

READING TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* IN JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES AND SING, UNBURIED, SING*

LEYENDO *BELOVED* DE TONI MORRISON EN *SALVAGE THE BONES Y SING, UNBURIED, SING* DE JESMYN WARD

VICENT CUCARELLA RAMON

Author / Autor:

Vicent Cucarella Ramon

Universitat de València

Valencia, Spain

Vicent.Cucarella@uv.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1547-2273>

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Abstract

Drawing on Harold Bloom's concept of *facility* or the unavoidable influence of texts that run through the cultural legacy of the African diaspora, this article examines the intertextual relationship between Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Salvage the Bones and Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward engages with *Beloved* to retell the myth of Medea and to rethink black motherhood to keep on interrogating questions of self-definition and the sense of community aiming to offer a more nuanced understanding of black women's reality under sundry layers of oppression. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Ward rereads *Beloved* to plunge into the importance of diasporic memory and its role in fostering familial bonds and healing. This is done by using the Morrisonian trope of the familial ghost(s) with the resulting traumatic wounds to exemplify the manifold ways in which collective memory has historically kept communities of African Americans together. This intertextual exercise exposes the way in which Ward's novels continue to examine Morrison's account of the violent legacy of slavery and its new practices on African American families and communities from past to present.

Keywords: intertextuality; slavery; motherhood; ghost; memory; Morrison; Ward.

Resumen

Partiendo del concepto de «factility» de Harold Bloom, esto es, la influencia inevitable de los textos que siguen la tradición del legado cultural de la diáspora africana, este artículo examina la relación intertextual entre *Beloved* de Morrison y las novelas de Ward *Salvage the Bones* y *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. En *Salvage the Bones* Ward se basa en *Beloved* para recrear el mito de Medea y repensar la maternidad negra para seguir interrogándose sobre cuestiones de auto-definición y el sentido de comunidad con el objetivo de ofrecer una concepción más matizada de la realidad de la mujer negra sometida a diferentes capas de opresión. En *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Ward relea *Beloved* para analizar la importancia de la memoria diaspórica y su papel para fagocitar lazos familiares y curación usando el tropo morrisoniano del fantasma con sus heridas traumáticas, para ejemplificar las distintas maneras en las que la memoria colectiva ha mantenido históricamente unidas las comunidades afroamericanas. Este ejercicio intertextual expone el modo en el que las novelas de Ward examinan el violento legado de la esclavitud que se desprende de la obra de Morrison, así como sus nuevas prácticas en las familias y comunidades afroamericanas desde el pasado hasta el presente.

Palabras clave: intertextualidad; esclavitud; maternidad; fantasma; memoria; Morrison; Ward.

«That sharing of our stories confirms our humanity»
– Jesmyn Ward

1. INTRODUCTION

Justine Tally's opening affirmation in her seminal volume on *Beloved* still resonates vividly: «Like a seemingly endless palimpsest, the breadth and depth of Morrison's *Beloved* continues to fascinate» (2009, p. xiii). I would further add that it also continues to loom over contemporary African American texts. The novel was published in 1987 and went on to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction a year later. Ever since its publication, *Beloved* has elicited a plethora of interpretations and studies that have, in due course, secured itself the reputation of being considered one of the greatest American novels

of the twentieth century¹. Most probably, the primeval appeal of the story lays in the fact that it is based on a true story that took place in the darkest moment of US history, that is slavery times. At a moment in which she was editing a project called *The Black Book* (1974), a compilation of memorabilia representing 300 years of African American history, Morrison hit on the history of Margaret Garner. According to a newspaper article that Morrison had read, in 1851 Margaret Garner, a former slave, escaped with her children from a plantation in Kentucky to Ohio. When her new owner and a posse formed by the US marshal in Cincinnati tracked her down, Garner threatened to kill her children and succeeded in killing her toddler girl by slicing her throat in front of her master and overseers.

Touched by the story and willing to muse about the traumatic outcomes of slavery, both in historical and ontological terms, Morrison envisioned Sethe –her literary revision of Garner– who, though being the main character in *Beloved*, stands out as more than just an embodiment of the real character. The novel opens in Cincinnati, in 1873, in the house numbered 124 on Bluestone Road that used to be owned by Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, where Sethe herself lives with her remaining daughter, Denver, after her two sons ran away from this spot that appears to be hunted by the ghost of the killed daughter. The arrival of a former friend in bondage, Paul D, unearths a series of flashbacks and fragmented memories that hark back to the time where Sethe and Paul D lived on the Garner's plantation, their flight to freedom and the different relationships established throughout their tumultuous lives. The awakening of painful and traumatic memories gets even more complicated when a strange woman named Beloved, who seems to be the grown up version of the killed daughter since this was the word that Sethe engraved on her daughter's tomb, presents herself in Sethe's life and will eventually act as the catalyst for the understanding and replacing of memories in search of healing and survival.

Indeed, through Sethe's story, Morrison crafts a neo-slave narrative, that is, a type of novel that revisits the experience and means for survival

1. It is worth noting that *Beloved* was chosen the best novel of the last 25 years by a survey undertaken by *The New York Times* in May 2006.

following the accounts of slave narratives², that explores the lasting effects of slavery on individual black women and men and their communities, and dwells on the destruction and resilient survival of the African people—60 million or more, according to Morrison's introductory epigraph which works as an approximation of how many black people died in the infamous Middle Passage. In this way, the novel rewrites, responds and builds upon the primeval slave narratives that brought to the fore the denunciation of slave practices and evinces slavery and its aftermath as the country's «national trauma» whilst, at the same time, draws on ideological tenets that suffused the «peculiar institution» to revisit and, to a certain extent, rewrite the creation of US history by «examin[ing] from within the nature and definitions of 'humanity'» (Tally, 2009, p. 1). Having been published in the late 1980s, the novel tackles different issues that have been vastly analyzed: the intrinsic potential of neo-slave narratives in their revisiting of slavery, the importance of memory for, as Tally reminds us (2009, p. 39), the publication of the novel «coincided with the debate raging over the validity of 'Recovered Memory' and its use as testimony in court in the United States», motherhood and the multifarious alternatives of maternal love, kinship, the legacy of the ancestors, the return of the repressed out of the deathly traumas and consequences of slavery, namely through the figure of the revenant, or the power of spirituality and the healing nature of redemption.

Taking into account the cultural impact and the ongoing legacy of slavery and racist practices in US society and culture, it is no surprising that such issues are still pervasive elements within African American literature. Indeed, and following the echoes of the old adage «the more things change, the more they remain the same», racist and so-called neo-slavery practices keep on surfacing in contemporary US. As far as the legacy of slavery goes, African Americans are still subdued to depraving policies in support of racial exclusion and discrimination and, as Michelle Alexander explains (2010, p. 2) in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, the

2. Neo-slave narratives are those contemporary fictional accounts that adopt the antebellum narrative of the enslaved to ponder about conceptions of race, as well as the importance of perspective and historiography. Established examples of neo-slave narratives are Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), or David Bradley's *Chaneyville Incident* (1981), among many others.

outcome of slavery practices has endemically made black people in the US fall prey to «legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were». In this light, it is apt to say that racial profiling, police brutality or the discrimination in the depraved housing system are nothing but tentacles that follow in the aftermath of slavery. Thus, it is no wonder that contemporary African American authors often link these current social issues with the ideological substrate of the slavery system.

In what follows I wish to focus on the two latest novels of the African American writer Jesmyn Ward, who not only has been bent on showcasing such issues through her fiction but that has openly acknowledged her literary debt to *Beloved*. As I will try to demonstrate, Ward revisits Morrison's novel and expands the way in which the Nobel laureate dug into the intimacies of slavery by transporting its new shapes into contemporary stories and realities. Ward's fascination with *Beloved* was made clear on August 9, 2019, five days after Toni Morrison passed away, when she wrote a laudatory article in *The New York Times* entitled «I Was Wandering. Toni Morrison Found Me», in which she declared the importance and impact that *Beloved* had on her at an early age: «speaking to me as none had ever done so before» (2019). Through Morrison's Pulitzer-winning novel, Ward realized that her «little rural Southern black community» (2019) could conceivably become a literary reality. Yet, *Beloved* also served as a creative milestone since it also taught her the importance of memory and remembering as well as the potentiality of kinship and community bonds within the African American culture. Thus, in this essay I will focus on the importance and presence of *Beloved* in Ward's two novels that received the National Book Award for Fiction: *Salvage the Bones*, published in 2011, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, published in 2017. My analysis of this intertextual aesthetics draws on what Harold Bloom (1988, pp. 405-424) schemed as «facility», or else the unavoidable influence of texts that run through the same literary tradition, in this case specifically through the cultural legacy of the African diaspora. Ward's novels draw from the fecundity of Morrison's masterpiece, though they replicate certain thematic aspects whilst inscribing the current gaze into similar matters and practices.

My intertextual analysis is thus based on a close reading of the two novels that features some instances in which the stories of the two books

steer towards the intertext to either replicate it or provide new interpretations. In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward relies on *Beloved* to retell the myth of Medea and to keep on interrogating questions of self-definition, motherhood, the sense of community and, walking behind Morrison's cues, ponders about the epistemological retelling and transforming of the myth to a more nuanced understanding of black women's reality under different layers of oppression. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Ward rereads *Beloved* to delve into the importance of diasporic memory and its role in fostering familial bonds and healing using the Morrisonian trope of the familial ghost(s) with the resulting traumatic wounds that exemplify the copious ways in which collective memory has kept communities of African Americans together. Following *Beloved*, the novel's enactment of memory relies on the shared activity of storytelling that commemorate the cultural bonds of the African diaspora. Thus, Jesmyn Ward's novels not only continue *Beloved*'s path, but also persist in its literary legacy by transporting to contemporary America stories that are still haunted by death, suffering and trauma but also alive with the horrors of racism and the pervasive suffering of African Americans.

2. BELOVED IN SALVAGE THE BONES: MOTHERHOOD AND THE MYTH OF MEDEA

Salvage the Bones is Jesmyn Ward's first and acclaimed novel and it premises the literary account of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on a black family. The novel follows the actions of a poor family of African Americans, the Batiste family (a distressed black father and his children Skeetah, Esch, and Junior, and their prized pit bull China), in the twelve days leading up to and immediately after the hurricane. Throughout the twelve chapters, each of which chronicles a single day in the lives of the characters, the hurricane builds as an oxymoronic absent presence which remains unnamed until chapter six and unseen until chapter eleven. Yet, the Batiste family, dwelling directly in the storm's turmoil, is already in roiling trouble. They are a marginalized family that live in a crumbling house in Bois Sauvage, at the outskirts of Mississippi, near a dirty lake formed after now-deceased grandparents sold off layers of usable earth that white people left abandoned. The mother died giving birth to the youngest son and the concept of motherhood

and mothering soon arises as one of the novel's central themes, because Esch soon reveals to be pregnant with her brother's best friend's child. Besides, the female pitbull, China, is also giving birth at the opening of the novel and this fact will also be decisive for the unfolding of two different and intricate types of Medean motherhood. In fact, this is the link that marks *Salvage the Bones*' intertextual exercise with *Beloved*. Although the novel has been studied in light of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*³, I would like to bring to focus Ward's singular rendition of *Beloved* in *Salvage the Bones* through the literary trope of the Medean motherhood that also permeates Morrison's novel.

Indeed, love, and particularly mother love, is a thematic concern in *Beloved*. Similarly, different vagaries of mother love also inform Ward's first novel. And yet what can be considered Medean motherhood, as a distinct nature of mother love, is what really bonds the two stories. Shelley Haley studied Morrison's penchant on Medea for her novel and focused on three main aspects that the two stories share or present as a contrast: alienation, identification with father figures and the ontological shift against barbarity. According to Haley (1995, p.178), Morrison does more than simply take up the literary trope of the killing mother since the novel problematizes the Medea-myth by providing new insights to the story. Likewise, Ward's novel builds upon the myth by grounding its new reading in Morrison's revision of the classic figure. Consequently, in this intertextual chain and sharing, *Salvage the Bones* exposes and adapts the ongoing validity of *Beloved*'s version of the black Medea.

Haley explains that, to clearly see the connections that establish the dialogue between *Medea* and *Beloved*, it should be noted that Morrison's Sethe might as well be read following the Euripidean version of the myth (Haley, 1995, p. 180). In it, Jason's wife is depicted as a woman under her husband's control. Paradoxically, she can only achieve her own individual self through an act of violence against her own offspring to seek vengeance. However, this move will be socially punished as it will mark her removal from society for «as a killing mother Medea violates the basic societal assumption

3. For the study of this intertextual exercise see Sinead Moynihan's article «From Disposability to Recycle: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*».

and alienates herself further from Corinthian community» (Hale, 1995, p. 181). Therefore, she is cast aside as a «barbarian» (Haley, 1995, p. 181), whose sense of maternity is rendered altered and violated which, in due time, shaped the definition of her motherhood as «the breeder». Confirming John Updike's tendentious statement (2008, p. 113) that «[m]otherhood is a force in Morrison's universe as to be partly malevolent», the Nobel Laureate built upon this stereotype and used the deleterious effects of slavery to present a slave mother who also kills her daughter.

The alienation in Euripides' myth stems from honor, whilst in *Beloved* Sethe's alienation is marked by her trauma and the way in which the townspeople fail to understand and empathize with her act. Hence, just as Medea's marginality is marked by the location of Corinth at the outskirts of Athens, so the setting of 124 Bluestone Road is situated close to the Ohio River, a liminal spot that establishes the frontier between slave and free territory, and leaves Sethe's family separated from the city. Similarly in *Salvage the Bones*, the Batiste family lives in a shabby house that also separates their land from the rest of the city. The land where they live was inherited by their ancestors, «Mother Lizabeth» and «Papa Joseph», ex-slaves who gained the land from white people after the Emancipation Proclamation. That is why Papa Joseph nicknamed the land the «Pit» after he let the «white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses», which eventually left a huge hole where they had excavated the side of a hill (Ward, 2011, p. 14). Thus, The Pit appears as a remote and desolate landscape, the Batistes' house «nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided» (Ward, 2011, p. 116), a space of «discarded plastic garbage cans, detached fenders» (Ward, 2011, p. 126). As in *Medea*, this marginal space that links the subjectivity of Sethe and Esch constitutes the starting point of their journey towards redemption and healing. And this redemption is rooted, in both stories, «in defiance of traditional conceptions of motherhood» (Ribeiro, 1999, p. 165).

As a central trope in the plot, *Beloved* differs from the myth of Medea in the type of motherhood that Morrison upholds for Sethe which in turn will help to mold the motherhood that is presented in Ward's novel. With her «too-thick» love for her children, she embodies a specific kind of love that also separates her from the type of black motherhood that other female

characters present. It is important to recall that Baby Suggs had eight kids but unfortunately lost seven and ended up keeping just one. Ella, who was raped by a white master, refused to care for the children that came out of this unwanted intercourse. Sethe's African mother, whose children were also bred out of rape, let them die. Not to mention, as Tally aptly pinpoints (2009, p. 33), «the fact that Sethe wonders if her mother was hanged for trying to run away, thereby presupposing the abandonment of her young daughter». Unlike Medea, and also differently from other black characters in the novel, Sethe's sense of motherhood is being built as the narrative advances and it is very much couched upon the bond mother-daughter, since it solely relies on her relationship with Denver and Beloved, the ghost of her killed daughter. Therefore, her maternal love does not come from pride or self-assertion but rather hovers between the mother she is and the motherhood she could not experience. As Haley observes (1995, p. 188): «Beloved becomes the daughter Sethe could not be; Sethe becomes the mother her mother could not be [and] Denver transforms the act of maternal love and female bonding into [...] a re-enactment of Beloved's murder».

It is precisely this sort of liminal motherhood, the one she actually has and the one that is lost, the one which is mirrored in Ward's novel. In *Salvage the Bones*, the loss of the dead mother will haunt Esch's pregnancy as much as the loss of the dead daughter sears Sethe's caring for Beloved. Esch remembers her mother constantly, but the type of motherhood that will help to question her own sense of maternity is China's. So, if Sethe's character is built upon Medea, in Ward's novel two different Medeas are displayed: a truly Medean and a healed version of the myth. That is to say, Ward takes Sethe's version of the Medean motherhood and divides it in the two alive mothers that live in her story. In other words, Ward responds to the Morrisonian Medea-figure to offer a motherhood with «transforming possibilities» (Stevens, 2018, p. 162). China, the pitbull is a key figure in the novel when it comes to ascertain Esch's redefinition of what it means to be a mother. In a Sethean move, China kills one of her new-born puppies out of protection and links her motherhood to that of the mythical character. Esch herself acknowledges this parallelism when she defines the pitbull as «bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea» (Ward, 2011, p. 130), and, being pregnant, brings out her concern over the maternity: «If she could

speak, this is what I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*» (Ward, 2011, p. 130). Just as Sethe turned a blind eye to other types of motherhood, China's Sethean motherhood—it is worth noting that Sethe's violent instinct out of protection is also compared to that of an animal by Paul D after he learns what she did to her daughter and shouts «You got two feet, Sethe, not four» (Morrison, 1998, p. 165)—is rejected by Esch who refuses to accept a mother love that involves any kind of violence. The novel makes explicit Esch's rebuttal of the Medean motherhood when she is reading a book of classical myths and finds it hard to understand the figure of Medea despite the fact that she is captivated by it: «I try to read the entire mythology book but I can't. I am stuck in the middle» (Ward, 2011, p. 154).

For China, her litter is utterly important to the extent that when Skeeter puts her up in a dog fight so that she can provide for the family (Ward, 2011, pp. 171-176), he cheers up the dog alluding to her puppies: «make them know» (Ward, 2011, p. 175). Terry Paul Caesar observes that in *Beloved*, «mother and daughter are [...] two parts of the same being [...] a conspirational oneness» (Caesar, 1994, p. 116). Mimicking Sethe's infectuous and merging act with *Beloved*, China literally fights to stay with her puppies to the extent that her own self comes to be conjoined with her pups. And yet this «lethal maternity» (2014, p. 121), as Katherine Clay Bassard puts it, is perceived as unhealthy and thus as a hindrance by Esch because it involves the annihilation of one of the parts. So, Esch's rejection of China/Sethe/Medea's violent side of maternity will make the young woman turn to the community, and in particular to Big Henry, in search of empathy and healing. In this sense, Esch's characterization neglects Sethe's impulsive traits and centers on her final embrace of healing through the key figure of Paul D. The gentle ex-slave returns to accompany her once she has got rid of her daughter's ghost. Sethe appears drained by her unhealthy and remorseful attachment to her daughter and laments that she has lost interest in life because *Beloved* was «her best thing» (Morrison, 1998, p. 272). However, Paul D's soothing words—«we need some kind of tomorrow» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273)—allow Sethe to wonder, for the first time, if her own self can be salvaged. Although Paul D bathes her subjectivity with the beautiful assertion: «You your best thing» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273), Sethe gets flummoxed for this reflection, though it spurs her last words that leave the story in a positive note out of a confusion that has

the primary flavor of self-acceptance: «Me? Me?» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273). *Salvage the Bones*' ending follows the same path by portraying the final act of Esch's subjectivity upheld with a type of motherhood shared, healed and accommodated thanks also to a nuanced black masculinity. This is clearly seen when after the outcome of the hurricane Esch bequeathes Big Henry, as a sort of honorary member of the family and a Paul D of sorts, her concern that her baby «don't have a daddy», to which Big Henry responds «You wrong...This baby got a daddy, Esch» (Ward, 2011, p. 255), a response that not only legitimizes Esch as a different mother to the model that she previously resorted to, but also expands the concept of motherhood as a renewed familial act of communal bonding and healing in which black masculinity has a share of the role. What is more, Big Henry talks about «this baby», a move that consciously helps to reinstate the subjectivity of Esch's child as a communal act. Mar Gallego (2014, p. 166) sheds light on the fact that in *Beloved*, Morrison conceives Paul D's final act of unity with Sethe as a way «to foster healthier and more balanced relationships between men and women». Equally, the ex-slave «realizes [...] how his own process of formation and remembrance has been propitiated by Sethe's caring support» (Gallego, 2014, p. 165) and, by the same token, Big Henry and the black community also confirm to be grateful for Esch's role in easing things up under the jolt of Hurricane Katrina. Hence, and rendering a black masculinity modelled á la Paul D, Big Henry resolves into a true potential father-figure for the child, but also recasts Medea's story again by embodying a rehabilitated version of a «recuperated Jason» (Stevens, 2018, p. 164) when he embraces Esch in their particular «some kind of tomorrow» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273): «Don't forget you always got me» (Ward, 2011, p. 255). Self-determined and with her own sense of motherhood disclosed in full comfort, Esch is finally able to answer Sether's closing doubts and proclaim: «I am a mother» (Ward, 2011, p. 258).

Jesmyn Ward draws on Morrison's novel and asks us to be acquainted with what Sethe doubts about in *Beloved*; that our «me» can definitely be our «best thing» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273). Esch's ultimate sense of motherhood in *Salvage the Bones* takes up elements that are present and praised in *Beloved*, although she obliterates the trope of the infanticide and builds upon Morrison's ending by laying the emphasis on a communal healing between black women and men. In so doing, the novel insists on the potentiality of

«an alternative sense of masculinity» (Gallego, 2014, p. 166) in the restorative process of understanding the suffering that involves any kind of maternity exposed to violence. Thus, the story leaves open the plausibility of communal healing and recovery, that is of salvage.

3. *BELOVED* IN *SING, UNBURIED, SING*: DIASPORIC MEMORY AND FAMILY GHOST(S)

The inspiration of *Beloved* is even more present in Ward's second book that was awarded the National Book Award for fiction: *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The novel is also set in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage—by all means Ward's own and African American Yoknapatawpha—and tells the story of an outcast family and their struggle to thrive and survive the multiple violences they have been subjected to. The tale is told in fragmented voices and recounts the same events from manifold perspectives. It follows the character of Jojo, a 13-year-old-boy who lives with her mother Leonie, a drug addict, and her baby sister, Kayla. His white father is imprisoned and they live in his grandparents' house. The role of the old couple, Pop and Mam, becomes crucial for the developing of the story. On the day the novel begins Jojo is to embark on a haunting travel with her mother and sister to pick up his father from prison. This trip will be used to unearth symbolic and literal ghosts of the past that will be central to set up the path of healing.

As in *Beloved*, the type of motherhood Leonie embodies is one of a kind. Not only is she a drug addict but she is also a woman that has endured floods of racist attacks by her in-laws for having eloped with their white son. Her conception of the self is damaged also by the family tragedies she has endured. All this has led her to become an obsessive woman with a problematic love for her children. Sethe's tormentuous understanding of her love for *Beloved* also finds its echo in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* with the motherhood Leonie signifies. If Sethe needed to grapple with the fact that «[u]nless care-free, motherlove was a killer» (Morrison, 1998, p. 131), Leonie is also in need to see that her tainted acts for love have really taken a toll on her: «Maybe I am too selfish» (Ward, 2017, p. 244). Acting atrociously out of love is what binds these two mothers and this will also be the source of their grief and suffering. This erratic behavior prompts their offspring to take center stage

and take care of them, thus rewriting the children's love for their mother. In *Beloved*, Denver takes the lead of the mother-daughter relationship once the ghost of her dead sister's parasitic love winds up draining Sethe's life and feelings to exhaustion. So is the case for Jojo who has to devote his attention to his little sister to fill in his mother's recklessness to the extent that Leonie sometimes thinks of him as a daughter: «I look at him and see a hungry girl» (Ward, 2017, p. 95), or reards him with jealousy: « I stand there, watching my children comfort each other» (Ward, 2017, p. 101), «They are each other's light» (Ward, 2017, p. 51). In both cases, the children shift their position with their mothers and help to expose the crumbling of a sense of motherhood fatally hit by racism and desperation.

This is why Jojo turns to his grandparents for a model and comfort. In particular, Jojo's granddad, Pop, plays a pivotal role in his awakening to adulthood and to take on his role as the family guide. However, the boy will learn that his adored grandfather has a staggering secret he has held back for his entire life. Pop was imprisoned at the penitentiary of Parchman on a false charge at the age of 15. There, he met 12-year-old boy Richie and took him under his wing. The young kid had been jailed accused of having robbed to help his family. None of the two sentences mentioned seem to have really happened which brings to the fore the wrongful and racist judicial system. The atrocities of slavery that have their effect on the characters in *Beloved* is transposed here to the neo-slavery regime (Alexander, 2010, p. 31) that the judicial system represents for black people in the US which, in Pop's own words, stands for «a place for the dead» (Ward, 2017, p. 96). The prison term turns out to be extremely hurtful and degrading for the black convicts. Despite Pop's protection, Richie is oftentimes mocked and ill-treated by other inmates due to his alleged homosexuality (Ward, 2017, p. 75). On a given day, the kid broke his hoe and that acted as the perfect excuse to get brutally beaten by a gang of convicts. He was so deleteriously whipped that his back wound up being totally destroyed. In a move that recalls Sethe's tree in her back, which, down the line, is nothing but a revolving clump of scars after a brutal attack, Richie also gets his back scarred forever (Ward, 2017, p. 121). As in *Beloved*, the «tree» in the back is converted into a manuscript made on, and of, flesh that conceals a silenced account of mistreatment and

abuse. From this moment on, Richie's and Pop's destiny dwells on violence and will be sealed until the end of the story.

Though unbeknownst to him, Jojo knows that something happened the day that he sees Richie's ghost. In fact, he is the only one who can see the kid's ghost—«a dark skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck» (Ward, 2017, p. 130)—and he knows the boy died but he wants his grandfather to tell him what really was the cause. This quest becomes even more obsessive when Richie's ghost gets demanding for answers and for a closure with just one action required: «to memory» (Ward, 2017, p. 136). This reenactment of memory in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is very much premised on the memory work that Morrison layered out in *Beloved*. Thus, both novels tap into «that nature of forgetting, memory, and survival» (Tally, 2009, p. 32). If in the coda of Morrison's novel we are told that «[r]emembering seemed unwise» (Morrison, 1998, p. 274) because «[m]emory makes life pleasant; forgetfulness makes it possible» (Tally, 2009, p. 33), resorting to diasporic memory in both stories will become decisive to achieve survival. This memory will be retrieved through testimonies and songs, that is, through oral tradition which, in both novels, will be the ideal means to counteract the legacy of racism by stripping off its real repercussion and, therefore, to vent resistance. Trudier Harris (1991, p. 1) also attests to this convention and avows that «orality is one of the keys to unlocking African American literary history». In this vein, if in *Beloved*, «the most obvious way in which memory is incited, formed, and complemented is through stories and storytelling» (Tally, 2009, p. 39), in Ward's novel diasporic memory will be the key to reconstruct the true story of the family to lay the foundation of the final process of healing.

Sethe's storytelling takes place in front of the fire in the same manner in which Pop's confessions to Jojo are always in the woods and at the hearth, connecting such acts of orality with their African past. It is thanks to the workings of this diasporic memory that Pop will finally pass on the story and will face his actions and destiny. Indeed, his memories of violence and racism will bring him back to remember the experience of his ancestors in the Middle Passage when recounting his traumatic stay in prison: «*she'd come across the ocean, been kidnapped and sold. Said her great-grandma told her that in her village, they ate fear [...] She learned that bad things happened on that ship [...] that her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to*

the muzzle» (Ward, 2017, p. 69). Indeed, Parchman bears a resemblance to a plantation: the Black inmates are obliged to work, they are «chained» (Ward, 2017, p. 186), if they escape they are chased with dogs and when caught, they are either hanged or lynched. Briefly put, Pop reflects Paul D's memories of slavery because Parchman prison acts for the modern plantation in which the nefarious legacy of slavery finds a new format⁴. As Michell Alexander (2010, p. 21) makes clear, «since the nation's founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form». With this act, Ward concretizes the historical continuum of violence, racism and exclusion that links slavery with the current and racist system of mass incarceration⁵.

This link is upheld by memory, that is, by remembering the whole history of violence against black people in the US. In Nicole Dib's words (2020, p. 140): «the story of [Pop]'s family's Middle Passage, the grip that the afterlife of slavery has on their lives, is unburied in the process of recounting his own encounters with the unfreedom that built today's carceral state». In this light, the two conceptions of diasporic memory related to the afterlife that conflate in the character of *Beloved* are again branched off in a Wardian way in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. These two modes of memory, as Justine Tally (2009, p. 41) has studied, are «what Ricoeur calls «reminiscence», which entails an active search for past experience (via storytelling and the construction of the past), and «phantasma», which is totally involuntary—and therefore more trustworthy as «fact»—because it is prompted by an association, or repetition of the past». *Beloved* has «both» (Tally, 2009, p. 42), but in Ward's book, Richie's ghost represents the «reminiscence» whilst Given, Leonie's brother who died murdered by a white friend, embodies the «phantasma». Just as in Morrison's story, «no black characters in the novel ever question

4. This contention is reinforced by David Oshinsky's study of Parchman in which he does not hesitate to assert that the prison might as well be seen as «the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War» (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 2).

5. It is interesting to call attention to the fact that Nicole Dib (2020, p. 139) turns to Spillers's theorization to link «the Middle Passage and black mobility» to «also show the violent rupturing of kinship ties that resulted from such forced travel». In this way, Pop's open door to recount his experience in the prison/plantation of Parchman is enacted thanks to Jojo's Middle passage/trip from the same prison to pick up his father.

the actual existence of ghosts» (Tally, 2009, p. 59), since their presence will be of help with an eye to grasp the family's peace of mind.

In this sense, Richie, as a «reminiscence», is in search of the actual truth of his death so that he can finally rest and go «home» (Ward, 2017, p. 182). This demand can only be provided by Pop who was there when the kid was killed. However, the confession will change the old man and the kid's ghost forever. After a series of questions and an ongoing persecution, that connects Richie's parasitic nature to that of *Beloved* when living with Sethe, Jojo eventually surrenders to Richie's request and asks Pop about the incident that led to the killing of the boy. Pop tells the story and it turns into a moment of redemption. According to the grandfather's story, Richie discovered the atrocious act committed by Blue, a violent inmate who raped a woman, when they were caught and stood no other chance than fleeing. They were chased and eventually captured. Pop was in charge of leading the dogs that had to follow the two fugitives. Once he got Richie, he realized that he would be lynched for being accused of raping a white woman and in a Sethean move, solely to spare him suffering, decided to kill the boy sticking a pick in his neck (Ward, 2017, p. 255), which very much echoes *Beloved* because this is the very same object with which Sethe attempts to kill Mr. Bodwin when she mistakes him for Schoolteacher (Morrison, 1998, p. 262). Pop's confession performs Paul D's opening of the «tobacco tin blown open» (Morrison, 1998, p. 218), since it frees him from remorse and guilt. Though, as Sethe in the aftermath of her attack to Mr. Bodwin, the old man collapses and breaks down, this loss of control exposes his redemption and his path towards peace of mind. The outcome of both attacks in each of the stories is the same: the disappearance of the ghosts. *Beloved* and Richie disappear owing to the fact that their ghostly presence was justified because their story had been left unresolved. When Sethe and Pop come to terms with their acts and their families and community redeem their guilt over understanding and forgiveness, *Beloved*'s and Richie's role as ghosts vanishes for their ubiquity was justified as «part of [familial] experience» (1991, p. 13), as Lynette Carpenter states.

On the other hand, Given, as a «phantasma» appears linked to Mam's and Leonie's memories. His presence is only seen by his sister when she is high and, therefore, at ease. By this token, he acts as a sort of ghostly

conscience who reminds her about the power of familial love and thus he has «Mama's face» (Ward, 2017, p. 34). The ghost of Leonie's brother serves to conjure up a trauma «that one doesn't yet know» (Chang, 2004, p. 125). However, Given's ghost, which is mostly celebrated in the story as his mother's way of clinging to life, will have to confront Richie's at the moment of Mam's passing. The «spiteful» (Morrison, 1998, p. 3) odor of 124 Bluestone Road is reenacted as «vengeful» (Ward, 2017, p. 264) in the moment in which Richie's ghost, as much «hungry for love» (Ward, 2017, p. 265) as *Beloved*, comes to take Mam to the world of the dead. The old woman had asked her daughter to collect «the litanies» (Ward, 2017, p. 267), that is, a sort of prayer to Maman Brigitte who happens to be a *mystère*, or, in other words, a kind of intermediary spirit in known as the «Mother of the Dead». Such resort to African spirituality welds Mama to her ancestors so that she can transcend in peace. Once she is gone, Richie's company also disappears, as he had previously done before Pop and Jojo. As the young boy finally cries out: «Ain't no more stories for you here» (Ward, 2017, p. 268). Once Mam is dead, the sky turns a sort of carmine red (Ward, 2017, p. 274) which, as in *Beloved* in the episode of Amy going to buy carmine velvet (Tally, 2009, p. 58), speaks of Mam's connection to Africa and reunion with her dead ancestors.

Mam's death triggers Leonie's acceptance of her real role in the family: «*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter*» (Ward, 2017, p. 274). The old woman's disappearance allows for the clarification of roles and Leonie accepts that she cannot bear to «pretend at forgetting» (Ward, 2017, p. 275). However, just as *Beloved*'s ghost disappearance is necessary to enact Sethe's final understanding, once Mam is gone and Leonie runs off with her husband, Jojo makes peace with her mother because he realizes that his real mother has always been Mam: «Now you understand life. Now you know» (Ward, 2017, p. 282). The novel ends with everyone understanding their place and with their healing process accommodated. Mam is now reunited with her ancestors and reconvened with the victims of the Middle Passage and the black victims of mass incarceration: «rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies» (Ward, 2017, p. 282). In this moment little Kayla starts to sing a song that Mam knew, just like *Beloved*'s ghost sang Sethe's intimate tune, bringing to the fore the yearned moment of final healing and unity for the family merging healed life and afterlife, «like relief,

something to remembrance, something like ease» (Ward, 2017, p. 284). This unity, understanding and shared love between Pop, Jojo and Kayla with *their* ghosts is the way to «put their story next to their ancestors'» to secure their «kind of tomorrow» (Morrison, 1998, p. 273). As in *Beloved*, familial ghosts help to make clear «the way in which the future is always already populated with certain possibilities derived from the past» (2000, p. 36), as Wendy Brown holds. This is why when the final familial trinity (the last wink at Paul D, Sethe and Denver) understand that their life is forever filled with their ghosts, since they help them to come to terms with the hurtful legacy of slavery up to the present, the family knows that they are finally «[h]ome» (Ward, 2017, p. 285).

4. CONCLUSION

The mighty impact of *Beloved* on the writers of the African diaspora has helped to insist on revisiting the legacy of slavery and the multifarious ramifications involving racism and violence «in the make-up of the American nation» (Raynaud, 2007, p. 43). Among different themes, the novel privileges the centrality of memory through the figure of the ancestors and the ghost and makes an insight into how the violence of slavery and racism affects black families and their relationships. One of the many black authors that has been influenced by *Beloved* is Jesmyn Ward. Her two National Book Award-winning novels are only a proof of it. In *Salvage the Bones* Ward takes on the Morrisonian version of trope of the myth of Medea and builds upon the type of black motherhood deeply contested in times of suffering and dispossession that Sethe illustrates. Ward locates the Batiste family in a peripheric terrain after 124 Bluestone Road to ponder about the marginalized role of motherhood for African American women. Sethe's «too thick» love and single-minded nature of protection and amendment that corners her to kill her own daughter is revised in the figure of Esch who, being a young, marginal and pregnant girl, defends her own sense of being a mother. Conversely, the Medean version that China, the family dog, embodies, will be discarded. The unabashed final moment of *Salvage the Bones* serves as a response to the moment of Sethe's befuddled questions in the attempt to salvage this healing process towards a nuanced and strong-minded conception

of alternative motherhood. To achieve it, the story also recasts the caring character of Paul D now transformed into Big Henry who brings in the importance of black masculinity and fatherhood in the reconceptualization of motherhood as a sharing and healing process in the search for survival after institutionalized violence. Thus, although Claudia Rankine (2019, p. 147) laments that «for African American families, this living in a state of mourning and fear remains commonplace», *Salvage the Bones* revises *Beloved* by using the backdrop of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and its fatal impact on black communities and families to enlarge Morrison's ending and lay emphasis on overcoming the remnants of mourning and grief seeking to keep on reflecting upon the social tendrils of slavery but using communal bonds, sharing and healing as legitimate tenets that can help African Americans to thrive and survive.

Still, the presence of Morrison's masterpiece is even clearer in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In this novel, Ward centers her interest on the presence of the familial ghost(s) and in the type of diasporic memory that accompanies their appearance in order to inquire into the fissures of another black family that has fallen victim of institutionalized racism. Interestingly, and following the current momentum of police brutality and the endemic crisis of mass incarceration, Ward presents Parchman prison, where Pop and the young Richie were jailed, as the reenactment of slavery that the prison system actually represents and symbolizes for African Americans and, in so doing, showcases that her interpolating exercise «produces a new sense» (Bloom, 1988, p. 406) that still belabors the new forms of the pervasive legacy of slavery inscribed in African America. With this link to the violence impinged by the «peculiar institution», Ward makes use of the trope of the ghost to exorcize the pain and the resulted trauma searching out to find healing, especially when this violence leads to wrong choices. As Sethe, Pop needs to do away with the grief and remorse for having killed Richie out of protection and love. This will serve as an example to Jojo who, just as Denver, will take the lead of the family once his mother Leonie finally disappears after the death of Mam, the real matriarch. Echoing *Beloved*, death and its outcome permeate *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, but Ward revamps again Morrison's ending when she presents the final familial trinity at ease with the omnipresent presence of their ghosts, their «home», who bring along the diasporic

memory that breathes them their meaning and also provide them with the tools and examples of how to keep on coming to terms together with and against the legacy of slavery.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* remains a shining light in African American literature and culture, especially when it comes to understand the nation's capital sin and its consequences. For that, the presence of this masterpiece looms over plenty of novels and texts within the literature of the African diaspora. Jesmyn Ward's novels are an illustration of this and prove that the legacy of Toni Morrison, which the author deems crucial so that she could become a writer, continues and stretches far beyond the written page. By banking on Toni Morrison's literature in the configuration of her very own novels, Jesmyn Wards authenticates the epigraph that opens this article. In the end, it appears to be true that *Beloved's* story still entices and it does need to be «passed on» because «that sharing of our stories confirms our humanity» (Ward, 2019, p. 10).

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