TO BE ONE WITH NATURE: HOW WEST AFRICAN SPIRITUALISM REWRITES AFRICAN AMERICAN ECOLITERARY NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Southern US literature and African American literature often speak about racialized and dismembered bodies swallowed by the earth and never retrieved. Nature, in these instances, is hostile and "white," as even trees become problematic symbols of lynching practices. This essay, however, attempts to retrieve and re-signify the concepts of soil and plants by analyzing the relationship between Black bodies and Nature from an Ecoliterary and Ecotheological point of view. This examination especially focuses on West African beliefs and their role in the African American re-appropriation of natural, earthly spaces and instances of the afterlife. Ethnic resistance and spiritual-medical knowledge have been crucial to African American cultural liberation, and the essay highlights this by analyzing the traces of African spiritualism and syncretism in the works of two African American authors in particular: Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward. The result of this re-appropriation is a vivifying, hopeful and ultimately political series of images and literary tropes that overturn mournful and chthonic narratives, resuming positive and life-bearing relationships between Black bodies and Nature.
Keywords: American south; West Africa; Spiritualism; Ecocriticism; African Americans; Toni Morrison; Jesmyn Ward.

> "Yes, subordination, subjugation, subaltern, literally 'under the earth,' racialized populations are buried people. But there is a lot happening underground. Not only coffins, but seeds, roots and rhizomes."
> (Ruha Benjamin, "Black AfterLives Matter," 2018)

As to this day, a consistent number of critics has written about African American literary renditions of the horrors of slavery and the exploitation of Black bodies. Some of the literary works taken into analysis adopt enraged tones, some try to find a catharsis for the survivors, and some others wish to find peace and release for the dead. These instances strongly take shape inside novels and poems, when it comes to the narrativization and fabulation of the relationship between Black bodies and Southern land; a relationship which has always been complex, problematic, and ultimately mournful. Patricia Yaeger, for instance, writes how landscapes in modern and contemporary southern women's literature are "loaded with trauma unspoken, with

bodies unhealed or uncared for, with racial melancholia" (Yaeger 2000, 19). This concept is espoused by other critics who speak of torture and the way Black bodies are tossed to the side once dismembered and bent by white perpetrators; these practices reach the "very depths of the land" and effectively turn Black people into soil—Southern earth is symbolically and literally fertilized with their blood. As Farah Jasmine Griffin posits, blood is then also organically linked to all the crops grown on Southern soil (1995, 16). To many African Americans, the typical idealized image of Southern Nature as painted by white pastoral literature was, and still is, unconceivable, as Nature has often been turned against Black people, both historically and literarily. The practice of lynching provides an excellent and gruesome example: a tree such as the magnolia, frequently used as an emblem of Southern beauty (Martin 2007, 95), was turned into a lynching symbol in the famous song *Strange Fruit* (1936), written by Abel Meeropol and performed by Billie Holiday, in order to address the impossibility of reconciliation between Nature and African Americans (Griffin 1995, 16).

Yaeger goes even further in her analysis and focuses on a grim image concerning soil itself, as she recounts the suicidal practice among African American slaves of eating dirt as an ultimate attempt to find death and peace (Yaeger 2000, x). However, as other scholars report, eating dirt and clay was an ambivalent practice, which could assume the form of an indulgence or become a means of temporary salvation (Starkey 1964, 56-57). Concerning the former, we know of slaves chewing on dirt as if they were chewing on gum or tobacco, whether for oral pleasure or for allaying hunger; as for the latter, we know of people who ingested dirt in order to get sick and avoid being sold into slavery and fall in the hands of African traders (56-57). In light of these examples, I would argue that the nature of dirt is quite ambivalent. Earth, soil, dirt and all its synonyms have often been used to oppress Black bodies, to silence them or to reduce them into nothingness. After all, a buried body is a mute entity. However, there are some redeeming qualities to these elements when adopted as forms of rebellion, resistance or liberation. With these concepts in mind, African American writers have looked upon spiritualism to find comfort and strength, as this essay will illustrate. Toni Morrison is one of these writers: her intent with *Beloved*, for instance, was "to pitch a tent in a

cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (Morrison 2016, xi). However, she did not only dwell in the realm of the ghostly and the supernatural. As will be discussed, she also fused African and African American culture together in a narrative that redeemed and gave new meaning to earthly elements that characterized a slave's existence. The symbolic value of dirt is one of them. An example of this symbolic positive rewriting of soil and dirt figures in a passage of her novel *Sula* (1973), in which Sula herself emphasizes the value of her lover's body, Ajax, as it resides in "an intricate layering of precious metals and water-seeking earth" (Yaeger 2000, 38): she imagines rubbing one of his cheek bones and finding gold under his black skin, then alabaster, and then "the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs" (Morrison 1973, 130-31). Morrison here insists on treasuring and reevaluating the layered complexity of her characters' subjectivity, as opposed to the "brute subjected stuff from which whiteness is made" (Yaeger 2000, 38), and places clean and fertile soil at the deepest and most intimate layer of their bodies, stressing an almost atavistic intimacy: "I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below.... I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. [...] How much water to keep the loam moist? [...] And when do the two make mud?" (Morrison 1973, 130-31).

As Marco Petrelli states, Morrison suggests that "stories have the power to redeem or to condemn" (Petrelli 2020, 279), and dirt can be redeemed through these very stories. As previously remarked, dirt can be a way to dissolution, as it indicates a path to survival. Surviving the action of dirt and the devouring or suffocating qualities of soil implies the possibility for the survivor to narrate and give voice to the ones who have been lost along the way. Giving them voice means bringing them peace, liberating them. In this perspective, "matters of life and death, soil, and narration seem to be poetically entwined" (Petrelli 2020, 279). This ambivalent aspect of soil and its entwinement to voice-regaining Blacks is part of what Kimberly N. Ruffin calls the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" that many African Americans experience (Ruffin 2010, 2): a dynamic influence and entwinement between Natural and Social orders. As Ruffin argues, African Americans suffer an environmental burden because of the way they are negatively racialized, but they also experience ecological beauty due to

"individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils" (2).

This essay highlights the "ecological beauty" that African Americans experience both in the social and literary landscape, as opposed to the "evils" suggested by the scholars mentioned above. African American authors have addressed the horrors of slavery and racism in their novels and poems, contributing to a solid and important tradition which denounces the vexations of the past and does not spare readers images of violent death and desperate mourning. However, even in the thickest darkness, light can be found: hope, a sense of community, remembrance, life. As Ruha Benjamin argues, these positive and vivifying themes might have been born out of sheer psychological necessity, but the sense of "kinfulness" that they ensue is a source of Black pride (Benjamin 2018, 49). These positive themes which do not present us with morbid and suffering images are there to counter balance a narrative that in certain instances could reveal itself to be toxic to the community, as the stress on systematic wrongdoing could show a "perverse quality" to narration: the struggle of a constantly subjugated people to be admitted into the category of "human," for which empathy is rationed and must produce empirical evidence of disparity and struggle (53). Benjamin suggests taking advantage of the "subterranean spaces" that the subordinated status entails and use them to create new forms of kinship (56). These forms of kinship are "seeds, roots and rhizomes" (47) that can find their way out of the ground and into the open air through experimenting with fiction, by adopting "speculative methods" to challenge the racist status quo (52), and by creating connections among the living and the dead, humans and Nature.

These narratives stress the concepts of power and resilience and the examples that follow, will show how some of them heavily rely on the imagery surrounding Nature and on different forms of Spiritualism to describe parables of empowerment and resistance. More specifically, hints towards, and reminiscences of African culture, religion, and lore are alive and prosperous in African American narratives, as they are intimately tied to, and integrated in, the literary geography of the Southern United

States. These narratives ultimately bind Black bodies to American soil and plants, giving birth to a new identity, one that is authentic to African Americans.

I will start by briefly addressing the poignant soil-related symbolism that finds its roots at the beginning of the history of African Americans: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Elizabeth D. Blum writes how: "slave traders reported cases of women swallowing African soil as they left their native land on the perilous journey across the Atlantic" (Blum 2002, 259). As this analysis will demonstrate, this powerful act was seen as the only way for African people to maintain a spiritual connection to their motherland—a vivifying relationship with dirt that is also addressed by scholars when speaking about West Africans being "uprooted" and then "replanted" in American soil (Myers 2003, 6). This metaphor involving roots and plants is a common trope that binds Black bodies even more tightly to the land and to the healing qualities of Nature. These specific tropes have been the focus of ecocritics and ecotheologians. Ecocriticism is intuitively involved in this discourse, as it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). The fundamental premise in which this definition finds its roots is that human culture both affects and is affected by the physical world, and this is a pivotal point to all ecological criticism. Ecocriticism analyzes the interconnections between Nature and culture, and between the human and the nonhuman. As a result, the concept of "world" is expanded to include the entire ecosphere (xix). The consequent step to take, once the concept of culture has come into play, is to consider religion. And this is where Ecotheology finds its place in literary analyses of African and African American studies: Ecotheology locates its field of exploration in the ancestral traditions of cultural groups within their environment—whether they refer back to book-based religions like Catholicism or Earth-based ones like Yoruba cults (Ruffin 2010, 90).

Since this article predominantly refers to West African culture and religions, its analysis will focus on Earth-based religions. Ruffin describes some of them as "site-specific responses that emerge from indigenous populations who have an in-depth knowledge of themselves" (90) and of the immediate world around them. They are place-centered beliefs. In these social-cultural systems, humans are not conceived as

separate beings, set apart from their natural environment, and religious practices reflect this concept, as they think of forests, rivers, and mountains as sacred spaces (91). However, these sites are not considered sacred because of an abstract religiosity, they are sacred because they procure food through crops, and crops come from rain, and rain comes from happy ancestors, who will be satisfied only if their descendants treat Nature well. Here, "religion is a very practical thing" (Byers 2004, 655) and everything is done to preserve the natural order of things. Ceremonies are performed to gain the favor of ancestors, who keep the land fertile and the community healthy, not just by providing food, but also by growing healing herbs and roots (Blum 2002, 249). These ceremonies, characterized by dances and singing in circle, were practices imported by the Congo region which then became central in slave culture (Stuckey 2013, 10). They had the purpose of both honoring the ancestors and achieving union with God, on whom "the fertility of men and crops" depended (10). The religious gatherings would become occasions for slaves to relate to one another even if cultural and language barriers stood among them (23); they were so preponderant that Christian faith, for African Americans, "answered to African religious imperatives" (29). Religious practices such as the "ring shout" prominently shaped African American culture as, for instance, they helped form the context in which jazz music was created. African Americans faithfully adhered to African tradition through the centuries, with offshoots of Bakongo-based expressions until the 1920s (107).

Meanwhile, the concept of "ancestor" would become a literary trope in Southern migration narratives that, if emphasized in the text, would symbolize the earning of Black birthright to the land, culture, and redemption (Griffin 1995, 5). The ancestor would be a benevolent, instructive, and protective character who would provide a certain kind of wisdom, and could manifest him or herself in rituals, religion, music, or even food; he or she could be a literal ancestor, or not (5). Concerning ancestries, it is true that, in certain instances of African culture, land continues relationships among "current, previous, and future generations" (Blum 2002, 249): a person does not disappear after death, but lingers and shows its presence in ways that are concrete and perhaps distant from the Western concepts of "haunting." For instance, Ruha Benjamin

espouses and reflects on the concept firstly introduced by Zhaleh Boyd of "ancestral co-presence" (Benjamin 2018, 46), and highlights the ways in which African American culture retained key features of African diasporic traditions by embracing this particular conception of Afterlife (47). When speaking about the relationship between the living and the dead, she stresses the connection between people and earth: racialized people are "under the earth" people, buried. However, Benjamin emphasizes the intense living activity of the underground, where seeds and roots carve their way among coffins. In this habitat, "alternative forms of kinship have room to grow and to nourish other life forms and ways of living" (47). A strong sense of community prevails, and the connection among the living and the dead is never truly severed. In addition to these concepts, the idea of the earth as an "ancient mother" comes into play. Earth might be the final resting place, but interment is often seen as a gathering back "in the womb of the earth" (Chavez 1993, 65). This vivifying image of earth derives from West African religious beliefs. In Igbo culture, for instance, "to discuss the land is to discuss the goddess of the land, Ala or Ana" (Gomez 1998, 129): the earth mother was the most important deity in most Igbo communities and "*ala* (the land) and *Ala* (the earth mother) were inextricably associated" (129). Fertile and generative qualities of soil can also be found in Bambara beliefs, and this is evident in legends as the one of the god Pemba: after transforming into a tree, Pemba created a woman who represented the earth, and then proceeded copulating with her; from the union, animals and plants came into existence (Gomez 1998, 49). This cultural inheritance inevitably influenced African American culture and its concept of Afterlife, as will be evident in the following pages. And as Robert F. Thompson states, "nowhere is Kongo-Angolan influence on the New World more pronounced, more profound, than in black traditional cemeteries throughout the South of the United States" (Thompson 1983, xiv). These powerful identifications that trace a communicative, lively, and motherly relationship between living, dead, and the soil create a chance of reunion rather than tragic division, and it could be further considered a positive counterpart to the "swallowing earth" of the American South (Yaeger 2000, 16), a complementary image that influences and inspires African American writers. When analyzing soil and land, we can identify their active

participation in the maintenance of folk tradition and we can also notice their constant presence in folk dramatization concerned with the meaning of life. These narratives are passed from a generation to the next (Christian 1980, 65). Barbara Christian indicated some of the novels of Toni Morrison as examples of this type of dramatization: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), which will be addressed in the following pages. As for the tradition they preserve, it is a successful fusion of Christian beliefs and Earth-based religious traditions, so much that many scholars talk about an "Africanist" quality to Black Christianity (Ruffin 2010, 92).[1] All this can be traced back to enslaved communities, who worshiped the woodland and syncretized Christianity with traditional African practices, focusing on the interrelationship between human and non-human (92). In implementing the results of this syncretism into their writings, African American authors participate in an active and effective ecoliterary discourse, from the times of slavery to this day. As an example, we could name renowned sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois—who argued that the African American church "was not at first by any means Christian; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation" (Du Bois 2007, 132)—and his analysis and problematization of the relationship between the Black man and his environment, which adopted a literary approach that we could call "ecoliterary": in his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), the character named Zora manages to buy a swamp of her own, clear it, and then grow cotton in it, in an act of reappropriation of a plant that had become a symbol of oppression. In the novel, the flowering of the fleece becomes a symbol "for the characters' relationship to the land and their ability to use nature to empower themselves and find self-fulfillment" (Preston-McGee 2011, 48). Along with Du Bois, we could name a number of other authors: scholar Kimberly Ruffin

[1] As scholar Mazi E. N. Njaka defines it, Africanism "seeks to liberate the mind of the black, enabling him to search for old concepts and values, African in origin, and to explore and create new ones. […] Africanism encourages the creation of a culture characterized by rationalism—a rationalism which gives rise to the discovery of other elements, empirical and/or normative. […] Its components are so varied as to include the arts, beliefs, culture, history, music, philosophy, politics, science, and concepts such as Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. In its specificity Africanism concerns itself with Africans and the African diaspora: namely, Afro-Americans, West Indians, Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, etc." (Njaka 1971, 12).

addresses the "ecotheological creativity" of writers such as Alice Walker and Octavia Butler, who synthetized through their works of literature scientific phenomena, book-based traditions, and Earth-based traditions (Ruffin 2010, 93). According to her, both Butler and Walker find the Bible useful for ecotheological synthesis; to them, however, the future of Christianity appears potentially antithetical to sustainability, and so they implement their visions with non-biblical religious resources (96). As Ruffin states, this is especially evident in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Walker's essays (Ruffin 2010, 95). A contemporary author who could find his place in this lineage of ecologically aware African American syncretized narratives could be Colson Whitehead. According to James Mellis, in his novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Whitehead was able to implement the "new, clandestine traditions" of African slaves, who struggled to satisfy their collective needs, into the consciousness of his characters, namely Cora, the protagonist (Mellis 2019, 4).

Part of this rather wide discourse revolves around the concept of re-appropriation. In particular, we could refer to Salamisha Tillet's considerations on the concept, both ascriptive and affective, of "civic estrangement," and the need of African Americans to represent themselves in a civic context that has marginalized them in civil myths, monuments, narratives, and so on (Tillet 2012, 3). These texts which commemorate enslaved African Americans are "sites of slavery" that democratize U.S. memory through the preservation of "those aspects of the past that uphold national identity and then legitimate and transmit those histories to present and future generations" (4-5). These predominantly post-civil rights and contemporary authors (such as the ones mentioned above) come at the end of a long democratic process that tried to remodel or own the environment Black people were forced to inhabit. Carolyn M. Jones addresses a form of spiritual attempt: "the landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became [...] neither legally not economically their own, but, became spiritually their own through their own labor under most difficult of circumstances" (Jones 1998, 37). This concept of freeing oneself through labor has been salient, and through the decades it has been tackled by a number of African American authors, one of them being W.E.B. Du Bois. However, as I will argue, Toni Morrison was

able to give us a peculiar insight on these processes of re-appropriation, by combining a scientific envisioning of the environment with a psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of Nature. This resulted in the production of an historical narrative for African Americans that was previously ignored by white society (Tolman 2003, 17). According to the author, the slave narrative was the "quintessential site of memory" and so it is important that in this context her characters (and, by extension, African Americans) gain "an interiority and subjectivity denied them in American history" (Tillet 2012, 5). Morrison "fills-in" the previous instances of autobiographical slave narratives, which too often shaped the ex-slave experience in a way that made it palatable to those who were in the position to alleviate it, "forgetting" many other things (Morrison 1995, 91). In many ways, her characters show how Black people have been oppressed by white people's use of Nature, but at the same time how they regain their agency and come to possess the ability to "understand how nature is interpreted, mediated, and used" in their favor (Wallace and Armbruster 2001, 213).

The plot of Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) is rich with earth-related images; Black bodies live in an almost symbiotic relationship with herbs and trees, elements that "intertwine ecology with nature and landscape with race" (Wardi 2011, 11). In this novel, the concept of "place" is as important as the human actors (Christian 1980, 65), since the Bottom is presented as an environment full of indigenous plants and herbs. This place is described right at the start of the novel, addressing its importance and establishing its role as an actual protagonist. The Bottom is a neighborhood that once "stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river" and that was connected to a valley by "one road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts." The narrator then adds a nostalgic observation: "The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby" (Morrison 1973, 3). The Bottom, by the time the story is supposedly being told, has gone through a process of deforestation, both concrete and metaphorical. Morrison mentions two herbs being uprooted which are relevant to this discourse, as they inform us that a very specific type of environment and cultural niche is being evoked, both geographically and symbolically: "In that place… they tore the nightshade

and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion Golf Course" (Morrison 1973, 3). The Bottom is abruptly destroyed in order to become a "white space," as the author herself stresses by presenting to the reader a number of conceptual and physical opposites: "they/neighbors (and implicitly whites/blacks), [...] roots/Medallion, houses/golf course, and past/present," are placed there to stress the racial division of the land (Page 1995, 62), and the submission of the small Black community to capitalist and entrepreneurial modalities of life which lead to urbanization and social homogenization; it is a "multi-pronged assault to social encapsulation" (Cohen 1995, 44). Morrison then focuses on this memory of nightshade and blackberry plants being torn from the earth, two plants which possess both medicinal and cultural properties. Nightshade has been used for centuries as tonic, appetite stimulant, and against asthma and whooping cough (Kuete, Karaosmanoğlu, and Sivas 2017, 288-89), while blackberries were used as medicinal herbs, curing skin conditions, sore throats and wounds (Verma et al. 2014, 103). The inclusion of both plants emphasizes an interest in pharmacopeia and the "root workers" who used it in their trade. It is a cultural sign and "archeological evidence" that African Americans practiced African spiritual tradition (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 46). This last aspect is also confirmed by the character of a previously mentioned novel by Morrison: Pilate, from *Song of Solomon*, who is trained by a root-worker through whom Morrison valorizes the figure of the natural healer and of the midwife. She is considered by scholars such as Jessica Gama to be the embodiment of tradition and ecofeminism; as she influences her son in searching for fulfillment through African ancestry, she denies masculine domination (often seen as destructive) in her household, and she economically sustains her family through homemade wine making, a practice that both links her to Nature and proposes a solution to "the sorrow and hopelessness of the displaced northern town of Southside" (Gama 2008, 50-51). In the words of Farah Jasmine Griffin, Pilate is the quintessential representative of the trope of the "ancestor": she is "both root and leaf, the transitional space between the ground where the ancestors reside and the sky to which they direct all who revere them" (Griffin 1995, 6). Stacy Alaimo defined her "a

kind of earth mother [...] remarkably giving birth to herself," hardly passive, a symbol of African American culture's rootedness in Nature (Alaimo 2000, 139).

As it seems evident, this relatedness of Nature and culture is not oppositional, but rather complementary. Zauditu-Selassie argues: "Morrison directs the reader's attention to the power of culture and the capacity of spirituality to re-center and heal African people" (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 49), creating a "literary garden" where haints, mojos and root-workers are part of a solid spiritual landscape (Zaudit-Selassie 2007, 39). In this landscape, nightshade and blackberry plants find their place because the whole community participated in "working roots," and both of them are used by "spiritual adepts" while practicing several rituals or making *minkisi* and spiritual packets (Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 50-51).[2]

Zauditu-Selassie further states that this strong reverence for the power of Nature, which characterized many literary works that stress its beauty and its mythic potential, is a practice that saved African people from the "traumatic terrain" of American racial landscapes. By bringing Africa to America, slaves extended the geo-political boundaries of their continent, fortifying its spiritual culture and sustaining their own inter-spatial and collective selves (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 39). This is also why so many West African traditions survived and have left marks on African American spirituality (40).

Toni Morrison faithfully portraits the process of remembrance and shows us its power, which can be salvific to African slaves: they can remember, therefore they can heal one another, and reach spiritual liberation (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 42). In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison "links the narrative to ritual in an attempt to restore balance in both the visible and invisible realms through the harnessing of spiritual energy" (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 42). Her character M'Dear is a healer who lives near the woods, a place defined by a high spiritual charge; the woods, in fact, symbolize the realm of the spirits, as in many West and Central African traditions. Furthermore, the woods

[2] *Minkisi* is the plural form of the Kongo word *nkisi*. "An *nkisi* is a form of traditional medicine made from animal or mineral, which, under the guidance of an Nganga [Master teacher, priest; ed.] helps to heal people from illness or any other imbalance. An *nkisi* makes it possible to approach a spirit. In the Western hemisphere, the Bantu of Brazil refer to the Kongo deities as Nkisis." (from Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 209).

used to provide Africans with the organic materials necessary to heal wounds and create charms (42). M'Dear and her fellow healers are the true repositories of indigenous knowledge (43) and slaves go to them with offerings and with the herbs and plants necessary for their jinxes and divinations. In a scene, women bring bowls of liquor extracted from "black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans" (Morrison 1970, 137); plants and various food items have a strong spiritual charge and are considered "gateways" to the other world, as they do not just contribute to the healing cycle but also harness the energy from the earth, preserving the vital essences of life. This energy is then transferred to human bodies whenever they are used or eaten (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 45).

These women are "like the baobab trees spreading their roots toward the sky and below the earth providing nurture and spiritual sustenance to the community" (54); the slaves trusted them and their remedies, and so enforced their own sense of cultural self-determination (Covey 2007, 123). This is a way of "knowing things" that evades the Euro-centric definition of "medicine" and "science," although it is valid to those who possess that knowledge and put it to good use (Selin 2003, v-vi). It is an entwinement of the spiritual and the earthly that has been highlighted by Toni Morrison herself:

> I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had: discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was "discredited." And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (Morrison 1984, 329–30) [author's emphasis]

Having addressed the poignancy of Toni Morrison's work, I will now focus on her legacy by mentioning another African American author who followed in her footsteps and who contributed to the creation of a new "protest" literature which, according to James

Mellis, is "based on African spiritual traditions, and use[s] these traditions variously, both as a tie to an originary African identity, but also as protection and a locus of resistance to an oppressive society" (Mellis 2019, 1). The contemporary literary environment that emerges from this definition is the latest expression of the concepts Morrison was describing in the previous excerpt, and it comes after a string of numerous Black women writers who challenged political and social issues through the recuperation of folk medicine, spiritual African tropes, and benefic relationships with the natural landscape, namely Toni Cade Bambara (1980), Ntozake Shange (1982), Paule Marshall (1983) and Gloria Naylor (1988).

The author I wish to mention is among the other African American writers who are at the end of this string, entering today's socio-political debate through their fiction: Jesmyn Ward. The story of her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is set in the Southern, fictitious town of Bois Sauvage, and follows little Jojo and Kayla, two siblings of African American and Native American descent who are journeying with their mother and her drug dealer friend to Parchman prison to pick up their father, who has just been released. Of great importance are two secondary characters: Pop and Mam, the protagonists' grandparents, who connect the whole family to the spiritual world, inhabited by ghosts such as Richie. Ultimately, they will all be forced by Richie's unresolved nature to face the past and its cultural irruptions in the present (Petrelli 2020, 283). These "cultural irruptions" include African herbalist traditions and spiritualism as means of empowerment: her characters use them to control, punish or protect themselves from a hostile society. In so doing, the novel gives new generations a historical and literary model in which cultural resistance can be found (Mellis 2019, 2).

While writing her novel, Ward researched magical and spiritual artistries such as voodoo and hoodoo, in order to give credibility to characters such as Mam and Richie, who represent Haitian Vodou and the concept of the afterlife respectively (Bryant 2017).[3]

[3] A clarification on the uses of the words voodoo, hoodoo, and Vodou is due. According to Jeffrey Anderson, "Voodoo proper is an African creole religion [...] As a developed system of belief, it has its own gods, priests, sacred ceremonies,

The clues that enable us to locate the character of Mam as a Haitian Vodou symbol are plenty: her French name (Philomène), the references she makes to Marie Laveau,[4] her invocation of Loko (the *loa* of healing and plants in Haitian Vodou)[5] and her opening up to the *mystère*. These elements provide a geographical and cultural context: Mam's practices are most likely emanated from the New Orleans area, and are practiced in Mississippi and the Gulf South (Mellis 2019, 9). As for the character of Richie, he represents a successful blending of African-based spiritual tradition and the African American contemporary concept of "fictive kin-making" implied in the "Black Afterlives Matter" theory, formulated by Ruha Benjamin. In her essay "Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice," Benjamin bases her concept of "fictive kin" and its networks of kinship on the experience of the African diaspora. In order to resist the dehumanizing effects of slavery, Black people recreated African notions of family and extended kin units. A person could experience both being nurtured and held responsible for their siblings and their fictive kin—cousins, friends—and so stimulate a generalized ethics of caring and personal accountability (Benjamin 2018, 47). In a broadest sense, Benjamin's Black Afterlives Matter concept takes the diasporic practice of kin-making and extends it "*beyond* biological relatives," and in so doing she includes "the materially dead/spiritually alive ancestors in our midst," those who "are animated by a stubborn refusal to forget and to *be forgotten*" (47-48). Richie, the ghost of a murdered boy, seems to fit in this contemporary mode of fabulation.

By adopting Benjamin's point of view, we could say that his story produces meaning and material with which Jesmyn Ward can both "build (and destroy) what we

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and magic. […] scholars frequently use *Voodoo* to refer to a West African religion that is more properly called *Vodu* or *Vodun*. More often, however, one sees *Voodoo* used to indicate a folk religion of Haiti, the preferred term for which is *Vodou*." (Anderson 2008, x) As for Haitian Vodou, "authors have made it famous by alleging ties with black magic, human sacrifice, and cannibalism" and this religion's origins "stretch back to the late seventeenth century, when French colonists began importing African slaves. […] The faith evolved into a complex blend of multiple African religions and Christianity." (33) Whereas hoodoo "in modern parlance, does not refer to a religion. On the contrary, it designates a body of magical beliefs, with little reference to deities and the trappings of religious worship. […] Hoodoo has long been associated with the Mississippi Valley, as has Voodoo." (xi)

[4] "The most famous of New Orleans's voodoo queens. Born in 1801, she had become one of the nation's best known African American females by the time of her death in 1881." (Anderson 2008, 134)

[5] The word *loa* is "[a] term evidently derived from the Yoruba word *l'awo*, meaning 'mystery.' These spirits or lesser deities are themselves divided into nations, based on their African origin." (Anderson 2008, 33)

call 'the real world'" (52). Spirits and ancestors come back to us through the stories of writers who focus on "*what is* and *what is possible*" (52). This narrative process is a literary form of kin-making, given that it cultivates kinfulness. And ultimately, "cultivating kinfulness is cultivating life" (65). As I mentioned previously, these relationships among the dead and the living strengthen the bond between African Americans and Nature. The living possess vivifying and healing herbal knowledge, while the dead sleep under the earth, among the "seeds, roots and rhizomes," where there are "not only coffins," but where alternative forms of kinship can grow and "nourish other life forms and ways of living" (Benjamin 2018, 47). These concepts find their representation in images such as the following, in which the ghost of Richie sleeps under the earth in what appears to be a womb-like environment, breathing and beating: "Home ain't always about a place," says Richie. "Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y'all one and it beats with your heart" (Ward 2017, 182-83). Richie and the earth appear to live symbiotically. Might it be a new form of life? Considering this concept of Afterlife and the references to the West African "earth mother," the connection between Black people and earth seems to be memory-preserving and potentially re-birthing.

Previously, I also mentioned the living's vivifying herbal knowledge. Much like the kin-making concept, it is strongly tied to African diasporic culture. In Jesmyn Ward's novel we are able to see African religious and healing traditions in action thanks to characters such as Leonie, who is Jojo and Kayla's mother. She represents an African American woman who has lost her people's ways, but ultimately manages to remember and retain some type of traditional knowledge, especially regarding herbs and their healing powers. Through Leonie, Ward seems to suggest that African-spiritual practices give characters protection, relief, and "the key to discovering a sense of identity through their usage" (Mellis 2019, 10). The herb she uses to help soothe Kayla's sick stomach is, at this point not surprisingly, blackberry. It is a natural method of healing illness that is both natural and supernatural, a traditional overlap in Black culture (Chireau 2003, 96). In the course of the novel, we come to learn various facts about Leonie's life, and among them we find reminiscences of the lessons her mother gave her, and knowledge about

herbal medicine she passed down to her. We get acquainted with Leonie's thoughts as she remembers: "Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world. Starting when I was seven, Mama would lead me out in the woods around the house for walks" and then "she'd point out plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt" (Ward 2017, 102-3). In this way, the text shows how root-working knowledge is still passed among generations, so that contemporary African Americans can still find a connection within themselves with their African slave ancestors.

We have plenty of evidence of this type of knowledge being cherished among slaves,[6] and Ward demonstrates how it survived the passing of time, being still alive today. As we follow Leonie's thoughts, we are informed of the healing properties of some plants: "You can make a decoction for cold and flu. And if you make them into a poultice, you can ease and heal bruises, arthritis, and boils…" (Ward 2017, 103). We can find almost identical listings of ingredients in real-life testimonies that were eventually put on paper, such as the ones catalogued by the *Federal Writers' Project*. For instance, in one of these documents we can find the words of ex-slaves such as Mrs. Celestia Avery, who explains that "We used everything for medicine that grew on the ground" (Rawick 1941, 26). Whereas Mr. Sam Rawls from Newberry stated: "Some of us had witches. […] In dem days, was lots o' fevers with de folks. Dey cured 'em and other sickness wid teas from root herbs and barks" (1936, 5). But a full listing can be found in the words of this ex-slave, Mr. Henry Ryan:

> When the slaves got sick they had doctors, and used old herbs. 'Jerusalem Ore' was a kind of herb for children, to build them up, and there was field grass roots and herb roots which was boiled and tea drunk for fevers. And 'Primer-rhine' tea which was drunk, too. Sometimes they would hang garlic around small boys and

[6] See the Collection *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. It "contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration, later renamed Work Projects Administration (WPA). At the conclusion of the Slave Narrative Project, a set of edited transcripts was assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*." Source: https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/ (last accessed on 08/01/21)

> girls necks to keep away any kind of sickness. (*Federal Writers' Project* 1936, 27-28)

And an even more specific account on roots, herbs, and healing methods can be found in the words of Mr. Hector Smith:

> I gwine tell you just like I know it, all de older peoples use to get de herbs out de old fields for dey remedies. My Massa en my Missus [...] Use to get old field ringdom, what smell like dis here mint, en boil dat en let it steep. Dat what was good to sweat a fever en cold out you. Den dere was life everlastin tea dat was good for a bad cold en cherry bark what would make de blood so bitter no fever never couldn' stand it. Dem what had de rheumatism had to take dat lion's tongue or what some peoples calls wintergreen tea en some of de time, dey take pine top en mix wid de herbs to make a complete cure. [...] Another thing dat been good for de rheumatism was dat red oak bark dat dey use to bathe de limbs wid. Willow tea was somethin good for chill en fever en catnip en sage tea was de thing for babies. (*Federal Writers' Project* 1936, 40)

This kind of knowledge was even more fundamental to a runaway slave's survival (Ruffin 2010, 35), living on the outskirts of plantation life, usually in the woods, depending on wild growing areas for their sustenance. As Ruffin writes, this knowledge was also important for slaves who needed to tend to their families and kin inside the plantations (35). A further example can be found in the testimony of James Bolton, former slave:

> [T]hey was allus some garlic for ailments. Garlic was mostly to cure wums (worms). They roasted the garlic in the hot ashes and squez the juice outen it and made the chilluns take it. Sometimes they made poultices outen garlic for the pneumony ... We saved a heap of bark from wild cheery and poplar and black haw and slippery ellum trees and we dried out mullein leaves. They was all mixed an' brewed to make bitters. Whensomeever a nigger got sick, then bitters was good for, well ma'am, they was good for what ailed 'em! We tuk 'em for rheumatiz, for fever, an' for the misery in the stummick, and for most all sorts of sickness. Red oak bark tea was good for sore throat. (Rawick 1941, 94)

As evidenced from Bolton's words, the herbal knowledge of slaves was incredibly vast and covered multiple types of illness. And, as Ruffin concludes, it was a way of counteracting the ecological burden of the slaves' existence with the "ecological beauty of meeting the needs of their ailing bodies with their own botanical knowledge" (Ruffin 2010, 36). This counteraction is not only liberating, but it also cultivates the concept of

"the body as a bioregion," the idea that bodies *are* Nature, rather than separate from it (36). All this leads to a pervasive form of freedom that is perfectly explained by Deborah Slicer: "The only bioregion that we can claim strict identity with is the body" and "to be 'home' is first to inhabit one's own body" (Slicer 1998, 113-14). Accordingly, folk medicine gets Black people in touch with Nature, and Nature returns Black people's vitality through both spiritual power and remembrance. It is an ecological process which refills the hollowness left by racialized violence and past and present abuses. This process is extremely important to African Americans, and the fact that this return to African spiritual traditions has been cyclical, as it has come in "waves" (Anderson 2005, 3-4), is evidence of this need to find relief from social abuse. As a matter of fact, Jeffrey Anderson and other scholars identified three main "upsurges of interest": in the mid-1880s, the 1920s, and the 1970s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these moments coincide with the Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Power and Black Arts Movements (Mellis 2019, 12). This seems to indicate that, whenever a significant event comes to the surface to challenge socio-political issues affecting African Americans, a cultural return to African spiritual tradition is subconsciously felt as needed (12). It has been argued by a number of scholars that we are currently living in another one of these "waves" of interest in African-based supernaturalism, which roughly coincides with the rise of "Trumpism". Jesmyn Ward's novel evidently reflects this new climate of protestation and social turmoil by turning to spirituality and traditions as a means of protection, in an attempt to regain power and identity (13).

It is with this final observation on *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and its contemporary political implications that I would like to conclude this essay. As we have seen, both Jesmyn Ward and Toni Morrison have tackled social and historical issues by adopting an imagery that is tightly connected to West African spirituality and its bond with Nature. With a re-appropriating intent in mind, these two authors managed to overturn the "white" images of domination and subjugation of the land by retrieving ancient and revitalizing knowledge. This knowledge, whether medical or spiritual, revolutionizes the literary tradition that depicts soil, dirt and trees as deadly captors. Instead, a new vision that presents earth as a comforting, life-giving, resourceful entity slowly takes

shape and builds an alternative as well as parallel literature to the Southern narrative that depicts land as a chthonic devourer: an Ecoliterature which embraces Ecotheological thought and focuses on both the spiritual and actual healing qualities of the flora, cherishing traditions.

This literary discourse gives birth to a process of amalgamation that is often adopted by dispossessed people, as it is intuitively embraced by other ethnic groups who experienced persecution, enslavement or incarceration, and who struggled to maintain cultural traditions over colonization. One of them being Native Americans, with whom Black STS feminists have often interlaced approaches to race, epistemology, and Indigenous metaphysics (Benjamin 2018, 51). With these tools and tropes, African American authors such as Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward retrace, retell, and reappropriate history both to educate and establish a contact with new generations, which are considered the true seeds of change. It is a "speculative method" which tries to envision afterlives, giving space to meaningful conversations between the living and the dead, but which also manages to revitalize Black people both physically and spiritually, thanks to the knowledge passed from a generation to another. In this way, contemporary young African Americans such as Ward's characters—Jojo and Kayla—find themselves suspended between past and future, with the hard but not impossible task to find a new "home," a new "garden" to inhabit and take care of, discovering "ecological beauty" again.

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