-known incidents between police and African Americans. As explained above, once the group is ordered out of the car the events soon escalate to the point that Jojo's life is in danger; it is in this precise moment when Leonie sees her dead brother trying to reach out to her children:

"Phantom Given is sitting next to Jojo on the ground, reaching out as if he could touch him. Given-not-Given drops his hand. Half of Jojo's face is in the dirt, but I can still see his frowning mouth, quivering at the corners: it is the face he made when he was a baby, when he was fighting the urge to cry" (165). In this passage the ghost functions simultaneously as witness and testimony of racial violence that is iterated across generations. This multifaceted reduplication of experiences through the characters of Richie, Jojo and Given that converge at this point attests to the atemporality of Black oppression and the instrumentality of the penal and criminal justice system in its perpetuation, be it through the legacies of plantation slavery in the contemporary form of mass incarceration alluded to by Richie, the over-policing of the Black body, shown through Jojo's experience, or the devaluation of Black life present at the ruling of Given's murder. In this regard, it is important to emphasize the implicit connection that Leonie makes between her son and her brother Given whose race and gender defines them as endangered from birth. In this respect, Ewing argues that "For Leonie, the ever-present threat of death means that she cannot nurture […]. But it is also true that the world which marks Jojo as a danger rather than a child renders Leonie's motherhood as always already abject" (147).

In this manner, the ghosts of Richie and Given define what Dib has termed "the novel's haunted roadscape" that posits the road as a political space (135). The critic notes how African American automobility appears as a "hauntological journey" where the road shows the "limits of autonomy for precarious subjects," as it becomes a contested space in which Black bodies are policed, and also as a space of violent memories that find an expressive form in ghosts (135). Alluding to the myriad current accounts collected under the common discourse of "driving while black"—a locution that "refers to black drivers who get pulled over for simply 'being black' and the violence to which they are susceptible because of this profiling" (Dib 139)—the passage reinforces a literal form of coercion under which African Americans continue to be subjugated. In this regard, Loomis goes one step further when she draws the parallels between the car and the slave ship arguing that Black characters live in the "captivity space of the petro-hold," (188) i.e. "a literal and rhetorical space of captivity fueled by oil culture that regulates Black bodies and temporality differently and more intensely than it does with white ones" (180). According to Choi, this idea is accentuated in Kayla's continued carsickness which evokes that felt by Africans in the slave ships (442). By foregrounding racial dynamics, the narrative indicts the principle of liberty of movement showing the dangers embedded in mobility for African Americans. As Michelle Stork explains, "the novel clearly decouples the narrative of automobility from the idea of progress and well-being: the children suffer from hunger and neglect; the automobile, subject to the American South's socio-economic hardships and racialised regimes of power, is not a guarantor for prosperity, well-being or health" (259). In this respect, it is especially relevant that, as Loomis points out, "The family's shift from mere risk to active danger is racialized: it occurs the moment the Black woman takes the wheel" (193). Thus, Leonie, as a Black woman, and her mixed-race children are the ones endangered by the actions undertaken collectively with white people. As Dib explains, "An intersectional understanding of the danger that Leonie faces recognizes both the danger of black automobility as the reason she

was pulled over and the fact that she, as the black woman, had to literally consume the risk that she, her white friend, and her white male partner all took" (146–147). After the police officer leaves and the group gets ready to continue their trip, Leonie is fully overtaken by the effects of the drugs and sees the ghost of her brother leaving:

> Given turns away from the car and disappears: I understand. Phantom Given is the heart of a clock, and his leaving makes the rest of it tick tock tick tock, makes the road unfurl, the trees whip, the rain steam, the wipers swish. I bend in half, my mouth in my elbow and knees, and moan. Wish it was Mama's lap. My jaw clacks and grinds. I swallow. I breathe. All delicious and damned. (167)

With this third account of her brother's sighting, Leonie hints at an understanding of temporality that is only available to the characters that experience the spectral but is never fully developed. However, the effects of the overdose that threaten her life knock her over and at this critical moment she can only wish for something that will soon be foregone: her mother. Thus this excerpt is another indication of the losses that sit at Leonie's core and the poor prospects of what is to come.

3.3.1.3 Atemporal Spectrality: A Multitude of Ghosts

The denouement of the novel is developed in two parts that bear a strong imprint of the spectral. The first of them takes place upon the group's return from the road trip and reproduces the convergence of the two previously discussed specters and their witnesses. In this part spectrality will be explored alongside an Africanist perspective that, while downplayed in comparison to the traumatic repression, is, nonetheless, a dimension that adds to the characters' understanding of the phenomenon and Ward's crafting of her theory of haunting. In an interview given upon the publication of the novel, Ward herself acknowledged that she conducted copious research on African-based spiritual traditions such as hoodoo and voodoo, as they are "what Mam practices" and "inform Richie's experience of the afterlife" (Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on her New Novel"). As explained in the second chapter, I examine the use of the spectral as an Africanist element in connection to the African diasporic bonds in the Americas. These speak of a transnational experience of oppression derived from the transatlantic slave trade, enslavement and anti-Black violence, and thus build a space of resistance anchored in the construction of a collective cultural identity. Taking into account Jeffrey Anderson's thesis on the historical waves of interest in conjure and other African syncretic forms discussed in the analysis of *Mama Day*, Mellis has assessed Ward's deployment of such forms as denoting a new critical moment for Black life in the United States. As he explains:

> It would seem that American culture is in the midst of another wave of interest in African-based supernaturalism. The cultural milieu of the United States has frayed in the first decades of the twenty-first century, having witnessed the very public rise of white ethno-nationalism from both individuals and

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> emanating from centers of power in Washington. The public protests by Black Lives Matter activists and high profile athletes like Colin Kaepernick, roughly coincided with the rise and election Donald Trump and the accompanying nativism, xenophobia, racism and seeming embrace of white nationalism by prominent administration officials, advisors, hangers-on and some sitting congressmen. (13–14)

These socio-cultural circumstances are ones which, as examined so far, Ward deeply engages and criticizes in her novel. Through her work, these forms of spirituality will configure an alternative worldview that provides security, healing, and a source of resilience in a society structured on Western hegemony that actively suppresses racial difference. In what Mellis calls an "African-based spiritual fiction"—that is, "African American realist fiction with African-based spiritual and religious elements" (3)—this turns into a means of "power, protection and protest in a racially oppressive society" (2). Through the course of the novel, there are both direct and indirect references to these systems of belief. River, for instance, holds close to his heart the teachings of his great-granddad which reveal the remnants of an animist understanding of the world: "[River's great-granddad] Said there's spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. Said the sun is most important, gave it a name: Aba" (73). As pointed out by Lucy Arnold, this "emphasis on the significance of community and 'spirit' in the specifically African American spiritual sense, the invocation of loa, the practice of herbal medicine" are all elements that approximate the spirituality of River to Hoodoo or Haitian Vodou (226). This view is more literally enforced when he makes a gris-gris bag to protect his grandchild down the road to Parchman. As pointed out before, this object comes to hold an important symbolic meaning. Arnold explains that the gris-gris bag "embod[ies] the deeply syncretic nature of spiritual systems like Hoodoo, incorporating elements drawn from Algonquin traditions, in addition to those drawn from African contexts" (231). In the narrative, it is the object that draws Jojo to the other end of the barrel of the police officer's gun, but eventually his life is spared. Thus, ultimately, the power with which River had vested the artifact seems to work, turning it into "one of the key objects through which the novel posits traditions such as Hoodoo as possible tools for political resistance, particularly given that to survive is a political act in these circumstances" (Arnold 231).

The central character through whom this African-based belief system and the subsequent dimension of the ghost as an Africanist element is explored is Philomène, Leonie's mother, whose complications derived from cancer have confined her to bed. When she was a teenager, the midwife Marie-Therese discovered in her "the seed of a gift" (39), one the old conjurer believes to be present in all beings but only developed by some. In Philoméne's case this translates in the ability to listen to all things, to "what the world sings" (42), which, through training, turns her into a healer, a woman aiding her community physically and spiritually. This knowledge and role approximate Philomène to the figure of the conjurer (Davis-McElligatt 109), represented by Miranda and Sapphira Wade in *Mama Day*. Similarly to these cases, the spiritual tradition embraced by Philomène and her family is presented as an admixture of African-based beliefs and Christian worship, where the discredited traditions

brought across the Atlantic are posed on equal footing with the religion of the master.[69] As such, Marie-Therese creates a pantheon of gods and goddesses where she pays homage and prays "to the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God" (40). As noted by Davis-McElligatt, conjure healing appears in the novel as an antidote against the ramifications of structural racism, as it provides "a model of transformative justice that advances the survival of Black people through rituals of healing and radical change, intracommunity interdependence, and by providing methods for the redress and prevention of harm" (103). The presence of these belief systems necessarily affects the notion of the spectral outlined by Ward: to the chief function of the ghost as metaphor for repressed violence, this added dimension links the awareness of the spectral to cultural rootedness. Unlike Tante Vangie, her predecessor's teacher, Philomène cannot see the dead, but her ability to listen to all natural things allows her to trace their presence in the natural world. For this reason, when her son dies, she decides to plant a tree that will sing to her, like the rest of the herbs and bushes do. This, like Jojo's ability to listen to animals and to see ghosts, connects the human and other-than-human world in a continuum that, like the ghost, resists the binary oppositions that have structured Western thought. In this regard, the novel advocates for a more horizontal and integrative view of the world. Davis-McElligatt points out that Philomène's conjure healing, together with the derived worldview, "collapses boundaries between the human and nonhuman animal, and the human milieu and the natural environment, and in doing so challenges the presumption that all living species on the planet are fundamentally different and therefore unrelated" (110).

Crucial to Philomène's role as a healer and, specifically, to her abilities is her theory of intergenerational transmission: "I think it runs in the blood, like silt in river water. Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees. […] Rises up over the water in generations. My mama ain't have it, but hear her talk one time that her sister, Tante Rosalie, did. That it skips from sister to child to cousin. To be seen. And used. Usually come around full-blown when you bleed for the first time" (40). This description, which she gives to a young Leonie as an attempt to draw her attention to her place in the world, emphasizes the bond shared by the different family members and it will account for Jojo's and Kayla's abilities. In Davis-McElligatt's words, these approximate them to "formidable nascent conjurers with powers that are amplifications of those extant in the family" (115). Interestingly, Richie is the first to inadvertently identify this peculiar inheritance in the children and link it to their witnessing of spectrality: "I realize there is another scent in his blood. This is where he differs from River. […] This is part of the reason he can see me while the others, excepting the little girl, can't" (141). While Jojo has kept his power a secret from everyone, the presence of Richie in his life and the imminent death of his beloved grandmother make him seek answers to the nature of

[69] In this project of reclamation and revaluation of alternative epistemological paradigms, Ward also tackles implicitly the negative view of conjurers and revises it through Leonie's comparison of her mother with the mythological figure of Medusa. In opposition to the popular image of the mythical woman as monstrous, Leonie underlines instead the beauty that emanates from her power and ascribes the common negative connotations to the "shock of seeing something so perfect and fierce in the world" (158). This effects a rewriting of the myth from a feminist perspective that lays bare the androcentric bias in the rendition of powerful women as monstrous abnormalities, a trope that appears as well in the stereotype of the Sapphire.

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the spectral phenomenon. An agonizing Philomène answers her grandson's pressing doubts, as she realizes that he has the ability to see the dead. This conversation, that constitutes a farewell for the both of them, provides a new venue to approach the representation of ghosts in the novel. In Philomène's chronicle, the spectral is first associated to the violent deaths: "I think that only happens when the dying's bad. Violent. The old folks always told me that when someone dies in a bad way, sometimes it's so awful even God can't bear to watch, and then half your sprit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water" (236). Her account reinforces the understanding of the spectral as an expression of repressed trauma, a soul looking for closure that is perfectly epitomized by Richie, and it hints at the pervasiveness of this phenomenon as it is matter-of-factly recorded in the folk phenomenology. While this serves to assuage Jojo's fear that she will turn into one of these creatures, only seen by him and doomed to an eternal unacknowledged invisibilization—"I couldn't bear her being a ghost. Couldn't take her sitting in the kitchen, invisible" (235)—it also foreshadows her impending ritual death. Complimentarily to this, however, Philomène shares with Jojo a view of death that is far removed from the Western conception of time: as Richie says, "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" (236). This understanding of death bears strongly on an African-based temporal framework discussed in the previous chapter where the afterlife is integrated in the realm of the present, with the order of the living and the dead converging in time and space, and life and death forming a continuum. This provides an alternative way of understanding the connection between life and death. As Petrelli points out, "Through her teachings and rituals, the story is infused with a distinctively non-Western way of representing the structure of, and the relationship between, the phenomenal world and the hereafter" (323). Thus, in the worldview espoused by Philomène, there seems to be a distinction between two realms of spectral existence: one associated to violence and defined by a lack of integration, and another one associated to natural and peaceful deaths where the spirit of the deceased is integrated in the world of the living. This distinction is crucial to understand both Richie's spectral existence and his glimpses of a different kind of afterlife, as well as the ritual Philomène will undergo, in which Leonie will play a fundamental role.

Partially absent from the equation, Leonie appears toward the end of the novel as the renegade child who finally complies with her mother's desire. Her account of her teenage years unveils her disinterest and resistance to learn her mother's lessons about plants. These she regards with a mixture of hate and distrust because they never proved enough to save her mother's life. Rendering her progressive distancing from and erasing of her teachings, she remembers how Philomène's "body broke down over the years until she took to her bed, permanently, and I forgot so much of what she taught me. I let her ideas drain from me so that the truth could pool instead. Sometimes the world don't give you what you need, no matter how hard you look. Sometimes it withholds" (104). Leonie's view denotes a pessimism based on her blinding pain that distances her from her parents and, thus, from the African American culture at large. Taking into consideration the context, this is what, ultimately, does not allow her to understand the sighting of his brother as a ghost and, instead, she keeps insisting,

beyond reasonability, on his being a hallucination. In this regard, Davis-McElligatt accurately explains that:

> By repeatedly misrecognizing her gift as a drug-induced anomaly, she is unable to interfuse herself with the spiritual world and liaise with her brother. Yet Leonie's spiritual soundlessness is also the result of profound unresolved trauma that is not yet and perhaps will never be fully healed—and, importantly, can never be healed by systems that insist on confinement and spiritual isolation. (115)

This entraps Leonie in a vicious cycle that is reinforced throughout the novel: she is fully dominated by the need to overcome trauma which she attempts to fulfill with evasion, but it is precisely this evasion that draws her away from the sources that would enable a healing, namely the connection and active participation in the family network and community. Rather than being the missing link in the intergenerational transmission of Philomène's abilities, she remains oblivious to her potential. However, toward the end of the narrative, she is offered redemption as her mother seeks her help to pass away in peace. Philomène, shattered by pain, implores her daughter for mercy: "I don't want to be empty breath. Bitter at the marrow of my bones. I don't want that, Leonie. […] Let me live with something of myself, please" (216). Although Leonie is resistant to perform a task for which she is neither intellectually nor emotionally prepared, she complies with her mother's wish as the latter stresses the inalienable mother-daughter bond that unites them. Philomène draws on the continuum thereby established between the two of them, one that reduplicates the continuum between life and death by bringing together birth and death: "You my baby. […] Like I drew the veil back so you could walk in this life, you'll help me draw it back so I can walk in the next" (216). Thus, Leonie is claimed by her mother and, in turn, she must claim her own mother and her ancestors by partaking in the ritual of death and, together with her Philomène, invoke "The last *mystère.* Maman Brigitte. […] She the mother of the dead. The judge" (215). This ritual, which draws strongly on Vodou, will therefore work as a means of placing African American culture alongside the tradition of the extended African diaspora in the Americas.

After Leonie gathers all the ingredients for the ritual—the graveyard stones from her brother's tomb, cotton balls, cornmeal and rum, an assorted assemblage that evokes the preparation ritual in *Praisesong for the Widow*—she returns to her mother's side. Mellis argues that her work here can be read at both an individual and a family level: by performing this ritual, she reclaims an old tradition from which she had been separated through her unconditional love for Michael and through the effects of drugs, and she also helps the entire family by providing a funeral ceremony for her mother (12). But, more importantly, in following in the steps of her mother, Leonie also reclaims a collective identity that is performed and transmitted through inherited cultural practices such as these. This is a process that takes Leonie, physically and psychologically, back to the death of her brother. While Given remained silent at his grave when she reached for help on deciding whether to carry on with her mother's request, once she makes her decision she sees him one last time. This fourth sighting is, thus, directly connected with her re-inscription into the family and the claiming of

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her cultural identity by performing the ritual of death for her mother. Despite Leonie's insistence on understanding her brother's ghost as a chemical reaction, this conviction starts to shake and she is brought to the brink of awareness of the abilities she inherited: "Even though I know it must be the dregs of the meth I swallowed, I still feel sober as a lead weight" (259). This is Leonie's closest articulation of the disruptive effect of spectrality that she has attempted to keep at bay, and it offers a renewed insight into the trauma of her brother's murder and her guilt. Given-not-Given does no longer appear as he used to be, but this time his ghost turns into a bloody version of his corpse, one that registers a spectral iteration of his murder that Leonie must confront:

> Given is still there. As the dog's bark rises, Given bleeds. I don't see the wounds, but he bleeds anyway, from his neck, form his chest. Where he was shot. [...] He freezes and looks at me, and I wish he was alive, was flesh, because I'd kick him. [...] Kick him for being here, now, for taking up space in the waking, sober world, right before me. For knocking the world sideways. (261)

This last sighting of Given shares with previous ones the imprint of Leonie's profound longing for her brother. In opposition to the others, however, this one offers a more direct exchange that Leonie cannot and does not wish to displace or obliterate. Instead, she literalizes a possible confrontation that shows the pain in the wake of his death and the aftereffects that his presence has on her life. This forceful grappling of Leonie with the ghost marks the possibility of healing that the entire ritual of death tries to offer, one that necessarily implies the acknowledgement of the spectral and the reclamation of individual identity along the familiar bonds of kinship and the diasporic bonds of Blackness. It is perhaps for this reason that Leonie's witnessing of spectrality expands and, for the first time, she is able to glimpse Richie: "I see a churning black cloud come to earth in the yard, but then I blink again and it's gone" (261). As the ritual progresses, the sighting becomes more forceful, "I blink, and up on the ceiling there is a boy, a boy with the face of a toddler. I blink again, sand scouring my eye, and there is nothing" (267). However, her misinformation about her father's past and the remaining resistance to open up to the spectral do not allow her to identify him.

The ritual death of Philomène constitutes the principal venue for the communion of specters: at this point in the narrative the ghost of Richie and that of Given converge and, most importantly, their witnesses expand beyond Jojo, Kayla and a reluctant Leonie, to Philomène. After learning the truth about his death and his subsequent disintegration, Richie is drawn back to the house by the glimpse of the song that would return him home. Before his temporal effacement, Richie had seen the connection between Leonie and her mother where he was a witness to "so much understanding and forgiveness and love that I hear the song again; I know that singing. I have heard it from the golden place across the waters. A great mouth opens in me and wails; I am an empty stomach" (245). This hunger conjures him up to Philomène's deathbed and is the foremost aspect she identifies upon seeing his presence: "Young. Full of piss and vinegar. [...] Vengeful as a beat dog. [...] Pulling all the weight of history behind him. [...] Like a cotton sack full of lead. [...] But still a boy. [...]. Hungry for

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love" (264–265). As noted by Swartzfager, her empathetic assessment of the ghost boy is deeply reminiscent of Beloved: "the hungry ghost [...] that brings the past into the present in order to demand a future for himself" (323). As such, it conveys the underlying trauma behind his present state, thus emphasizing the historical alongside the individual: Philomène sees and understands his hunger but, most importantly, she vests him with the humanity and childhood he was denied in life. It is due to this imperative need to assuage his starving self, that Richie desperately attempts to claim Philomène as his mother, a move that heartbreakingly shows his need to be claimed, in turn, as a son. For him this will open the path to a peaceful afterlife; however, Given's ghost interposes and, transformed by anger, denies Richie's wish with the menacing words "Not. Your. Mother" (265–266). His forceful defense of his mother makes his apparition unleash a hold over the rest of the family, thus allowing Jojo, Kayla and Philomène to finally see him. Jojo acknowledges the presence of his uncle and joins him in the expulsion of Richie, claiming "Ain't no more stories for you here. Nobody owe you nothing here" (268). Thus, with River oblivious to his presence and rejected by the rest of the family, Richie confronts his second failed attempt at finding home. In this respect, Dillinder argues that "Ward denies him a neat denouement, implying that there is no way to meaningfully offset his stolen life" (144).

In opposition to Richie, Philomène has been able to fulfill her life-long wish of seeing her deceased son. However, Ward crafts a duplicity that subsumes Given and Leonie in a single entity: while the mother sees the spectral presence of Given, her reaction is worked out through the bodily materiality of her daughter: "Mama slaps me. Where her hand hit burns. She cuffs me with an open palm on the other side, and my ear throbs with blood. Her right fingers grab my cheek, dig into my eyebrow ridge, and she's holding my face straight, whispering against whatever is above us" (266). The mother's violent physical touch denotes the hunger she herself has harbored for Given, one to which she has been drawn by the presence of Richie. Pained by the sighting of her son as one of those roaming spirits and begging him for relief, she calls him once "Given. [...] Baby. Please" (267). Taking advantage of the duplicity created in the previous scene, these words exert a transformative power over Leonie: "It's the word *baby* that makes me jump off the bed because I hear her say it now and I'm her baby again, soft-gummed and wet-eyed and fat, and she is whole and sweet-milked" (267). In this act, therefore, Philomène claims both her son and her daughter and, in turn, she is claimed as mother, an act of healing intended to carry them all to a more peaceful future. Thus, Given addresses her and makes his final intention known:

> Given's next to the bed, climbing into it, curling around her, saying "Mama," saying, "I come for you, Mama," saying, "I come, Mama," and Mama takes one long, ripping breath, her breath and blood and spirit beating frantic as a moth caught in a spider's web, and then "Shhhh," Given says, "*I come with the boat*, Mama," and then he moves his hand over her face, from her air-starved chin to her flared nostril to her eye, open and open, looking from me to Given to Jojo and Michaela to Pop at the door and the back to Given. Given's hand flutters above her face like he is a groom and Mama is a bride and he has pulled the veil from her head and let it fall back so they can look

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> upon each other with love, clear and sweet as the air between them. Mama bucks and goes still.
> *Time floods the room in a storm surge.*
> I wail. (269; emphasis added)

This fragment renders Philomène's death as a peaceful one, in opposition to that of Richie and Given, and thus adds a new layer to spectrality that approximates it to the benevolent and guiding presence of ancestors of different African-belief systems. In this respect, Choi argues that Philomène's death opens a second "atemporal space." As noted first by Richie, who described the smell in the room as "all salt: ocean and blood" (244), and later by Leonie, who equates time to a "storm surge," this space evokes the Middle Passage. Choi points out that this speaks to the violent foundational trauma of slavery, as it recalls "the bloody history, or, the history of blood" (446). In this respect, it is important to note the pervasive use of water imagery in the novel that can be traced in the multiple references to aquatic spaces as well as the prominent featuring of water to define the characteristics, concerns and even names of characters. In this regard, Dillender argues for an understanding of water and derived spaces as markers of an "expansive chronology" (141). It is in this second sense, the origin of blood affinities actualized in the diasporic dimension of African American identity, that this new atemporal space differs from Parchman and is constituted as a productive site of resistance. As Choi explains, "Mama's atemporal space is a diachronic space of remembrance as opposed to the annihilating space of Parchman. Her oceanic space breaks out the vicious cycle of the black experience and invites the unburied and the living to the space of black collectivity" (446). For Choi this, ultimately, constitutes the home that Richie so desperately seeks, one that emerges from an alternative worldview: "I contend that Ward creates 'home' for blacks in an atemporal oceanic space where the past and the present are able to meet simultaneously," which becomes "an alternative space of affect that functions against the space of white rationality" (435).

The healing of Philomène's ritual death, however, does not have a uniform effect on all of the characters involved. As mentioned before, Richie is not able to join her and Given's journey to the afterlife, and her immediate kin are plunged into grief. River confronts the grief for the death of his wife, another staple on the multiple dear losses that marked his life, through a particularly-devised form of spirituality. As rendered through Jojo's perspective: "I know what he was doing when he thought us asleep. Something like praying, but not to God. How he was speaking and asking and searching the craters and the mountains in the ceiling. Searching for Mam" (279). This is another instance of an alternative belief system where the patriarchal figure of an all-domineering god is displaced by the direct appeal to Philomène, the conjurer and healer. The most troubled outcome is represented by Leonie, whose integration in the family is finally frustrated by the grief for her mother. After performing the requested ritual, Jojo turns against her with accusations of taking her and his uncle's life away: "Your words. They let in a river. That's what took her and Uncle Given away" (270). Leonie's assessment of Jojo's reaction sheds light on her existing wounds and how the passing of her mother opens them anew: "He doesn't understand what it means, to have the first thing you ever done right by your mama be to usher in her gods. To let her go" (270).

The relation between the mother and the son reaches here what seems to be a point of no return for, in spite of her understanding, Leonie is once more overcome by the pain and frustration that take the shape of anger and violence. In their final confrontation, Jojo denies her the sympathy he has for all beings and renounces her as mother: "'Nothing. [...] You can't give me nothing.' He looks at mama when he says it, and I stop smoothing her hair back from her still face. And then he's looking at me and he's hard as Pop and soft as Mama. Censure and pity" (271). Despite their mutual intelligibility, the two of them refuse to draw the bridge that could unite them on their shared pain and Leonie violently attacks him and Kayla as the latter tries to defend her brother.

Broken by the pervasive intrusion of the past in the present embodied in the loss of her mother and her brother a second time, as well as the inability to build a future that will uphold her family, Leonie decides to leave with Michael. In this regard, Lewis notes that "Leonie's actions bring about further traumatisation not only because of witnessing Mam's death, but also because Leonie bears witness to her own traumatic experience. These initial acts of witnessing are ultimately detrimental to Leonie because there is not enough emotional distance from the traumatic circumstances" (281). The rendition of this decision speaks about her ambivalence throughout: "I want to hit him again and I want to hold him to me and palm his head again like when he was a hairless baby and I want to tell Jojo, *We a family*, and I want to ask him: *What you seen, boy, what you seen?* But I don't do none of that" (272; emphasis in original). This shows a tragic failure to overcome the personal and structural problems that undermine Leonie's status as a mother. As she approaches the car to leave, she states her disruption: "*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe*" (274; emphasis in original). Swartzfager explains that "The suffering that she feels is so intense that she loses the identity that she has so recently found in familial and cultural history" (329). Instead, she circles back to her addictions, the drugs and Michael, as she wishes to see her brother one last time and feel loved by a man with whom she shares a despairing need for evasion. The couple get on the car, "an aquarium" of their own devising, and "pretend at forgetting" (274–275). However, as Stork points out, the prospects are bleak, as "driving is not a means of escaping the past, but continues to bear the traces of memories, of unwanted ghosts that Leonie has not, and perhaps cannot, come to terms with" (261). As Jojo recounts in the final chapter, this will lead them further into themselves and each other, consumed by a hunger that finds an outlet in their deepening drug addiction. In this manner, Leonie undoes any kind of progress that she might have made towards healing. As Ewing points out, "While it is possible to read Leonie's successful participation in the ritual that allows her mother to die as redemptive, it is important to notice that although she wishes to reinscribe familial bonds, […] she does not do so" (154).

Together with Leonie, the character who suffers a deeper transformation is Jojo, in his case toward adulthood. Leonie's account of the effect that Philomène's death, the encounter with his uncle and the expulsion of Richie have in Jojo is traced physically:

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> Jojo gains what Pop's lost of his bearing. First, a brace across his thighs, all the bowlegged softness of his preadolescence dissolved to a granite stance. [...] Then across his chest, which makes his shoulders crowbar straight. [...]

> And then the headpiece so that the baby face, the last of the milk fat, is steel-still, frozen for war. Only Jojo's eyes peer out, carrying some of the boy in them. (270–271)

In this depiction Jojo seems to finally absorb the qualities of his grandfather, a marker of his entrance into adulthood. While this physical transformation epitomizes his coming of age, his full maturation is yet to be achieved at a psychological level in a process where the spectral turns into an instrumental mechanism. Throughout the story, which has been described as a bildungsroman (Conroy 34), there are various references to Jojo's coming of age that range from his involvement in the family affairs to the depiction of his emerging sexual desire. Common to all these instances is the racialized experience which imprints an acceleration of the process and invests them with a particular gravity. As such, Jojo must take on the adult responsibility of caretaker because of his absent mother, an absence that is itself deeply marked by the effects of racial trauma. In the teachings of his Mam and Pop the specter of racism looms large, as exemplified through the story of Richie, who becomes "a guide into the awareness of his personal connection to the traumatic history of his race" (González Groba 87). Another instance of this racialized socialization takes place in his reminiscing of his grandmother giving him a talk concerning sexual affairs at the age of eleven. This, together with River's story of prison, works as an implicit warning about racial and sexual dynamics epitomized in the southern rape complex that underlies the legacy of lynching and the criminalization of the African American male. As explained by González Groba, this "led to the lynching of so many black males in the name of the pernicious fiction of the sexually pure white woman threatened by the 'black beast rapist'" (91). This connection is brought to the forefront when he considers his desire for Misty and the Black woman at the gas station. The racial etiquette is a fundamental part of his identity, ingrained in his behavior and appearance from an early age by his grandparents as means of protection. In this light, he ponders on an earlier episode where his grandmother's touch bore the markers of warning and assurance: "If I'd get too excited, like when we got to the checkout and saw all the candy, she'd squeeze. Not too hard. Just enough to remind me that we was in the store, around a whole bunch of White people, and that I needed to mind my manners. And then: she was behind me, with me, loving me. Here" (128). This hold, that is ambivalently reduplicated in Michael's touch of Leonie, shows the extent to which Black subjects self-police and control their own bodies. To this integration of the white gaze in the very self, however, Ward adds a counternarrative of love that reinforces the value of Black life even in the face of denigration.

In all the tenderness of his thirteen years, the most striking aspect of Jojo's accelerated maturation is his experience with death. As Choi points out, "the story lays out the cycle of life and death" (135), but the second looms larger in the narrative. Somehow Jojo becomes the point of convergence of this tendency: the story opens with the slaughtering of a goat and ends with Philomène's passing, the two deaths that he experiences directly. However, he will also be the primary receptacle of the aftereffects of other deaths: he listens to the narration of Richie's murder and to the devastating effects that the killing of his uncle has on his mother's and grandparents' lives. Paradoxically, Jojo's most explicit connection with the world of the dead comes from their spectral prevailing: Jojo is the chief witness of Richie, and the only

living being able to communicate with him; toward the end he also sees Given, and together with his sister Kayla they become the sole witnesses of the final spectral object of the novel: a host of unnamed souls in the nearby forest. Upon Philomène's death, Jojo embarks on long strolls in a fruitless search for his grandmother's ghost; what he finds, instead, is Richie. Unlike what Choi purports, Richie's disintegration into a black hole seems to be far from a "therapeutic death" (444); instead, he seems to be condemned to a perpetual wandering. He tries to convey to Jojo his inability to reach the peace he sought: "'I thought once I know, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could'—the word sounds like a ripped rag—'become something else. Maybe, I could. Become. The song'" (281). His fragmented speech stands as a testament to a re-traumatization that emanates his conjuration, disintegration and final eschewal from the family home. Next to him, the siblings grasp an equally distressing sight where countless souls attempt to put their testimony to hearing witnesses. This single rendition of the final spectral object is worth quoting at length:

> And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. 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 still 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.* Eyes blink as the sun blazes and winks below the forest line so that the ghosts catch the color, reflect the red. The sun making scarlet plumage of the clothes they wear: rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies. Their eyes close and then open as one, looking down on me, and then up at the sky, as the wind circles them and moans, their mouths gaping now, the airy rush their song, the rush: *Yes*. (282–283; emphasis in original)

This image of the ghosts perched on trees as if they were birds is strongly evocative of the "bottle trees" tradition discussed in the second chapter, where bottles were placed on trees invoking protection from spirits, and it replicates Kayla's fundamental role, for throughout the narrative she continuously interprets the ghosts she sees as birds. Similarly to *A Visitation of Spirits,* the freedom associated to the bird is here frustrated as these souls remain trapped awaiting for their release. This is further emphasized in the symbolic power of the tree which, as Khedir explains, is "highly significant in African-American cultural memory" as a motif associated to lynching re-signified in this narrative as a space of diasporic communion ("Ghosts" 21–22). Unlike the two previous cases of spectral apparitions, here we encounter a multitude of anonymous ghosts, which draws on the collective dimension of haunting

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explored in the novel. As Antoszek explains, "*Sing, Unburied, Sing* incorporates embodied ghosts to 'rematerialize' African American history" and it "reimagines the idea of haunting by going beyond the categories of the individual and the human" (15). In fact, the only extant information about these specters is provided by their words, where the individual accounts converge in a (narrative) continuum, marked by the absence of punctuation, of racial oppression. These silenced ghosts of different genders, hues and ages put forth their violent deaths that expand across history and mark the consecution of generation after generation, linked by a shared traumatic story of violent lives and merciless deaths: from the sexual exploitation, starvation, separation and brutalization endured by enslaved bodies, to present iterations of police violence. As González Groba points out, "The testimonies of these ghosts are reminders of unacknowledged and unresolved troubles, of that which is there and not there, past and present, and future, all at the same time" (92). Through their testimonies Ward emphasizes a perpetuation of oppression that is part of a historical tendency toward the physical and social subjugation of African Americans and indicts the national narratives that seek to erase this traumatic history. Thus, these ghosts become "ethereal witnesses to the persistent cycles of antiblack violence" (Dillinder 144).

To Jojo's astonishment, it is his younger sister that responds to these laments; inadvertently adopting the legacy of her grandmother, Kayla becomes the empathetic witness of these souls in penance. Moved by their pain, she first instructs them to go home and, when such commandment fails, she devises a song that functions as a surrogate one:

> 'Go home' [...]. The ghosts shudder, but they do not leave. They sway with open mouths again. [...] They stay. So Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand. Only the melody which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of trees, that cuts their whispering but twines with it at the same time. And the ghosts open their mouths wider and their faces fold at the edges so they look like they're crying, but they can't. And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it's how Leonie rubbed my back, Kayla's back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. (284)

As noted by Sanne Steele-Nicholson, in opposition to Jojo's struggles "to break free of the familial and collective trauma," Kayla confronts it (46). In the end, it is Kayla's "uncanny emotional intelligence" (Swarzfager 330) that opens a channel of bidirectional communication with these ghosts. Her broken song, placed beyond the realm of language and narrativization is what allows for the creation of this communicative space where the traumatic reality embodied in the specters transcends language itself. As Ewing notes, "In resisting language, the novel resists a translation of pain into the system of meaning that creates the Other, obscuring oppression as it pretends to describe a singular truth" (153). Kayla's mixture of extra-verbal sound and gesture stands as a palimpsest of her family's legacy and her own reformulation. Not in vain, Jojo notes in her complexion and demeanor the imprint of Michael's eyes, Leonie's nose, Pop's shoulders and Mam's attentive sight

alongside something that is uniquely hers: "[...] something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (284). Through this assessment, Kayla's action achieves a quasi-historical status that approximates it to an exercise of remembering that must be carried out collectively at two different levels. First, by tracing back an ancestral, and necessarily diasporic, memory that, as Cucarella Ramon points out, "will become decisive to achieve survival" (92). Second, the process of assemblage that Kayla enacts implies an interracial approach where the history of African Americans is integrated in the broader American historiography, and the current iterations of these legacies are reckoned with at a national level that underscores white responsibility. In this manner, it also traces the intergenerational connection between the ghosts of the past and of the present where these familiar recollections are used as a cohesive element that allows for the recuperation and acknowledgement of the past as a basis for the construction of a collective identity.

Kayla's song is dominated by tenderness and love, and Petrelli expands on its healing power, arguing for its capacity to "neutralise the paradigm of enslavement, close the gap between the living and the dead and lead the spirits to a place in which their humanity can be redeemed" (333). However, its role as what he calls "a sonic vessel leading 'home'" (333) is not fully developed in the novel: in the final assessment that Jojo makes of the transformation of the specters' distorted and hungry faces there is a concession to a regained ease; however, as noted by Loomis, the catharsis is incomplete (202), as "the novel ends before readers see whether the ghosts truly cross over," something that qualifies the result of the song as "somewhat ambiguous" (204). In this regard, there is a disagreement among critics between an interpretation of this ending from a more optimist perspective that purports the final healing; and those who, like Dillinder, find the closure these souls seek "a chimera," thus emphasizing the continuation of haunting (144). The former consider Kayla's song an opportunity for integration and transcendence to a new order, "the nexus between the living and the dead," which is none other than "the world of justice, equality, and liberty" (Choi 445). Thus, the final word of the novel, "Home" (285), constitutes for Davis-McElligatt "a sign that her melody worked to carry them across the water, that they heard the song and become one with it—and that they have exited the limits of spacetime and entered into the future" (121). In turn, and following Ewing, I would argue that this outcome escapes any simplistic understanding of healing and transcendence. While it is true that Kayla's act of recognition and the song she crafts provide a space for the specters' full-fledged materialization and historization—"In telling their stories and participating in Kayla's song, then, the ghosts affirm their shared trauma, assert themselves as individuals, and locate the horror of the book in the past and ongoing violence that exists" (Ewing 154)—this does not function as an exorcism. Tapping into the very nature of the spectral, the ambiguity and ambivalence that define ghostly ontology are here exacerbated to convey the need to grapple with the past as a means to move forward, the need to remember in order to resist and fight, and thus the inevitable need of learning to live with ghosts. As Ewing explains, "the ending of the novel is an expression of trauma that in its very existence resists erasure, a complex act of

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mourning that maps the contours of an unbearable vanishing point as well as a possible path forward" (145).[70]

The novel concludes with an inversion of roles between Kayla and Jojo, with the little sister consoling him as he observes the unsurmountable pain that amplifies his emergent experience. As Lloyd points out, in this act, "the work of memory is central," as both of them become witnesses who "enable a process of remembrance and its attendant affects" (250) that serves to unearth these spectral voices from oblivion. Despite the partial open-endedness of the story, the exchange that Jojo attended and his willful listening to the testimony of the specters constitutes a pivotal moment of his maturation. With his grandmother's death, Jojo had delved into this coming of age that can be apprehended through the depiction of his present state:

> Sometimes, late at night, when I'm listening to Pop search the dark, and Kayla's snoring beside me, I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels. That maybe I know a little bit about why she left after Mam died, why she slapped me, why she ran. I feel it in me, too. An itching in my hands. A kicking in my feet. A fluttering in the middle of my chest. An unsettling. Deeper. (279)

His account is suffused with anxious powerlessness in the face of despair, and it stands out as Jojo's first sympathetic understanding of Leonie. As Conroy notes, "Through others' stories of suffering, he finds a way to sympathize with Leonie's own suffering and begins to overcome the alienation he previously felt towards her" (48). While he traces the parallels between the two of them, Jojo chooses to keep his place in the family and stand next to his grandfather and Kayla. Unlike Leonie, Jojo forgoes evasion of the love that nurtured him into the man he became, and this is what marks a shift in his attitude toward the last spectral object. The resistance that he had shown toward Richie is reversed through Kayla's intent soothing of the ghosts in the trees. Jojo's assimilation of his sister's actions as the adoption of personal and ethical responsibility toward the dead is what ultimately marks the completion of his coming of age. As González Groba points out, "the passage to manhood depends on learning to acknowledge voices from the dead that refuse to stay dead and which cry out for justice and recognition" (94). It is essential to note that this shift implies a redefinition of manhood that registers the importance of values such as compassion and interpersonal reliance, in detriment of a more patriarchal vision of masculinity associated to violence, emotional repression and imperturbability that he espoused at the beginning of the narrative. Lara Narcisi argues for the understanding of this move as a potential mechanism of liberation: "Embodying a new kind of masculinity, Jojo seems poised to break the familial cycle of incarceration. […] he learns to balance the masculine and the feminine; neither journey would

[70] Tribbett provides a reading of the novel alongside the blues tradition. While he signals different elements that cement this connection (including Parchman's association with this musical form), he points out "the motif of singing and the metaphor of the song of life" as "the most important links to the blues" (37). In this respect, it is the fundamental ambivalent nature of the experiences to which the blues give shape that becomes a relevant venue to approach the broader sense of Kayla's song. As Tribbett notes, "The fundamental dialectic at the heart of the blues—joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain—engages with similar tensions" (25).

be possible without the help of the women in their lives, and without the ability to learn from and emulate their generosity and compassion" (316).

When Richie mused on the maturation process that Jojo had to undergo, he defined it as one that would be marked by an enhanced understanding of time, love and home. From the privileged perspective granted by his spectral existence, Richie comes to understand time as "a vast ocean," a conflation of orders where "everything is happening at once" (186). From his living experience at Parchman, he learns that love is protection and sacrifice, as demonstrated by River. As Petrelli points out, this "goes on to suggest that love is to be intended as a fraternal bond established between the oppressed, a different relational dynamic aimed at creating a community of care among Black people within the walls of the endless prison of modernity" (331). Home, however, seems to remain for him an unfulfilled wish, the one that prompted his journey to Bois Sauvage and that remains unresolved due to the hold of trauma. Partly thanks to his abilities and the impact that the spectral has on him, Jojo experiences these landmarks in life: the understanding of time espoused by Richie becomes a natural conception for the young protagonist who repeatedly attends to the disruption of the present by the past and the creation of an alternative un-chronological order. Like for Richie, love is outlined in relation to his grandparents and his sister, but he also reaches a better understanding of its complexity when he reconsiders his mother. Again, home remains the most elusive concept that, at his present stage, is indissolubly linked to acknowledgement and remembrance. This essential distinction between the aliveness of Jojo and the spectrality of Richie becomes the strongest venue to tackle hope in the narrative. As González Groba points out, "We would like to think that, in the end, Jojo, even while conscious of the fragility of black life in America, is somehow better equipped to face the future and maybe break the cycle of incarceration that has severely damaged two generations of men in his family" (94).

3.3.2. Concluding Remarks

With *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Ward makes an important intervention in the field of spectrality studies as well as in the African American literary scenery. Her mobilization of the spectral metaphor stands as proud heir of her predecessors', as examined in this dissertation. In the novel the ghost presents an important multifaceted perspective: its chief function as the vehicle of unresolved trauma, associated in this case to the historical reality of Parchman Farm as a mechanism of coercion and subjugation of the Black population during the Jim Crow era, as well as the contemporary experience of devaluation of Black life presented as iteration of what Lloyd calls the "deep legacies of racial violence" (240). In addition to this, Ward also introduces, in a secondary plane, a dimension of spectrality that approximates it to an Africanist understanding through her exploration of the rich African substratum present in African American culture. Historically, this has been recovered and deployed to vindicate a diasporic connection that crafts a cultural identity forged by resilience. By masterfully weaving together these two strands, the author provides a comprehensive depiction of the spectral phenomenon that posits it as both metaphor for dispossession and social marginalization, and a site of resistance and a means to claim agency. Furthermore, Ward explores the ever-present duality between the individual and the collective: each of the named

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and nameless ghosts that appear through the pages of the novel has a story of their own that functions as a link to the broader African American history. Like their witnesses, they harbor a personal damage and response that is, nonetheless, a faithful reflection of the racial dynamics within the world they inhabit and, therefore, necessarily political. As Choi claims, "Ward writes stories about the unspeakable, the invisible, the excluded to deconstruct white narratives and rebuild the American history; and reasserts African roots and history, spirituality, black raciality and locality within the American tradition" (435). In this light, the author not only adopts and reproduces her forebears' haunts, but she amplifies them by crafting a theory of spectrality grounded on a magic realist disruption of the quotidian by a host of human and other-than human presences that impact the lives of her characters. Her most recent novel, *Let Us Descend* (2023), continues this project of historical reclamation and expands her spiritual theory to encompass, not just the ghosts of those whose lives were taken mercilessly, but all the natural spirits that River's granddad sought behind the forces of nature.

As demonstrated in these works, as well as in previous novels, Ward's is a "half-lyrical, half-political tale" (Antoszek 7) deeply attuned to the critical debates and social concerns of our time. Thus, in addition to a decidedly womanist and environmentalist perspective, *Sing* is embedded in the contemporary acrimonious racial debate. Different critics have drawn attention to the timeliness of the novel, approximating it to a form of activism concerned with an interrogation of the past in search of answers for the present state of affairs, and thus "forcing the legacies of slavery into full view in the present" (Swartzfager 332). As discussed in the introduction of the chapter, this has been socially articulated with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, one defined by its counter-hegemonic emphasis on feminism, LGBTQ issues and defined by a decentralized leadership (Hartnell 14), of which Ward's novel becomes a key artifact. With its emphasis on an intergenerational transmission of trauma through an oral storytelling that renders personal and collective memory a counter-narrative of historical discourse, Ward centers the possibilities of healing in the sharing, active reception and appropriation of these (hi)stories. In fact, for Mellis, the great traction of the work among critics and readers alike, "speak[s] to the desperate desire for healing, hope, and, ultimately, a safe haven to call home, and indicate that, perhaps, for those looking for healing and community in America, the way forward may be to look to and embrace the past" (14). Jojo's coming of age, defined by a racialized socialization and his first encounters with state-sanctioned violence as well as his coming to terms with the history of his community, marks his emergence as a Black man in America as one characterized by precarity amid the perpetual iteration of racist violence. Through this character and his relation to his family, Ward provides a balanced take on the forces at work in the current moment. Petrelli has remarked on what could be considered the author's realist-pessimist account of contemporary Black experience:

> Through her work, Ward gives voice and representation to the African American community, exposing the harrowing conditions in which its people have been forced by neglect, poverty and systemic racism—the effects of which she presents unsparingly. At the same time, her insistence on the

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> salvific powers of kinship and bonds that people establish to counter and redress the destructive, dehumanising impact of institutional violence demonstrates a determination to counter this state of things through the liberation afforded by a community united by love, care and resistance. (319–320)

This duality is embodied in the very valences of the spectral as discussed throughout this analysis. When considering the presence of the ghost in relation to the iteration of trauma, it is approximated to a vehicle of expression of hopelessness. However, the witnesses' coming to terms with the specters and the integration of their transformative force in their lives allows for the creation of a productive space of resistance.[71] Ward herself has acknowledged this ambivalence in her writing: "The past doesn't feel far removed from us. The past feels like the present. When we're writing about what it means to be Black in Mississippi, when we're creating our characters, the past is very present in our work with all its attendant traumas and hardships and joys, all the things that make life worth living here. We are writing from places where people didn't leave" ("Something"). There is no doubt that the picture that Ward paints of Mississippi, and of the whole of America in the twenty-first century for that matter, is a bleak one. Nonetheless, the realist pessimism that suffuses these pages is not enough to erase the hope she believes must sit at the core of every writing enterprise: "I think there has to be hope in any story. [...] Hope equals meaning, and for me there has to be some sense of meaning to any story" (Ward, "Black Girls" 2018). This hope draws on the urgency of a national reckoning with a history that is ingrained in the very structures of America's architecture, one that, like the spectral haunting of the novel, has a profound hold on contemporary society. Among us, like ghosts perched on trees, the unburied keep singing for a sympathetic ear that acknowledges their presence.

3.3.3. Coda: *Let Us Descend*

Jesmyn Ward's latest novel, *Let Us Descend,* was published in October 2023 and has since received mixed reviews. As mentioned before, in this work the contemporary Bois Sauvage of her three previous novels is replaced by the antebellum South, "the beginning of the reality Ward has lived and written about" (Edemariam). Borrowing the title from Dante's "Inferno," the story unveils what Ron Charles has called "a real hell on Earth" that was the reality surrounding the institution of slavery. The narrative revolves around Annis, a young, enslaved woman in a plantation in the Carolinas and the journey in which she embarks after, first her mother, and then herself, are sold. Following in the trend of neoslave narratives, the novel sheds light on those aspects that were obscured or downgraded in the source genre of the nineteenth century, chiefly, the inner lives of the enslaved and their acts of resistance. In this

[71] Petrelli offers a critical Afropessimist reading of the novel focalized in the character of Richie as epitome of "unredeemable suffering" (328). In his examination of the novel, the critic assesses the treatment of different ideas and concepts coined by Frank Wilderson, one of the foremost proponents of this theory. While a detailed account of this theory falls outside the scope of this analysis, this framework is adequate to assess the iteration and perpetuation of racial oppression in the present moment and can be apprehended through the aforementioned discussion of the ambivalence of the novel's ending and that inherent to the overall phenomenon of the spectral.

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sense, the work is an ode to love and humanity, and its structural axis are the maternal-filial relations that unite Annis' grandmother, Mama Aza, her mother, herself and the baby she carries in her womb at the end of the story. The love and protection that stem from such connection constitute the main tool of resistance, as declared in the opening words of the novel: "The first weapon I ever held was my mother's hand" (1).[72] As Yesmina Khedir argues, motherhood appears "as a symbol of power and a site of female strength" ("Bearing" 41). The memory and strength of her forebears lead Annis through the torturous pilgrimage of the slave coffle that drive her into the heart of Louisiana and ultimately guide her escape into marronage. In this journey, Annis will grapple with a host of supernatural forces that provide an alternative worldview. The spectral features prominently among these and, while it differs greatly from the main function discussed in the case of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, it is worth briefly considering some points of convergence. In *Let Us Descend*, the spectral can be traced in connection to two main elements: the different spirits of natural elements with which Annis communicates, and the ghostly voices of her mother and grandmother. The former constitute the central mobilization of the spectral in the narrative, and it can be best accounted for by considering its Africanist dimension. As the protagonist goes deeper into the process of the inner slave trade and is sold into a new plantation she becomes acquainted with a number of spiritual forces such as "She Who Remembers," "They Who Take and Give," and, most importantly, one that calls itself Aza which introduces her to these ghostly "restless lineages" (Edemariam) that embody an alternative animist worldview. Thus, spectrality appears embedded in a particular epistemological framework that is proximal to an African-based paradigm. Closely resembling River's great-grandfather and Philomène's teachings, in this novel, the world is also "seething" with spirits (34), and these anchor their existence on the condition of being acknowledged and paid attention to: "We speak. […] Because you hear" (160).

Of these spiritual forces, the one with whom Annis establishes a closer connection is Aza, the spirit of storms, that adopted the shape of her grandmother after meeting her on the slave ship that brought her to America. One of the soldier wives of an important Fon King, Mama Aza is captured and sold into slavery, after she was made pregnant by her true love, a fellow soldier. When the ship is besieged by a storm, she prays for her and her unborn child's life and Aza is conjured, thus establishing a transgenerational connection between her kin and the spirit. While Aza helps Annis at different times, their relationship is troublesome as she realizes that the spirit is moved by an egotistical and cruel hunger that can only be alleviated by human worship and blind submission to her will. As Ada Edemariam points out, "These spirits are ravening to be placated, to be seen, wheedling, vengeful, loving, fallible, often chronically untrustworthy but necessary allies in negotiating psychological and physical pain nonetheless."The most important aspect of their relationship for our inquiry, however, is the fact that Aza introduces Annis to the Water, a spiritual force that creates an alternative space-time that is beyond chronological order. As Aza explains to Annis, to begin to fathom Water, "you must understand something more of time, of the universe" (125). This atemporal entity

[72] Jesmyn Ward. *Let Us Descend.* Bloomsbury, 2023. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

is described as "all spirit" (125), beginning and end, all-knowing. Furthermore, the Water is ascribed a particular characteristic: she does not speak, but sings, and her force is perceived in the singing that emanates from some human and other-than human beings. As the spirit explains, "The Water has many voices. The people… […] They sing with the Water. They sing back to it" (221). Aza confesses that she has heard the voice of the Water in children and also in Annis, as well as in all of her people, a singing so strong that those spirts who heard it return looking for it: "They say it cleansed them. That it wrecked them. Said it swept them up in a terrible wind. That is why some go out into this world: they search for it. They whisper of that singing they caught, once. From the water. From your people" (221). As experienced by Annis later on, the singing of the Water figures here as a force of liberation, one that gives a glimpse into an alternative world of freedom: "It runs through me, blinding me and there is a great presence at the heart of it, all-seeing, all-knowing. I am small and afraid and aghast at it; I am embraced. I am" (255). While the living feel its force as resilience and resistance, the spirits find it their home. In fact, Aza's account reinforces the spatial-temporal dimension of Water as an afterlife when she explains that, after death, her grandmother became part of it.

Taking this into consideration, I contend that in *Let Us Descend* Ward completes the theory of haunting outlined at the end of *Sing*. The Water discussed in the former novel appears as the atemporal space that opens up at the moment of Philomène's death, one that is described through water imagery. In this manner, the author also accounts for the singing that Richie hears throughout and Kayla's final song; she equates it to the symbol of the Water and reinforces this realm as a peaceful afterlife. In this sense, this reading stresses and amplifies the Africanist dimension hinted at in the previous novel, especially if we consider that the realm of Water is deeply evocative of what Mbiti called *Sasa*, a time order that comprised simultaneously the living and the living-dead that exist because they can still be named, as discussed in the second chapter. However, the model of haunting expanded by Ward in *Let Us Descend* continues to have the duality introduced in *Sing*: next to those who had a peaceful death, there are those who die violently and who, like Richie, are relegated to a perpetual spectral wandering in search of home. As stated by Annis's mother, "Violence begets remaining" (220). The author, however, resists a neat classification of the complexity of life and survival and introduces a third kind of death that underlines the manifold facets of Black experience:

> What of the ones who die bad but not awful? Those who die bleeding from the eyes, those who die with their breaths rattling, those who die because their bodies break on them, piece by piece, like clocks come to the end of their circling, those who die from bellies swelling, their eyes turning yellow, those who drown in rivers, those who work and work without rest, who lie down one night, exhausted from the march of days, and never wake in the morning? It's all bad. (220)

This reflection, which defies Aza's vague assertion of the existence of multiple alternative worlds, rescues from obscurity those common lives that have not made paradigmatic abolitionist cases, civil rights lawsuits or, for that matter, social media hashtags, but that

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continue to be impacted by explicit acts of discrimination, inequality and structural racism. This predicament, which Julian Murphet has called "the neglected lives of the 'other America'," is at the core of Ward's present enterprise and the threat that unifies her oeuvre.

Alongside this primary spectral element of the novel, there is the secondary element of the spectral voices of Annis' mother and grandmother that accompany her in the escape from the second plantation into freedom. Their disembodied ghosts appear to give a lesson of resistance that is to nurture Annis in the new journey she is to undertake. Mama Aza tells her about her captivity in the cells from which she was to be transported to America, of the Middle Passage and how the baby she was carrying drew her toward life. She learnt that the strongest act of resistance laid in resilience, in continuing to breathe where all she wished for was giving up: "Every day I woke, I spared myself" (271). Her mother comes back to remind Annis of her own value and strength, "You your own weapon. […] Remember" (273). While these two spectral apparitions are closer to other mobilizations of spectrality discussed in previous works, inasmuch as their testimonies become vehicles of revision, they exert a more explicit pull toward the transformative power of spectral exchange. Because Annis remembers and bears witness to them, she is vested with the necessary poise to fight a sure death in the hole to where her mistress forced her, and to carry on a new life, not as one of Aza's worshippers in the city, but by herself in the swamps. As Jenny Maattala claims, this transforms the novel, into "a story of both origin and resilience, and of descending into the inferno and coming out the other side."

In this narrative, Ward exploits the liquid proprieties of Water to lay the foundations for the crafting of an alternative universe. Aza explains that "The worlds are oceans. […] There are currents between them that connect them. Straits, like streams" (224). While Annis hopes to find her family waiting for her at one of these waterways when her time comes, she chooses the material life she has been given to experience freedom, effectively reworking the motif of the split between the (free) mind and the (subjugated) body present in multiple accounts of bondage. If her body was what defined her in a slave society, her reclamation of it in its full materiality represents the most subversive act of liberation. The ending of the journey completes what has been described by Imani Perry as "Annis's bildungsroman" and it is a testament to the claim of agency denied by slavery: "I want to lead. I want to find my own way through this knot of woods, drying toward their winter sleep. I want to choose where to put one aching foot, where to sink into the mud, ankle-deep in mosquitoes, before pulling it out to step again. […] I want to choose" (283). As Annis acknowledges, this agency is a collective enterprise enabled by all the women who loved her and were lost along her way, and her claiming it for herself and her baby constitutes a strategy of emancipation projected onto the future generations that are to flourish in the swamp.[73] Closing the gap between the

[73] In her short story "Mother Swamp" (2022) published prior to the novel, Ward seems to engage with the afterlives of *Let Us Descend* (Khedir, "Bearing" 41–42). She presents an all-female maroon community found by an ancestor who ran away from slavery pregnant, the ties they draw with other maroon groups and their present decline which Afice, the protagonist of the story, must confront. Similarly to the novel, the mother-daughter relations are a fundamental theme, the depiction of nature holds animist undertones, and spectrality appears in the ghostly ancestral voices that guide Afice's journey back to mainstream society. Furthermore, the metaphorical dimension of spectrality as invisibilization is also explored through the phenomenon of marronage.

past and the present, *Let Us Descend* shares with *Sing, Unburied, Sing* the urgent need for acknowledgement and listening to the (spectral) Other as the main sources of growth as well as an ethical imperative. As Annis claims about the brutal rape of her beloved Safi, "If she must bear it, the least I can do is bear witness" (46).

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CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

At the outset of this dissertation, I introduced the notion of the spectral as a conceptual metaphor espoused by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. As such, the ghost transcends its symbolic or tropological standing to turn into a relevant critical tool of analysis. It is this potentiality that I have attempted to examine. The initial contextualization of the ghost along historical, cultural and, more specifically, literary coordinates has enabled the mapping out of the specific spectral instances present in each of the works that constitute the corpus of this dissertation along a broader social context and epistemological tradition. The psychoanalyst interventions of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries established the grounds for the theoretical examination of the ghost that bloomed with the spectral turn of the 1990s. Born in the spirit of postmodern philosophy and aesthetics, these new explorations would thrive on the disruptive potential of the spectral to develop a profound revision of the master narratives that had governed Western thought and ideologies. Such rewriting would foreground the revenant Other as a socio-political construct against which both the historical rhetoric of progress that underlay colonial and neocolonial enterprises, and normative identities were upheld. The uncanny alterity the ghost represents, at once the familiar and the abject, turns, in the literary sphere, into the fodder that will foster a host of genres and modes through which to enact major cultural interventions. Among these the Gothic occupies a privileged space in American literature, its imprint a constant presence from the country's inception to our days. Racial Otherness becomes in this context the ever-resurfacing absent presence, one that ultimately appropriates its archetypical monstrous assimilation to describe instead the traumatic reality of slavery, and its heinous ramifications of segregation and structural racism. This intricate connection between spectrality and the Black subject is what ultimately defines and qualifies the haunting to which the novels analyzed bear witness, one that I have tried to account for through various analytical models of spectrality, trauma and memory.

In the previous chapters I have considered both the figurative and non-figurative aspects of the spectral; while the latter are the main object of inquiry, the figurative dimension features both in the linguistic formulations that employ the metaphor of the ghost to evoke invisibility, and in formal terms through what I have called structural spectrality. This mechanism, which is more apparent in *Mama Day* and *A Visitation of Spirits,* ultimately remarks on the characteristics attributed to the spectral that appear across each narrative's specific discussion of such spectral instances, chiefly ambiguity, relativity and multiplicity. It is this exploration of the non-figurative emergence of the spectral, in other words, the deployment of literal ghosts or haunting, that is the driving force behind this piece of research.

This examination was carried out in two differentiated units that obey to my working hypothesis: I contend that we can ascertain two differentiated, although intimately related, functions of the spectral in the novels under analysis. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Mama Day* the foremost dimension of the spectral explored is the Africanist one. I argue that the ample variety of Afro-syncretic elements locate the ghost along a broader reclamation of African roots and heritage that is prompted by the anxiety derived from assimilation into mainstream white culture. While the novels studied under this premise delve into the founding trauma of slavery and articulate an important social commentary, this is displaced to a secondary position in favor of the diasporic exploration of a cultural identity that will sustain the marginalized group in the face of white supremacy. In turn, in Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* and short stories "Tell Me, Tell Me" and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*," as well as in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the inverse claim applies: the Africanist dimension of spectrality is downsized and the specter is here mobilized in relation to trauma, both individual and collective, where it becomes the key means through which to articulate a complex social critique that tackles both intra- and inter-community dynamics and to draw attention to the perpetuation of these issues today.

I began by considering three spectral passages—a term created *ad hoc* to account for the particularity of the spectral as embedded in the physical and spiritual journey of the protagonist and thus contingent on external and internal movement—that transform Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*. With their attendant change of scenery across the U.S. and the Caribbean, each of these moments is dominated by a spectral figure that illuminates different stages of the protagonist's life and that outlines the identity and cultural crisis that besieges her. The ghost of Aunt Cuney takes Avey back to her origins and thus plants the seed of the metamorphoses that she is to complete. In the second spectral passage, her deceased husband makes an apparition that awakens her to the contours of her predicament: the process of assimilation into white society and detachment from African roots, which enacts a process of mourning. Lastly, the host of ancestral specters with which the protagonist communes in the third spectral passage complete her claiming of the self with an added diasporic consciousness. In *Mama Day* I outline three spectral elements which are more varied in nature and scope. The most comprehensive one is the spectral dialogue between George and Cocoa, which not only draws a complex social picture, but also provides the structural axis of the narrative as well as the interpretive lens for a kind of haunting that is aural, rather than visual, and that will enable the deployment and understanding of spectrality in the novel. As such, the Days' spectral voices constitute the second spectral element which, together with Sapphira Wade's ghostly presence, as the third delineated spectral element, configure the main venue to explore an alternative epistemological paradigm deeply influenced by African-based belief systems (through practices such as conjure and hoodoo) and to unearth the trauma and resistance embedded in their (hi)stories.

In terms of spectral usage, *Visitation of Spirits* becomes the most multilayered work analyzed. The protagonist's struggle at the crossroads of family, community, religion and homosexuality is carried out through four spectral scenes that transport Horace through loci of oppression and self-abnegation, chiefly the church, the elementary and high schools and the

theater, where he becomes the witness to his own suppressed self. The agency denied to Horace in these spectral scenes, which are instrumental in understanding the conservative family ethos and his suicide, is restored in his role as haunting agent. The second plotline of the novel is pervaded by Horace's metaphorical presence after death, be it openly conveyed (as in his cousin Jimmy's memories) or inarticulate (as in the opening and closing sections of the novel). In Kenan's short stories "Tell Me, Tell Me" and "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*," spectrality is similarly deployed through the so-called sightings or scenes. The first story revolves around six sightings through which an elderly white woman will be confronted with the ghost of a Black boy that resurrects her past and, by extension, the South's. Another ghost boy makes his presence known in the second story; here, there is a mixture of spectral sightings where Randall, the main witness, approaches the mysterious figure, and spectral scenes that unfold in his haunted house and weave a history of antebellum runaway slaves. Lastly, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* we can differentiate three distinct spectral objects which, in their juxtaposition, draw a continuum of racial oppression across generations and geographical expanse. The foremost spectral object of the novel is the ghost of Richie, a Black prisoner from Jim Crow Parchman Farm searching for closure. Next to him, Given stands as the second spectral object of interest, the victim of a heinous racially motivated murder. Their stories converge in the atemporal space put forward by the third spectral object, a mass of unnamed souls belonging to different periods whose claims for justice reveal the long history of racial oppression that determines the existence of Black subjects in the United States. As a coda to this section, I included a brief comment on Ward's latest novel concerning the deployment of spectrality. Here the author completes a model of haunting initiated in *Sing* where the paradigm of traumatic haunting is combined with an alternative, Africanist-inflected, conception of the hereafter.

Despite the differentiation established as part of my main contention, throughout the analysis I have stressed two aspects that have determined the critical approach to the spectral metaphor and that are of the utmost importance in this study, especially as it considers the African American literary tradition in the context of what Kathleen Brogan terms "cultural haunting." These have to do, first, with the double dimension of the ghost as vehicle of the individual experience and epitome of a collective reality. As such, in these works, it can be repeatedly seen how the experiences prompted or embodied by the spectral have a clearly denoted racial component that directly appeals to a history of anti-Black violence that ranges from the transatlantic slave trade to twenty-first century racist murders, as well as the founding and flourishing of the African American community. This leads us to the second aspect that I have tried to outline throughout, which is the dual valence of the spectral, one that has sometimes been underdeveloped in previous critical analyses. With this I am referring to the fact that the ghost, mainly due to its invisibility, has often been used as a proxy for dispossession and marginalization (a correlation that has been accounted for in the figurative uses of the trope) and, thus, highlighted in connection to a negative valence. However, by virtue of its liminal identity and refusal to stay dead, a more positive valence of the ghost can be construed. It is according to this second view that we can account for its power of historical revision, one that emanates from reclaiming a voice in itself and from the

subsequent (paradoxical) process of visibilization it enacts, which approximates it to a tool for subversive resistance. In all the cases studied—with the exception of "Tell Me, Tell Me," where the author uses this mechanism precisely to make a statement about white responsibility—bearing witness implies a re-inscription of these presences in history and, moreover, this often entails an empowerment and transformation of the self. In what follows, and by means of conclusion, I would like to discuss some further points of convergence among the narratives which are, to a great extent, derived from these central tenets.

In all of the narratives under analysis the ghost appears as a catalyst for their witnesses' confrontation with individual and collective or national memory, and therefore its function as an agent of revision is reinforced. In all of them, with the exception of "Tell Me, Tell Me," this has a relevant effect on their main witnesses. It is the subject position of these witnesses that I would like to consider along racial, gender and sexual lines. Luminita Dragulescu claims that "In the context of the U.S. racial regimes, being black often means being exposed to a range of traumatic experiences, ranging from daily racial microaggressions to episodes of blatant racial violence that occur with the background of haunting specters of the slave trade and the plantation system" (282). To this general condition it must be added that of those for whom the racial oppression intersects with the violences embedded in their gender, sexual or other non-normative conditions. In assessing the novels and stories analyzed in this dissertation, it becomes apparent that most of those placed at the receiving end of the spectral unfolding either identify as women—such is the case in *Praisesong*, *Mama Day*, *Sing* and even "Tell Me, Tell Me," which despite showing Ida's dismissal of the spectral in line with white power, unveils her flagrant gender oppression—or homosexuals—in the case of *Visitation* and "Resurrection Hardware." Even Jojo, the single major witness who does not fit in either category, undergoes an incipient process of masculine deconstruction. As hinted at in the first chapter, this is owed to what Chassot describes as a situation of double silencing or exclusion. These dissident identities are posited as the most available to the alterity the ghost represents because they themselves represent the living and material Other within their already Other(ed) communities. In this regard, it is not a coincidence either that the authors themselves are identified within the aforementioned categories, for the enterprise they carry out in the project of raising the voice of the dead is tantamount to the act of claiming their literary voices at the edges of a literary system that has systematically marginalized them. When considering cases of haunting in Black and white southern literature, Patricia Yaeger remarks on the work of African American women writers regarding the creation of a haunting scene that is "more complex and involves the in-gathering of scraps that are almost not there," a process which lends to the narratives "a rhythm [...] of disappearance willed into reappearance" (92). Here, the dual valence of the spectral is one mobilized to the utmost productiveness: in terms of affect and affinity, the ghost becomes the proxy to represent the racial, sexual and gendered identities that have been invisibilized at a national and community level. However, the transformative effect that the spectral unfolds in the lives of their witnesses and the subsequent impact this has on their communities turns them into key tools to voice their individual experiences alongside the collective history, a mechanism that works against the manifold attempted erasures.

Together with their gender and sexual identification, racial identification is also an issue for most of the witnesses throughout the narratives. In general terms, a survey of the witnesses of spectral apparitions shows either a definite embedding in the African American community or a movement of approximation toward African American culture. This is often represented through the deployment of African heritage and Africanist remnants, which, for some of the witnesses of spectral apparitions, is solid and overt—such is the case of Miranda and Philomène, both of them conjurers—while for others, it turns into a process of reclamation deeply influenced by the spectral and central to plot development. The most explicit case in this regard is Avey's, whose journey is one toward her African American and diasporic roots, but Cocoa, Horace, Randall, Jojo and Leonie equally negotiate their complex relations to Blackness with different outcomes. While for Cocoa, Randall and Jojo the exchange with the spectral becomes an important venue of acceptance of their varied identities (chiefly, hybridity and homosexuality) and incorporation in the African American community, for Horace and, especially, Leonie such integration is frustrated. The relation that the former maintains with his community through the argued transformation into an agent of haunting and the subsequent transformative power he could potentially exert over its members could be read as providing some sort of respite from his tragic death, one that is to a great extent influenced by the strict mores of the ultra-religious community to which he belongs. Leonie's willful distancing from her family and the culture they represent seems to be more definite and highly dependent on the difficult transformation of the social structures that govern her life and ultimately prompt her evasion from reality through drug abuse. Notwithstanding their different outcomes, in all these cases the narratives bear witness to a process of claiming the self, sometimes almost cathartic, some others insufficient, but one that is effected alongside and *enabled by* the positioning of the condition of hauntedness as the only possible ethical stance.

This claiming of the self with the attendant (paradoxical) embodiment prompted by the spectral exchange is epitomized in many of the texts analyzed through the centrality of corporeality or, more specifically, through the process of attachment between the mind and the body that these narratives rework. This becomes more forcefully apparent in *Praisesong* and *Mama Day*, where the transformation of the characters is manifested physically with Avey's cleansing and bodily arousal and Cocoa's corporeal invasion and recovery. In Kenan's fiction, the body also becomes a centerpiece of contention as it turns into the unsurmountable barrier that Horace wishes to transcend and cannot, or the conjuration of a prosthetic bodily materiality effected by Randall in "Resurrection" to account for the opening to the presence of the spectral. In *Sing*, corporeality is almost as haunting a presence as its various ghosts. Here the undoing of the body mirrors the psychological tearing apart of Black life that the social conditions enforce: Richie and Given are brutalized by racist attacks, Leonie is physically consumed by the drugs of despair, Jojo comes close to annihilation, and vomiting is throughout a central motif to represent the indigestibility of the myriad forms of anti-Black violence exerted on the racialized body and psyche. Ultimately, this claiming of a holistic self where body and mind are one seeks to undo the forced split between both components that

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had such a currency on the representations of the enslaved self as means of survival, thus becoming an unlikely and subtle tool for the articulation of criticism that seeks redress.

Another important point of convergence among these narratives is the primacy of intergenearationality, which is often formally marked by the reduplication of plots and even characters. I would argue that such reduplication is carried out on both a vertical and a horizontal axis, each with broader socio-historical resonances. Horizontal reduplication can be ascertained in the usage of the double or potential doubles of protagonist characters such as the binomes Horace-Jimmy or Richie-Jojo. Of greater interest for our discussion is the vertical reduplication: in most of the narratives analyzed we find different generations of the same family; in most of these, the older generation (generally great-grandparents, grandparents, or analogous familiar configurations) are the ones that establish a closer relation to the protagonists as anchors or witnesses of the spectral. This applies to the case of Avey and her great-aunt Cuney (who herself is reduplicated in the character of Lebert Joseph, this being another instance of horizontal reduplication that speaks of diasporic geographical expansion), Miranda and Cocoa, Horace and his grandfather Zeke as well as Jojo and his grandparents, River and Philomène. It is common in this pattern of intergenerational transmission that the medial generation, normally that of the parents, is absent or lacks narrative relevance. This applies to all the previous cases discussed where parents are either dead or do not exercise their roles as such. This seems to be intimately related to the multiple instances of surrogate parenthood that proliferate in these narratives. We can see this more explicitly in Abigail's and Miranda's caring for Cocoa after her mother's death, in Zeke's and Retha's rearing of Horace (as well as Jonnie Mae's and Malachai's analogous treatment of Jimmy) after the parents leave, or in Jojo's and Kayla's consideration of their grandparents as their actual Mam and Pop due to their parents' erratic performance. While in Avey's case her parents are present, the ancestral and nurturing surrogate parents of her rebirth are her Aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph. Thus, this trend extends beyond family structures to encompass other adjacent characters, as illustrated by Lebert Joseph's relation to Avey or River's relation to Richie. This can be interpreted in a dual manner: on the one hand, as representation of the generational discontinuities produced by the founding trauma of the slave trade and slavery. In this context, I find particularly pertinent to consider Saidiya Hartman's theorizing of filiation in *Lose Your Mother*, where she argues for the enslaved persons' descendants' position of metaphorical orphanhood: "To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past. The letters distilled the history of the transatlantic slave trade to this: I was an orphan" (*Lose* 85). On the other hand, this sheds light on the importance of the extended family or communal ties of kinship that, in cases such as Sapphira Wade's, stretch beyond a particular time to the memory of a community birthed into being and maintained across centuries by the power of an ancestral mother. Lastly, the younger generation, normally the grandchildren, is posited in a focal position, the group that, in its entanglement with the spectral, brings together the past and the present. Taking into consideration each of the examples discussed throughout the dissertation, such intergenerational focus can be ascribed to the transmission of a trauma that has not yet been resolved because it is still being perpetuated. Therefore, this turns into a key asset to

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discuss the prevasiveness of racial oppression, or what Ta-Nehesi Coates has called the "generational peril" ("The Black" 271) of Black life, across space and time, this being the two final parameters of convergence that will be considered.

In her *Ghost-Watching American Modernity*, María del Pilar Blanco claims that "to look for ghosts as a reader of literature and film is to study different perceptions of haunted landscapes as distinct from one another—and to vigilantly account, as a reader, for the spatiotemporal coordinates that merge to produce a site of haunting" (1). Varied as they are, the different spatial settings featured in the narratives analyzed are anchored by a common point of reference: the U.S. South. The haunted locus *par excellence*, the South is indeed a distinctive region where the past and the present coexist in an uncomfortable anachronism and, as stated in the initial chapter and illustrated throughout, this region is a land ripe for ghosts. The Black communities described are generally located in the rural parts of the region, dominated by diminished economies. The first two novels examined share the particularity of making these southern locales fictional islands (Tatem Island in *Praisesong* and Willow Springs in *Mama Day*) isolated spaces that function as means to preserve a vernacular African American tradition shielded from the powers of (white) modernization and globalization. Kenan's Tims Creek also evokes this isolation and detachment but, in this case, tradition, as embodied in strict religious mores and regulations, shifts from an asset of resilience into an oppressive force. However, even in their independence, these settings stand as testaments to a history whose legacies are more forcefully conveyed in the present-day poverty and desolation that dominate the landscape of Ward's Bois Sauvage. The loci where these stories are set turn, thus, into a palimpsest where the master's house is overwritten by the Black shacks, slavery is overwritten by the acts of resistance of the enslaved, this by the rhetoric that transformed the systematic brutalization of the Black body into the mythic order of moonlight and magnolias, and the struggle for emancipation into a Lost Cause fight to uphold tradition. Again, this is all overwritten by diverse and ongoing gains and backlashes that make the racial struggle for survival a continuous trace in the landscape. While the South is presented as a locale from which this bleak reality stems, most of the works expand the idea that, if the region represents the most flagrant attack on Black life, the violence and discrimination extend well beyond the Mason-Dixon line. As such, both *Praisesong* and *Mama Day* offer a dire picture of New York as one of the primary destinations for the exodus of African Americans fleeing the racial terrorism of the South. Thus, the different geographical points located in these novels—the North, the South, and the Caribbean—are punctured by the presence of the spectral and emerge as spatial indicators of the realities with which the novels engage: ongoing Black oppression and the venues for redressal and contestation. As Blanco argues, "ghosts and haunting" are in themselves "commentaries on how subjects conceive present and evolving spaces and localities" (6).

A final consideration of temporality is of the utmost importance to fully address the deployment of spectrality in the narratives analyzed in previous chapters. Throughout I have referred to the disruptive character of the spectral; this is one that is made apparent not only in the plotline, but also in terms of realist representation. In the first chapter I discussed how the ghost became a common trope in Gothic or magic realist traditions that oftentimes become

subterfuges for an acute treatment of social issues or taboos. Alongside the ghost, in the novels analyzed, conventions from both these genres—ranging from experiences at the border of the real and the hallucinatory, haunted houses, evil *doppelgängers*, extraordinary happenings—as well as other speculative traditions are amply explored. In fact, Madhu Dubey delineates the importance of speculative fiction in late literary returns to slavery and claims that "recent novelists of slavery undo historical authority by exploiting an exorbitantly fictive imagination" (785), by appealing to "an antirealist literary imagination that can fluidly cross temporal boundaries and affectively immerse readers into the world of slavery" (785). In addition to these motifs and tropes, it is also worth considering how the formal structure of these narratives also tramples the conventions of realist representations. Both *Mama Day* and *A Visitation of Spirits* include either paratextual elements with information that is paramount to the development of the plot—such as the case of Sapphira Wade's bill of sale—or a multiplicity of textual formats that configure a strong multiperspectivism—both novels have sections narrated from the collective point of view of the community. Similarly, Kenan's novel includes dramatic excerpts that reduplicate events otherwise told through the perspective of a focalizer. Among these formal aspects, the one to which I would like to devote the last part of this discussion is the immanent temporality present in the narratives, more specifically the disruption of the chronological order by myriad flashbacks. With the exception of "Resurrection Hardware," analepsis is structural in the texts discussed: for Avey each of the spectral passages implies a return to a further stage of the past; *Mama Day* and *Visitation* are narrated retrogressively and contain a multitude of flashbacks within this structure; in "Tell Me, Tell Me" and *Sing* these flashbacks are part of the narrative fabric, as without them the threads would hang loose.

As pointed out in the first chapter, Peter Buse and Andrew Scott argue that anachronism is inherent to spectrality and the very structure of haunting. Created *in* and *by* the past and actualized in the present, the ghost's liminal identity disrupts the distinction between both orders. This is an immanent truth of any spectral object, but in the African American cases this acquires special relevance since the specter does not simply represent a repressed event with which the characters must contend, but it carries with it the events of a history that is not yet overcome; that is to say, these Black ghosts carry with them a past that is in perpetual iteration in our present and this is what ultimately prompts their haunting, the never-ending violent forces that brought them into existence in the first place. Dubey speaks of a "temporality of haunting" where "the past breaks into the present like a ghostly intruder, and the distance between then and now dissolves into a disorienting sense of simultaneity" (789). Instrumental for the creation of such temporality is what this critic labels "time-bending devices" whose main function is "to reveal the long afterlife of slavery" (790). This is perfectly instantiated in *Sing*—the novel that most theoretically grapples with temporality—first through the doubling of Richie's and Jojo's experiences and the concomitant transposition of Jim Crow Parchman Farm into the Mississippi State Penitentiary as embedded in the prison industrial complex, and, second, by the positioning of Jojo in a continuum of potential erasure alongside Richie and Given. In their survey of contemporary Black literature, Habiba Ibrahim and Badia Ahad extrapolate the narrative treatment of

temporality to articulate the current condition of Black existence. They put forward the concept of "black temporality of crisis" (1) through which they posit that Blackness operates on an alternative temporal register to that of chronological time (4). For them, the Black condition is not "*in* crisis" but "*a* crisis" in and of itself (6), marked by the unending iteration of the past in the present: "events are repeated sequentially at different moments in a cyclical fashion. In this conception, the passage of time does not signal progress but a futurity that is shaped by past events" (6). They correlate the pervasive disruptions of chronological order, tropes of return and mobilization of the genre of horror present in contemporary Black literature with the process of a state of exception made quotidian, and they argue that "To persist in an ongoing state of crisis is to be made vulnerable by time's indefatigability" (3).

Despite the pessimistic social picture that these theoretical elaborations put forward, they also invoke the aforementioned dual valence of the spectral, one that is structural. When accounting for the proximity of the plantation and its resurfacing literary treatment, Eve Dunbar argues that "conjuring the plantation functions as a refusal to close a wound of the plantocracy" but also enables us to "imagine other possibilities for Black life that exist amid but also in excess of enslavement's long shadow" (57). All of these novels testify to these alternative possibilities of life in the actual plantation and the virtual plantation-dynamics to which the Black body is subjected. Within the former, Avatara's journey back to Africa with the Ibos, if only mentally, grants a claiming of the self that the subjugation and exploitation of her body cannot redress. Likewise, in *Mama Day* Sapphira's reclamation of herself and her children from the claws of the institution and the subsequent formation of the Day family line constitutes the most overt act of resistance to slavery. If, as Sheila McKoy contends, the difference between Black and white, slave and free is defined by "being located in time," by "the privilege of knowing one's place in time" (211), these two women become epitomes of reclaiming one's space, which is tantamount to reclaiming their self, their roots and the history that they have yet to write. For other characters like Randall, Jojo and Kayla, their spectral exchanges seem to have granted them an awareness of the potential for freedom, even in the face of bondage, that should nurture them as they traverse the post-plantation grounds. This foregrounding of the workings of temporality in the narratives under analysis (at an external level with the subversion of realist representations and internally with the rupture of chronological linearity) is owing to the fact that, in great part, it answers the question that originated this piece of research by accounting for the emergence of the spectral in the contemporary scene. At the core of each returning specter is the ever-present annihilation of Black life in America, the need to articulate culturally and socially the transhistorical legacies of slavery, a cry that will hopefully awaken our consciousness to the atrocious past, the tragic present and the impending future.

This transition from the immanent temporality of the literary text to the social criticism has been sustained by a theoretical apparatus that relies heavily on the spectral language of the unending. The contemporary reality of African Americans has been articulated through what Hartman calls "the afterlives of slavery," ones defined by "the ongoing processes of dispossession, accumulation, and extermination" that determine a "structural" relation to the past ("The Times" 210), as discussed in the third chapter. In her critical account, the

connection between the spectral and these perennial hazards of African American life are literalized as she unveils the continuum established among the carceral modes of coercion and suppression that govern Black life in America. As she states, "If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison" (*Lose* 133). Similarly to Hartman, and heavily relying on Afropessimist thought, Christina Sharpe has defined Black life as always inscribed "in the wake of slavery," that is, "to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13–14). Throughout both the literary texts analyzed and the philosophical approaches to the Black condition underway in our time, the peculiar institution becomes an ever-looming presence whose legacies of Black disposability and fungibility regulate current social dynamics. At the core of these afterlives, in this wake, is the unrelenting fact of Black death owing to the enforcement of the ever-adapting plantation ideology. It is what Coates terms the American "heritage" that is the destruction of the Black body and that has historically been, and continues to be, perpetrated with impunity (*Between* 103). Poet and activist Claudia Rankine claims that "the condition of Black life is one of mourning" (145). Black death, as derived from structural racism and inequality, seems contingent on Black progress in the U.S., the foremost marker of the temporality of crisis discussed by Ibrahim and Ahad. As Rankine claims, "Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police, or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained, or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against" (147).

Given this reality, it hardly comes as a surprise that ghosts roam free among the living, because "Black Americans are constantly stepping into the souls of the dead. Because they know: They could have been them; they *are* them" (Kendi, "The American"). By making the spectral the focal point of my critical discussion, I have attempted to provide a materiality to these disembodied presences, to carry out both an inscription of the Black body in the annals of American history and also of the diverse African American voices in the literary sphere. When Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved*, she crafted a novel that transcended even the standard landmarks of masterful literary creation; she put forward a piece that was both reclamation of the standing of the African Americans in the annals of the country's history and of African American women writers in the national canon, and a tombstone over the forgotten mass grave that is America. The authors analyzed here, Morrison's contemporaries and heirs, have engaged her same project of mourning and commemoration. In a country littered with thousands of monuments to the Confederacy, the hegemonic intention to forget part of the (hi)story must be curtailed by the imperative need to remember. Coates writes that "America is literally unimaginable without plundered labor shackled to plundered land, without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship, without the culture crafted by the plundered, and without that culture itself being plundered" ("Notes" 85). The literary texts engaged in this dissertation militate against the fallacious idea of American innocence, the mythic origins of a country without a past, and confront an encounter with what Arthur Redding calls "that beckoning Other, the disposed, the forgotten, the unburied, the un- or still- or half-born—that which eludes historical accountability" (41). They dramatize a resurrection of those that have

been *ghostlined,* sent to the other end of the divide "between being and nothingness: between those said to be present and those designated as society's present-absences" (Young 4), and put forth the need for an impending social reckoning with the past and its legacies. In the critical analysis of the literary works that constitute the corpus of this dissertation, as well as in the theoretical discussions that have accompanied them, this is posited not simply as an ethical imperative, but as the only means through which to move forward. Within and beyond African American literature and the United States as a country, haunting, trauma and memory are erected as the defining qualities of our zeitgeist, an interpolation in an increasingly dehumanizing world at the service of capitalist interests, bodies and voices being destroyed before numb consciences, lest their ghosts come to haunt us.

FUTURE AVENUES OF RESEARCH

The delineation of a corpus of research necessarily entails an exhaustive process of selection that is forged with exclusions. In our case, there are a number of novels featuring spectrality that we could not include mainly due to space constrictions but that would have constituted a relevant material for a further expansion of the current line of research. *The Salt Eaters* (1980) by Toni Cade Bambara deploys a marginal instance of the spectral in association to the process of healing derived from African American traditional medicine which would frame it alongside the novels studied in the second chapter, under the rubric of the Africanist dimension of spectrality. Another novel that could have been considered is Phyllis Alessia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), which relies heavily on a spectral possession by the protagonist's ancestors that underlines the importance of memory. However, there is a second group of novels that could be of even greater interest to test the working hypothesis of the dissertation. Bernice McFadden's *Gathering of Waters* (2012) foregrounds the town of Money, Mississippi as a locale governed by animism where the specter of Emmett Till remains after his death.[74] The infamous case of Till and its spectral hold on the African American imagination is also present in Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys* (2018), a juvenile book that renders the spectral existence of an African American teen killed by the police that meets the ghost of Till, thus stressing the perpetuation of anti-Black violence. Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House* (2015) deploys the trope of the haunted house as the structuring element of a comparison between present-day circumstances of Black life and the period of the Great Migration, accentuating the persistence of the haunting beyond the South and into the supposedly safe haven of northern cosmopolitanism. Finally, *Grace* (2016), like the briefly-examined *Let Us Descend,* is a neo-slave narrative in which spectrality appears both in its literal form and in a more indirect formulation that I will call *implied spectrality.* While the former is defined by the existence of a spectral object, the latter is associated to a set of more diffuse characteristics that convey a sensation of hauntedness, even when they do not feature an actual specter. In this novel, these are the development of parallel storylines—the novel draws next to one

[74] Martín Fernández Fernández's recent monograph *The Emmett Till Case in US Fiction: Psychological Realism, Magic Realism and the Spectral* (2023) offers an extensive approximation to the spectral in this narrative as a part of the survey of the representation of the Emmett Till case in contemporary American novels.

another the runaway slave Naomi's and her daughter Josey's coming of age in the context of Southern slavery—, the iteration of characters and events—the dyad mother-offspring and the experience of rape—as well as shared themes, tropes or motifs—the most prominent in this case being motherhood, gender and racial relations—that create a scheme of powerful intra-textual significance. This cluster of novels that can be described under the label of neo-spectral fiction and that could be studied alongside Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, exploit the different dimensions of the spectral metaphor discussed throughout this dissertation, as they engage with the experience that emerges at the juncture of the juxtaposition between the past and our most contemporary realities.

The scope of this research can be further expanded at different levels. First, and following Kathleen Brogan's theorizing of cultural haunting as a pan-ethnical phenomenon, the field of African American literature could be broadened to consider Black literature of the diaspora along similar patterns of the transatlantic slave trade and its afterlives in postcolonial societies of the Caribbean as well as Central and South America. Within the United States, a comparative study between African American fiction and other ethnic literatures, chiefly the Native American and the process of literal and metaphorical removal, could also offer a fruitful analysis. Second, in addition to spectrality and haunting, another possibility of expansion resides in the interrogation of the emergence and consolidation of contemporary African American speculative fiction and, especially, the use of a particular set of antirealist conventions in a growing number of accounts of slavery that range from Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) to Ta-Nehesi Coates' *The Water Dancer* (2019). However, if we return one final time to the spectral as a conceptual metaphor, I consider that the area of figurative spectrality and what Peeren calls the agency of invisibility, as discussed in the initial chapter, offer a great avenue to advance the general theorization of the ghost and the field of spectrality studies alongside a further inquiry into the current state of Black literature that has not yet been fully explored. In this regard, I would like to propose first an examination of the theoretical potentialities of the spectral metaphor through the aforementioned concept of implied spectrality that could be scrutinized through the analysis of novels such as *Delicious Foods* (2015), by James Hannaham, *The Mothers* (2016), by Brit Bennet or *Hell of a Book* (2021), by Jason Mott. In these works, while no ghost seems to be named as such, metaphorical haunting is a structural force that looms large over characters and incidents. A second field of study that could be derived from the advancement on the figurative analysis of the spectral metaphor is that of prison narratives, either fictional, in novels like *This Life* (2021), by Quntos KunQuest, or in autobiographical accounts of inmates such as *The Sun Does Shine* (2018), by Anthony Ray Hinton, Albert Woodfox's *Solitary* (2019) or *My Time Will Come* (2021), by Ian Manuel, among many others. During the research process for this dissertation, I found mass incarceration to be one of the most difficult realities to come to terms with, in great part due to the uncomfortable realization that it had eluded any personal reflection on the topic of Black oppression. This fact, the understanding that something so pervasive had gone unacknowledged, left a strong imprint that led me to think about the prisoner in terms of the "living dead" postulated by Peeren, one that in the African American context acquires a complex significance.

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Beyond spectrality and the multidimensionality of the spectral metaphor, there are a couple of tendencies that I have identified in my survey of contemporary African American literature and that are, non-coincidentally, related with some of the transversal characteristics previously discussed. The first of these relates to the preponderance of family sagas in contemporary Black literature—this could be illustrated in several of the works analyzed and others, such as *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* (2012) by Ayana Mattis, *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi or *A Kind of Freedom* (2017) by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton, among many others. This could be related to the aforementioned intergenerational pull, and I would tentatively argue that at their core lies the need to localize the Black self, and subsequently the previous and posterior generations, in a history from which it has recurrently been erased. The second is the autobiographical tendency that is present in contemporary African American literature, especially as developed by writers and other intellectuals. In this regard I find illustrative recent memoirs such as Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), briefly discussed in the third chapter, Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018) or Natasha Tretheway's *Memorial Drive* (2020). This triad of Mississippi authors write about trauma and corporeality, the self and the community, the South, and, key to it all, about what it is like to be Black in America, what it is like to live in a condition of mourning, these being the driving force of their enterprises. The ideas discussed in this final section are only an outline of the potentialities present in the literature and criticism that I have come across in the course of researching and writing this dissertation which must be arranged systematically, tested and examined thoroughly. With this study I have humbly attempted to contribute to the project of visibilization that is carried out by countless writers, artists, critics and historians, to advance another step in the industrious archeology of searching for improperly buried corpses and giving agency and voice to those unfairly silenced.

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Since the so-called “spectral turn” of the 1990s, the ghost has been placed at the forefront of critical debates and artistic manifestations. Adopting the field of spectrality studies, this dissertation seeks to account for the ubiquity of the ghost in contemporary African American fiction. This examination posits two dimensions of spectrality: first, the Africanist one, where the ghost appears as a marker of cultural identity that is mobilized to problematize the loss of cultural bonds in the process of assimilation into the white hegemonic society, and to unveil the anxiety such process of integration entails for the Black subject. Second, the psycho-social one, where the ghost functions as a catalyst for the subject’s confrontation with their own material self and with the past.