Blackness and the Anthropocene Sublime in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.1.5571

Abstract

This article focuses on the potentials of African American literature to analyze and rethink interlinkages of race, the sublime, and the Anthropocene. Specifically, it discusses two of Jesmyn Ward's novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Let Us Descend* (2023), through a focus on Blackness and the notion of the Anthropocene sublime. My readings show that Ward mobilizes traditions of the sublime through an African American environmental perspective, thus highlighting the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and often suggesting alternative forms of thinking about the human. After introducing the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of my analysis this article focuses on two strategies through which Ward negotiates questions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime: playing with collapsing temporalities (*Salvage the Bones*) and with figures that I interpret as "elemental ghosts" (*Let Us Descend*). It argues that Ward's Katrina-novel *Salvage the Bones* speaks to the Anthropocene sublime by representing "civilizational collapse" as part of the present (not a far-off future), by showing the effects of traditions of anti-Blackness on the present, and by collapsing human and more-than-human temporalities through a discourse of motherhood. *Let Us Descend*, on the other hand, a historical fiction set in the antebellum period, addresses Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by representing the racial sublime of slavery through the figures of "elemental ghosts." Through perspectives developed in African American studies, my readings of the novels demonstrate how Ward strategically deploys established traditions of the sublime in ways that resonate with the Anthropocene and contribute to a more race-sensitive conceptualization of the Anthropocene sublime.

Keywords: African American literature, Anthropocene, sublime, Blackness, race, Gothic.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el potencial de la literatura afroamericana para analizar y repensar las interrelaciones entre raza, lo sublime y el Antropoceno. Analiza dos novelas de Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) y *Let Us Descend* (2023), centrándose en la negritud y en la noción de lo sublime del Antropoceno. Mis interpretaciones sugieren que Ward utiliza las tradiciones de lo sublime a través de una perspectiva ambiental afroamericana, poniendo así de relieve las dimensiones raciales de lo sublime del Antropoceno y tratando de inspirar formas alternativas de pensar lo humano. Tras introducir los fundamentos teóricos y conceptuales de mi análisis, este artículo se centra en dos estrategias a través de las cuales Ward negocia las cuestiones de la negritud y lo sublime del Antropoceno: jugando con temporalidades que se colapsan (*Salvage the Bones*) y con figuras que yo interpreto como "*elemental ghosts*" (*Let Us Descend*). Argumenta que la novela de Ward *Salvage the Bones* habla de lo sublime del Antropoceno al representar el "colapso civilizatorio" como parte del presente (no de un futuro lejano), al mostrar los efectos de las tradiciones antinegras en el presente y al colapsar las temporalidades humanas y más-que-humanas a través de un discurso de maternidad. *Let Us Descend*, por su parte, una novela de ficción histórica ambientada en el periodo anterior a la Guerra de Secesión trata la negritud y lo sublime del Antropoceno representando lo sublime racial de la esclavitud a través de las figuras de "*elemental ghosts*". Las lecturas de las novelas demuestran cómo Ward utiliza estratégicamente las tradiciones establecidas de lo sublime en formas que resuenan con el Antropoceno y contribuyen a conceptualizar lo sublime del Antropoceno a través de nociones desde la perspectiva de los estudios afroamericanos.

Palabras clave: Literatura afroamericana, Antropoceno, sublime, negritud, raza, Gótico.

Questions of race have only belatedly found a place in Anthropocene discourse. While many other factors have been considered almost from the inception of the Anthropocene concept in the early twenty-first century (as frequent suggestions for alternative labels suggest), race has for some time received relatively little attention. By now, however, scholars including Nicholas Mirzoeff, Laura Pulido, and Kathryn Yusoff, noting an initial erasure of race in the Anthropocene, have come to articulate the need and provide models for exploring its role more rigorously. Their research complements other critiques of the Anthropocene that revolt against the perception that the concept unduly posits a falsely homogenizing account of the human species, seeking to ensure awareness that the Anthropocene has to be seen as a racial process too.[1]

Fruitful ways to discuss race in the Anthropocene can involve perspectives of human geography, postcolonial ecocriticism, or environmental justice scholarship, but also, as this article suggests, concepts from African American literature and African American studies. The field of African American studies often addresses questions of race through Blackness, a notion and term that is variously used by scholars in this field to explore histories of anti-Black violence and racism, but also to extricate Blackness from such histories. The analyses of Ward's fiction presented in this article, on one hand, deploy the analytical potentials of Blackness for genealogies of anti-Black racism and its effects into the present. On the other hand, my understanding of Blackness is rooted in an inclusive idea of Black Studies as a field that, in Cornel West's words, broadly tries "to redefine what it means to be human, what it means to be modern, what it means to be American" (542). In relation to the Anthropocene, this understanding of Blackness both provides a way to show (some of) the Anthropocene's racial histories and helps spotlight how African American literary discourse often creatively attempts to rethink the human.

The writer I turn to in this essay, Jesmyn Ward, is celebrated widely as an environmentally interested Southern author, deeply in conversation with the Black literary canon, and is therefore particularly promising with respect to tracing interlinkages of Blackness, the sublime, and the Anthropocene. Turning to literary discourse in relation to such interlinkages connects my argument to discussions over an Anthropocene aesthetics. With African American literature, these discussions have both crucial synchronic and diachronic dimensions. On one hand, there is the (still) much-debated aesthetic problem for contemporary Anthropocene literature that Greg Garrard once described as a "crisis of representation," in which "[n]one of the traditional forms of literature, film, or television documentary is unproblematically suited to capturing the geographical and temporal scale, complexity, and uncertainty of climate change" and the Anthropocene (709). My readings of Ward's fiction speak to this crisis insofar as her work draws on the potentials of specifically African

[1] On race in the Anthropocene, see also Davis et al., Tuana, and Peters in this special issue.

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American perspectives and narrative traditions. On the other hand, exploring these perspectives and traditions through the heuristic lenses of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime also centrally involves the relation between aesthetics and the figure giving the name to the proposed new geological epoch in question, the *anthropos*. It interrogates the constitutive role of the sublime as what David Lloyd describes as a "regulative discourse of the human on which the modern conception of the political and racial order of modernity rests" (3)—an order whose contestation has obviously been a vital concern for African American literature.

With these conceptual frameworks in mind, this article discusses two of Jesmyn Ward's novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Let Us Descend* (2023), by focusing on Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime. My analyses contextualize Ward's fiction and its exploration of racially inflected vulnerabilities and resistance strategies within archives of Black thought and thus as part of a genealogy of (anti-)Blackness and its relations to the sublime. Ward, I show, mobilizes traditions of the sublime in various ways that highlight the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and suggest alternative forms of thinking the human that are relevant for an Anthropocene context. In order to explain Ward's strategies, I will begin by briefly introducing the theoretical frameworks of my analysis, namely my understanding of the Anthropocene sublime and its potentials in relation to African American literature. Then, I turn to Ward's novels to analyze how they negotiate questions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by playing with collapsing temporalities (*Salvage the Bones*) and with figures that I interpret as "elemental ghosts" (*Let Us Descend*).

The Anthropocene Sublime and African American Literature

While the Anthropocene, in its typical association with large-scale environmental crises and disasters and their overwhelming impacts intuitively interlinks with a sublime vernacular, such links never emerge in a historical vacuum or disconnected from political interests and effects. To the contrary, exploring an Anthropocene sublime reveals the lasso of human aesthetic history that is thrown around the Anthropocene in ways that bear the potential for a more rigorous critique of the Anthropocene. Connecting the Anthropocene with the sublime enables us to analyze the former as dependent on aesthetic and literary histories and choices. As historian of science Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, finding inspiration in foundational theories of the sublime, points out, the Anthropocene, when it relies on the aesthetic of the sublime, "rejuvenates old cultural tropes" (288). Fressoz thus proposes the potential of the Anthropocene sublime as a discourse for sustained critique by identifying several facets of an Anthropocene sublime and by asking us to consider "the function" of the sublime as it (re-)emerges in the Anthropocene (298).

The Anthropocene sublime, as a critical discourse that allows for discussing aesthetic and political dimensions of the Anthropocene, has particular relevance in the context of African American literature. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, a

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focus on the Anthropocene sublime is enriching for analyses of the African American literary tradition as a way to critically address the Anthropocene, because this tradition has long been keenly aware that the sublime is not a neutral concept but one with a violent racial history. Focusing on the Anthropocene sublime from an African American perspective can help explicate racial histories and (anti-)Blackness as part of the Anthropocene by understanding the sublime as a discourse that intersects with the production of both the figure of the modern human and modern concepts of race. After all, the classical sublime emerges with racial biases when it draws its power from troubling an experiential stability: it designates not merely an aesthetic framework, but a "state of mind" (Shaw 1), and involves "an experience of potent uncertainty, a moment in which the identities of self and world become energetically interpenetrative" (Outka 15). Such a conceptualization of the (classical) sublime pertains to racialization through the ways in which it has historically involved an othering of racialized (most often specifically Black) bodies (Shapiro 43). Moreover, in classical eighteenth-century aesthetic treatments of the sublime and as part of a "racialization of liberty" in Atlantic modernity (Doyle 13), the sublime has significantly shaped discourses in and of the United States. Not only was the sublime assumed to be ideally suited "to register and interpret the 'uncivilized' wilderness of the American continent" (Mohr and Moss 289), but the ways in which the sublime turned dark bodies into others were also aligned with the existence of racial slavery and contributed to a racialized national identity through literature (as Toni Morrison has famously argued in *Playing in the Dark*). The sublime was thus part of what Laura Doyle describes as a continued process of "racializing freedom" and cultivating a "compelling vision for the 'liberty' narrative" that had profound cultural and material effects (91, 93). This process includes the large-scale environmental transformations of the New World through racial slavery and the lasting epistemic violence of anti-Blackness that extends beyond the period of colonialism and African American enslavement into the present.[2]

The second reason why focusing on the Anthropocene sublime is productive in the present context is that it helps critically interrogate and respond to the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene, as the racial biases in classical theories of the sublime have often been met by resistance and counter-discourses in the African American tradition. Such resistance has taken a variety of forms, ranging from a strategic, often double-voiced usage of different types of the sublime to undercut bias to the coinage of alternative critical concepts that reappropriate the sublime. Examples of the former are found in nineteenth-century African Americans' responses to iconic environments through the natural sublime, as in Frederick Douglass's take on Niagara Falls, which simultaneously mobilizes a sublime vernacular while performing a subtle critique of the sublime as a marker of racial privilege (Klestil), or the evocation of the sublime to describe the resistance

[2] On the racial biases of classical theories of the sublime and the complex relations between race and the sublime, see Armstrong, Gilroy 187-223, Freeman 105-147, Hubbard, and Shapiro 41-67.

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potentials of swamps (as in W.E.B. Du Bois's novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*). Well-known instances of the latter include W.E.B. Du Bois's famous notion of the color line (Shapiro 45-46), Toni Morrison's theorization of race as a sublime, "virtually unspeakable thing" ("Unspeakable" 3), or Ta-Nehisi Coates's attempt of self-empowerment through desublimating the racial sublime in *Between the World and Me*. Such thinking conceptualizes and contests the "racial sublime" as "a vast, difficult-to-comprehend system of oppression" that "separates much of white and black America" (Shapiro 44-46). Additionally, recent scholarship which builds on such critical traditions (even if not primarily or explicitly engaging with the sublime), as in Black Ecologies or in studies that renegotiate a racialized enlightenment humanism—such as Jackson's or Yusoff's—is likewise an important if broader context for my analyses of Ward. Ward's fiction is both part of longstanding counter-discourses that have strategically deployed and reconceptualized the sublime and in conversation with more recent (typically Afropessimist) positions emerging out of such counter-discourses that, I argue, deserve to receive more critical attention in the fields of ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies.

One of the key facets of the Anthropocene sublime identified in Fressoz is particularly important from an African American perspective: the "sublime of the collapse" (292). Rooting the "sublime of the collapse" in a "literary device dating back to the middle of the nineteenth-century," namely "the 'ruins of the future'" (292), Fressoz points out that

> Linking the Anthropocene to the idea of civilizational collapse or human extinction is an aesthetic and political choice. Other narratives are possible: for instance, the Anthropocene could be envisioned as a far more perverse and unequal process that accentuates other forms of vulnerability and injustice. If the narrative of collapse is both simpler and more sublime it is also deeply problematic. (292-293)

Fressoz's idea of the sublime of the collapse as part of the Anthropocene sublime thus includes two main components. Firstly, there is the proposal that the Anthropocene sublime emerges from and depends on the notion of future collapse, and thus involves a temporal distancing from collapse for those who experience the Anthropocene sublime. Secondly, Fressoz stresses that telling this narrative (and not another one) is an "aesthetic and political choice" and that alternatives are possible (293).

Both of Fressoz's arguments are crucial in the present context. The idea of a *future* collapse is fundamentally problematic from an African American perspective, since Blackness is bound to a heightened risk of collapse in what Christina Sharpe has described as a (still) persisting anti-Black "atmospheric condition of time and place" (106). This is not just apparent in the continual collapse and expendability of Black life in the U.S. during the historical periods of slavery and Jim Crow, but also because the legacies of these histories persist in transformed ways until today. There has never been an equal opportunity for a distancing from collapse, especially in the contemporary environmental context, given that Black communities in the U.S. continue to be on the frontlines of the risks of climate change and environmental disasters. A distancing from collapse in a spatial as well as in a (deep) temporal sense

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is unavailable for many vulnerable Black communities of the present. In other words, the "ruins of the future" narrative is only available for those for whom the present feels (at least relatively) safe (Fressoz 292). From a perspective rooted in the experience of the precarity of Blackness, this fundamentally marks the Anthropocene sublime as privilege and the Anthropocene as evasion.

This is also why Fressoz's insistence on the narrative focus on future collapse as an aesthetic and political *choice* is so crucial for African American traditions. After all, these traditions have often been engaged in developing counter-discourses to dominant forms of the sublime and may therefore inspire alternative cultural tropes for the Anthropocene sublime too. Accordingly, my readings suggest that by renegotiating the Anthropocene sublime, African American writers like Ward, on one hand, bring that sublime's racial dimensions and relation to Blackness to light, while, on the other hand, by relying on a long history of resistance to (racialized forms of) the sublime, they are able to inspire alternative narratives that may help prevent reproducing forms of racialization. African American traditions and Black Studies, if meant to "redefine what it means to be human" (West 542), also hold potential for contributing to the imagination of new versions of the Anthropocene.

Collapsing Temporalities in *Salvage the Bones*

This impulse of dethroning and rethinking a racialized figure of the human produced by the notion of Blackness and classical theories of the sublime is essential to Jesmyn Ward's writing. Ward's novels consist in a form of what Sharpe has called "wake work" (13), as they explore histories and legacies of enslavement that continue to shape the present. In this project, the sublime is central not despite but precisely because it is deeply problematic for the African American literary imagination. Ward's texts deploy different forms of the sublime seeking to move beyond the intrinsic dualisms of the classical sublime in ways that help us explore potentials of the Anthropocene sublime. Her writing evokes traditions of the sublime that highlight the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene sublime and that often suggest alternative forms of thinking the human. I argue that these affordances become apparent in two strategies in the novels considered, as Ward plays with collapsing temporalities and the natural sublime (*Salvage the Bones*), and with figures that I interpret as "elemental ghosts" and the racial sublime (*Let Us Descend*).

With *Salvage the Bones*, Ward engages with Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime by collapsing temporalities in three different ways: first, by figuring collapse as part of the present (as opposed to collapse in the future); second, by collapsing an anti-Black past into the present; and, third by collapsing human and more-than-human temporalities through the novel's discourse of motherhood. With respect to depicting collapse as part of the present, *Salvage the Bones*' representation of Hurricane Katrina is central. Ward's Katrina-novel seeks to move beyond merely portraying the natural sublime of a category 3 hurricane, as the author's response to a question about a declining public interest in Katrina in a 2014 interview shows:

> I was hearing that people were tired of Katrina, that there was Katrina fatigue. […] I think that Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the South and the country in general—ugly things about race and class and about how certain human lives are valued more than others. […] Maybe it was just too much and people are afraid to address it because it was so awful. ("Beating")

This passage mirrors a central choice Ward made for her novel: her focus both in the interview's explanation for receding public interest in Katrina and in *Salvage the Bones* lies less on the disaster as such than on the disastrous conditions it revealed. This becomes apparent as the novel reserves the largest portions of its portrayal of the Batiste family for the days leading up to the Hurricane's arrival. Although *Salvage the Bones* is Ward's most overt engagement with climate change (as a look at scholarly literature on the text confirms),[3] the story, told from the perspective of teenage first-person narrator Esch who discovers and contemplates an unwanted pregnancy in the days preceding the storm, is not simply about Katrina as an isolated incident.

This is not to say that the novel omits depicting the destructive forces of Katrina in terms of the natural sublime, thus conveying a sense of collapse in the present by portraying the vastness of the storm and its destruction. In Ward's much-celebrated metaphorical language, *Salvage the Bones* expresses the sublime of the hurricane's landfall with winds that "*sounded like trains*" (Ward, *Salvage* 219; emphasis in original), and suggests its overwhelming character: "It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and bids them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides" (230). The devastating effects of Katrina's destructive forces, too, are revealed in relentless clarity, thereby alluding to a "sublime of the collapse" (Fressoz 291), as entire villages are "[n]ot ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone" (Ward, *Salvage* 253). Crucially, however, this is decidedly not the "ruins of the future" type of narrative that Fressoz refers to, but one that situates "civilizational collapse" into the present through the natural sublime (Fressoz 292).

Such a depiction of Katrina echoes the African American literary tradition—Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes to mind—which hints at the second way in which *Salvage the Bones* collapses temporalities: namely in the sense of collapsing an anti-Black past into the present. Ward's novel, after all, is not about the hurricane as the singular disruption of a purely natural disaster as it instead reveals how practices of slavery and segregation have shaped the conditions of collapse in the present. As Katrina was one of the first events that revealed racialized impacts of climate change to a broader U.S. public, the focus in the novel is on the event as one "that exacerbated and exposed—rather than created—scenes of injustice" (Bares 22). It is on the legacy and effects of environmental racism that have produced the Batiste family's conditions on "the trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit"

[3] Environmentally oriented readings of *Salvage the Bones* include those by Santana and Bares; suggestions to read Ward's novel as an expression of "slow violence" (Nixon) come from Hartnell and Leader-Picone (61-79). For readings explicitly focusing on the Anthropocene, see Wilson-Scott and Ivry.

(Ward, *Salvage* 94). Ward's Anthropocene sublime is therefore not primarily that of Fressoz's "geological superhuman," but instead reveals historically grown anti-Black injustices collapsing into the present, thus showing how even a Category 3 hurricane (less severe than Category 5 hurricanes that have also been observed) can mean immediate "civilizational collapse" for some (Fressoz 288, 292).

By emphasizing how, to use a phrase from N.K. Jemisin, "[f]or some, it has always been hard" (qtd. in Jenkins 127), Ward fundamentally opposes a narrative of the Anthropocene's *suddenness*, of how contemplation through the sublime has *suddenly* become impossible, as in Latour's assessment that "the world is *no longer* a spectacle to be enjoyed from a secure place" (170; my emphasis). From the perspectives of Jemisin's "some," Latour's "secure place" never existed. *Salvage the Bones* represents this idea not only in Ward's stretching of the time covered by the story to twelve days (all but the second to last one representing the actual arrival of Katrina), but also by depicting a host of more quotidian forms of violence that give the narrative multiple climaxes. These include an accident that leaves the father of the family with a mutilated hand, Esch's unwanted teenage pregnancy, her brother Skeetah's dog China's killing one of her puppies, and her brother Randall's futile attempts to obtain a basketball scholarship. Such forms of violence manifest in the present but also, Ward suggests, have roots in a past that created the present's systemic, infrastructural conditions. An automated phone call the family receives before Katrina's landfall is revealing: "*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned* […] *these could be the consequences of your actions*" (217; emphasis in original). What follows, in a man's voice that "sounds like a computer" is a list that implies, in Esch's interpretation and its ultimate rationale, that "*You can die*" (217; emphasis in original). From the perspective of the Batiste family, the phone call represents an automated violence and neglect on behalf of a state authority that—in a dehumanizing manner reflected in the machine-like quality of the voice—washes its hands off potential deaths of racialized groups deemed negligible. For the rural Black family, whose Hurricane-obsessed father is unable to obtain spare parts for their vehicle to evacuate (46), and who continuously struggle for daily survival, the very idea of having a choice in the face of environmental risks is revealed as illusory. The Batistes are Jemisin's racialized "some" for whom it has "always been hard," and Ward's strategy of foregrounding their quotidian catastrophes and slow but constant collapse through the deep irony of the phone call's implication of their free choice spotlights how permanent conditions rooted in a history of anti-Blackness shape the family's experience of Katrina.

Throughout, the novel stresses that the Batiste family's heightened vulnerability is inflected and conditioned by a long history of anti-Blackness, as Ward deploys what she calls her strategy of "narrative ruthlessness" ("Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*"). Ward's "Bois Sauvage," the fictional town that is the setting of her first three novels, is "still dense with the memory of the closed, rich bayou in the

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marrow of the bones" (Ward, *Line* 239). A "duskier Yoknapatawpha" (Cunningham), this place is always prone to disaster, since

> when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north. (Ward, *Salvage* 4)

Mention of the slave galleys in conjunction with (touristy) beaches stresses how racialization functions as a differential of human populations that is built into the Batiste's world and their environmental/family history on "the pit," a home shaped by exploitation, as Esch's grandfather was accommodating white neighbors by "selling earth for money" (14). Ward thus claims that acts of exploitation, part of a tradition of anti-Blackness, have (in this case literally) lowered the lived worlds of racialized others, and that environmental racism and the legacies of plantation (and subsequent forms of) slavery have created the violent existence the Batistes experience. In this way, the novel attests to Ward's proposal in *The Fire This Time* (2016) that "[w]e must acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, must recall the black diaspora to understand what is happening now" (9), but also highlights racial dimensions of the Anthropocene by recalling the history of anti-Blackness.

Beyond representing collapse in the present and showing its emergence from an anti-Black past, a third strategy through which Ward collapses temporalities to negotiate Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime in *Salvage the Bones* comes in the form of a collapsing of human and more-than-human temporalities through the discourse of motherhood that pervades the novel. Motherhood, as a concept, generally holds significant potential with respect to theorizing human life in the Anthropocene, considering its possible interlinkages with thinking the *anthropos* inter- and trans-generationally and across species boundaries. While this article is not the place to investigate such ideas more extensively, Ward's discourse of motherhood connects motherhood with forms of vulnerability historically produced by anti-Blackness, and it serves to imagine an alternative figure of the human that responds to collapse with an ethics of care.

Through Esch, Ward addresses racialized ideas of teenage Black pregnancy and broadly evokes meanings of mothering. This includes, for example, a constant negotiation of motherly absence, for despite the fact that Esch's own mother died giving birth to her younger brother Junior, the figure of Rose Batiste persists throughout the book as what Santana calls "a consistent absent presence" (109), and features particularly prominently in Esch's experience of Katrina. The memory of Rose functions as a perceptive lens for this experience, as the narrator continuously reads Katrina's forces through her mother's stories about her sensual experience of the 1969 Hurricane Camille. Esch thus viscerally makes sense of her own experience by recalling her mother's description of "smells" and "sounds" of the earlier storm (218-219).

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The feeling that "*Mama always here*" (220; emphasis in original) evoked by the protagonist, however, is only one way in which a discourse of motherhood shapes Esch's perception of the storyworld. Additional meanings of motherhood that are significant as part of Ward's negotiation of the Anthropocene sublime arise specifically through the ways in which Ward's narrative transcends motherhood of human figures by including a host of alternative mothers. The novel explicitly negotiates competing concepts of motherhood—for instance, in a discussion between Skeetah and Manny, the biological father of Esch's child (96)—and it evokes the longstanding trope of the loss of a Black mother through Rose as a reminder of the violence and vulnerability of racialized groups in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, Esch invokes and interlinks mother figures ranging from Greek mythology (Medea) to nonhumans (China, her brother Skeetah's fighting dog). Characteristic of all of these is their ability to both give and take life. While Medea is the life-taking mythological model evoked not only in Ward but also in, most notably, Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*, China, while more ambivalent in her temporary gentleness toward her puppies also kills one of her offspring (17, 129). Moreover, Esch herself contemplates (highly risky) methods of ending her pregnancy when she muses about things "you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you" (102). Ward thus once again underlines an inequality visible as a socio-economic facet that has grown out of a tradition of anti-Blackness, here with respect to choice-making regarding biological reproduction.

With respect to Ward's imagining of an alternative human response to collapse and an ethics of care, it is crucial that Esch experiences the hurricane through a multiplicity of mother figures. Her living through the storm is shaped not only by associations to her dead biological mother (Rose): Esch also reads Katrina as a mother. This suggests an alternative idea of the human that is most clearly articulated during the aftermath of the hurricane, when Esch announces:

> I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (255)

The passage reveals a twofold response to the Anthropocene sublime as perceived through Esch. First, the protagonist's response to the storm as a "murderous mother" aligns herself (who is also a mother) with the storm and thus signals an experience of the natural sublime (as one of the frameworks Ward uses to represent the storm) that finds its resolution not through a sense of mastery and a practice of othering. The novel underlines that Katrina is not the last devastating natural disaster—"until the next mother […] comes" (255)—and it does not build toward the restoration of a stable human subject in opposition to the forces of nature (as in other Katrina-novels). While a classical narrative of the natural sublime regularly implies self-

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assurance through a sense of mastery, as "the sublime overwhelms the senses and the imagination but is nonetheless a manifestation of the supersensible in the mortal human" (Lloyd 49), Ward's protagonist is denied such a dimension of closure that hierarchically elevates the human. Instead, Ward opts through Esch for a collective response that interlinks the protagonist as mother and the "murderous mother" Katrina in a new framework of collective relations marked by care. Esch, after all, is not alone by the end of the novel: after her (extended) family learns about her pregnancy, she is assured that "[t]his baby got plenty daddies" (*Salvage* 255).

Furthermore, the novel's closure hints at the ways this outcome and *Salvage the Bones* more broadly propose a revaluation of forms of interconnectedness and suggest the need to abandon a strict caesura between human and nonhuman life. Scholars have noted the ways in which Ward "activates a complicated interstice of valuation around the human and the nonhuman, revealing the ways in which the relationship between Black rural life and nature is characterized by interbeing and pervasive connectedness" (Dunning 78).[4] Additionally, while Ward emphasizes the violence of dehumanizing forms of anti-Blackness as echoing through the Anthropocene sublime, her text does not shy away from but embraces what Marjorie Spiegel once termed the "dreaded comparison": the evocation of similarities between the suffering of African Americans and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Throughout the novel, Esch fuses images of Blackness, the human, and the more-than-human, a process that is also visible when Ward describes Katrina's survivors by moving from "newborn babies" to "blind puppies" to "newly hatched baby snakes" (*Salvage* 255). Through the narrative technique of a book that uses the word "human" merely ten times (Santana 116), which radically follows through Esch's observation that "[b]odies tell stories" and which does not shy away from interlinking concepts of Blackness and nonhuman animality (83), Ward offers an idea of the human that does not "master" the sublime, suggesting instead an ethics of care envisioned through an African American experience.

Elemental Ghosts in *Let Us Descend*

With *Let Us Descend*, my analysis shifts the focus to another strategy through which Ward mobilizes traditions of the sublime in ways that speak to Anthropocene discourse, namely by introducing figures that I suggest reading as "elemental ghosts." Instead of deploying the natural sublime to stress how the ongoing effects of violent racial histories condition collapse for African Americans today, Ward's most recent novel uses classic gothic elements such as haunted landscapes and supernatural figures to represent antebellum slavery as a racial sublime. Building on the work of Michael Shapiro, I define this racial sublime as "a vast, difficult-to-comprehend system of oppression" that (still) "separates much of white and black America" (44–

[4] Santana also sees the novel as provoking "a troubling of the human through a coalescence of human and animal identities" (110); contributions by Dunning (73-78) and Ivry make arguments along similar lines.

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46). Shapiro conceptualizes the racial sublime as a persisting, "imagination-challenging" "system of racial discrimination and officially sanctioned forms of brutality whose vastness pierces the veil of ignorance only episodically" (42-44). This idea, I argue, is central to Ward's approach in *Let Us Descend*, as the novel presents its protagonist's overwhelming and disorienting experience of a dehumanizing system of oppression: a world of antebellum slavery that is not just hellish and haunted but thereby becomes vast, incommensurable, and unimaginable, and that represents continuous collapse as defining the experience of Blackness. The act of (fictionally) depicting antebellum slavery in drastic ways is obviously not an innovation and does not per se qualify as a mobilization of the racial sublime. Nor is including gothic elements a new feature in African American literature (Toni Morrison's *Beloved* comes to mind) or singular to Ward's fiction (the gothic has been explored by scholars as a way of expressing a traumatic past).[5] However, the intensity with which Ward evokes a sense of vastness and incommensurability through her idiosyncratic use of ghostly elemental figures produces an imagination-challenging system that qualifies as a literary version of a racial sublime marked by continuous collapse.

In relation to her previous work, *Let Us Descend*, published six years after *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and influenced by the death of Ward's husband during the COVID-19 pandemic, represents both continuity and shifts in Ward's fiction. The novel, on one hand, retains a focus on the transmission of ancestral, spiritual knowledge through maternal lines and on mother figures and women's solidarity, as it centers on a teenage Black girl's horrific journey from North Carolina to a sugarcane plantation in Louisiana. Moreover, as the title suggests, Ward keeps rooting her stories in literary material of the long-distant past—in this case, Dante's *Inferno*. Being another "potent melding of traditions" (Edemariam), the novel introduces elements of haunting that align with Ward's idea that the Gothic "always goes back to the beginnings for us as Black southern people. It always goes back to enslavement" (Ward, "Something Beautiful"). On the other hand, *Let Us Descend* also represents a departure, as Ward leaves the contemporary Bois Sauvage setting of her first three novels behind to write her first historical fiction featuring the antebellum world of Annis, a mixed-race protagonist-narrator sired by a North Carolinian plantation owner. The involvement of ghostly figures, too, represents a significant shift. *Let Us Descend* may not, as reviewers have generally agreed, "add much to prior fictional representations of the immoral mechanics and lucrative dynamics of institutional slavery" (Khedhir 44). However, its ghost figures are an innovation in Ward's work, because they function not primarily as a means of revisiting and consciously revising a traumatic past, as they do in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2011), another Bois Sauvage novel, but as a means of survival as they make up, as I argue, a version of the racial sublime.

Read in relation to notions of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime, this strategy primarily serves to stress racial processes that have produced stark racial inequalities as part of the Anthropocene. It also allows Ward to introduce ideas for

[5] See, for example, the studies by Brogan or Gordon; also Freeman 105-148.

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rethinking the human. Ward's haunted world in the novel is another instance revealing that the notion of "civilizational collapse" must figure differently from an African American perspective, since the "ruins of the future" narrative evades extensive experiences of collapse in the present and in the past, as Ward suggests through her first-person narrator's experience of slavery as a racial sublime. The novel thus follows an Afro-Pessimist trajectory insofar as it contemplates a departure "from liberal humanism's fictions of universality" through the atrocious journey of Ward's protagonist (Jenkins 129). As a speculative fiction, it poses the question "what it might mean to sit in a place of understanding, and acceptance, of blackness as enslavement, of a world that defines one's metaphoric and literal body as the marker of unfreedom and the end of the human" (Jenkins 129-130) by returning to a primal scene of enslavement.

The harrowing painfulness of this primal scene, fittingly framed as a Dantean narrative of descent into the hell of antebellum slavery in the Deep South, confronts readers with a violent racial sublime, which translates, in the novel, to the protagonist's overwhelming and disorienting experience of a dehumanizing system of oppression. The facets of this system, in *Let Us Descend*, are portrayed through a classical gothic aesthetics. The novel features gothic elements such as wild and threatening landscapes, images of (plantation) ruins, the idea of living entombment, and supernatural spirits that haunt the enslaved protagonist. As Annis is sold down the river to a "Georgia Man," her journey becomes one of torture that involves both incommensurable human cruelty on behalf of the slave traders and the dangers of natural environments (such as crossing torrential rivers). Ward thus uses classic elements of the Gothic to create a nightmarish racial sublime that reveals the incomprehensible and vast brutalities of slavery. Her keenly metaphorical style portrays a world that presents its horrors through the dehumanizing animalization of the enslaved (*Descend* 53), but also through a language that invokes images of fire and burning. What begins with Annis overhearing her half-sisters' tutor telling the story of "an ancient Italian […] walking down into hell" and her drawing a first analogy to her "mother toiling in the hell of this house" takes its course, via allusions to the *Inferno*, to end with the protagonist's descent into the hell of slavery in the lower South (33).

This (also geographical) descent from the Carolinas to Louisiana, where Annis is sold to a sugar plantation, manifests as Ward's representation of a horrific racial sublime that links Annis's Blackness with the experience of continuous collapse, as it invokes and repeats the sense that "[s]urely the earth is opening to us. Surely this terrible world is swallowing me" (*Descend* 22). The novel's key engagement with the discourse of the Anthropocene sublime emerges in relation to the spiritual survival of Ward's enslaved protagonist. In this respect, Ward's strategy centrally involves, besides references to an ancestral spiritual knowledge as a resource and survival technique, Annis's dealing with the supernatural figures roaming her haunted world that can, I suggest, be read as "elemental ghosts."

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Let Us Descend thus addresses the question of the human in the Anthropocene through its portrayal of a spirited world "[g]rounded in an ancestral African cosmological view of the universe as porous terrain between the human and spiritual worlds" (Khedhir 42). Annis's experience of this world comes in the form of the racial sublime of slavery evoked through a gothic aesthetics that includes classic gothic elements but also features "elemental ghosts." Significantly, these "elemental ghosts" are not the haunting spirits of those violently killed in the past (as in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*), but take the form of natural elements such as rivers, winds, and fires. Ward depicts a spirit-ridden world through the eyes of her protagonist, where rivers speak, winds talk, fires whisper, and the earth philosophizes. In this world, New Orleans is teeming with ghosts:

> She Who Remembers burns over the docks, etching the names of the enslaved on the scroll of her skin as she watches them stumble from the holds of the ships […]. Another spirit, white and cold as snow, walks the edge of the river; it hungers for warmth, for breath, for blood, for fear, and it, too, glances against the stolen and feeds. Another spirit slithers from rooftop to rooftop before twining about wrought iron balconies outside placage women's bedrooms, where it hums, telling the bound women to portion out poison in pinches over the years, to revolt, revolt, revolt. Another spirit lopes through the streets, black hat askew, grinning. Another spirit beats drums […]. (*Descend* 278-279)

These ghosts are not remnants of the dead who trouble the living to consciously revise their traumatic histories, but elemental figures bound to and emerging from the constituent parts of the planet. They "watch," "walk," "hunger," "hum," and their existence and experience intersects with the empowering ancestral spiritual knowledge Annis has received ("My mama always said this world seething with spirit. She was right" [76]). Even if interlinked with strategies that secure Annis's spiritual survival, these spirits are not by definition of a benevolent nature, but rather complicit parts of a doomed world and of Annis's experience of continuous collapse, as their being turns out to be invested with willpower, needs, and interests.

This becomes apparent in Aza, the spirit Annis first encounters during her southbound journey, a "volatile and hurricane-like presence, which appears in a strange unfathomable shape" (Khedhir 43). At first comforted by Aza's guiding presence during her Dantean descend, as Aza models her appearance after Annis's grandmother Mama Aza and reveals that she has been a companion of her maternal ancestors, it soon becomes clear that such comforts, in Ward's hellish world, come at a price. Echoing Dante, the spirit is complicit in Annis's descent and enslavement—Aza has refused help to her mother in seeking flight, Annis learns—as Aza's insisting claim reveals: "You must leap. You must do as your people did. You must sink in order to rise" (*Descend* 126). This guide, it turns out, craves "a kind of worship" (185) for herself and Annis eventually realizes that "[t]hese spirits […] want succor, want adoration, want obedience, want children. They want love. We starve, but they are hungry, too" (250).

Ward's racial sublime of slavery therefore manifests not only in the representation of the vast and incommensurable brutalities of antebellum slavery through a gothic and hellish atmosphere, but also crucially involves being

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overwhelmed by the spirits populating the world of *Let Us Descend*. This is relevant for Ward's engagement with the Anthropocene sublime and her rethinking of the human. When Annis becomes pregnant when taking a maroon lover, Ward's protagonist needs to claim and recreate a sense of herself in order to gain freedom both from her formal enslavement and from being bound by a spirited world. Annis eventually has to literally dig herself out from an underground hole where she has been confined as a punishment, to emerge physically from the "dark mouth of the earth" (*Descend* 146). Ward thus echoes the trope of the underground that is recurrent in the Black literary tradition (Khedhir 42-43), and featured in other contemporary texts such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* or Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*. This trope is instrumental in showing that Annis starts the process of her ascent of her own accord while using the spirits infesting her world. Annis paradoxically needs to evoke and use the power of her elemental ghosts to escape their power over her. The secret to achieving freedom, Ward implies, lies in recalling her ancestors and their spiritual powers (*Descend* 273). Only this recall enables her to "jab through the earth," using "[m]y arm [as] a spear" (261, 262). Annis's reclaiming herself in overcoming and resisting the racial sublime of slavery therefore does not succeed without engaging with (and thus accepting) the overwhelming power of the racial sublime (265). At the same time, however, Ward insists that acknowledging this help does not replace Annis's self-reliance ("I delivered myself" [295]) in the process of gaining freedom and articulating herself as human.

Additionally, there is also a spatial dimension to the process of securing freedom and humanity. The swampy wilderness in which Annis solitarily settles is of her own choosing, against the wishes of Aza who implores Annis to return to New Orleans. The geographical positioning of Annis's refuge and its symbolic meanings are crucial, as this place lies beyond the plantation but not entirely beyond its historical remains. On one hand, the space Ward carves out for her protagonist (and the expected child) is separated geographically from the plantation, located in a swamp. With this choice, Ward recalls a history of resistance through marooning that Black writers—as in W.E.B. DuBois' s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*—have frequently celebrated, but also implies that the racial logics of the plantation and its anti-Blackness must be left behind in order to secure a foundation for freedom and a viable future. On the other hand, it is significant that this does not mean leaving behind the remains of a civil society entirely in redesigning the human (as some forms of Afro-Pessimism would propose). This is implied both by the survival of Annis's ancestral spiritual knowledge, which secures her thriving in her new surroundings, and in her choice of an "empty, green-grown cabin" (*Descend* 285), the remnant of an abandoned plantation, as the place to build a future. Moreover, this choice, and the portrayal of a "hidden, green-walled room" where Annis "gather[s] wood sorrel and mushrooms and sassafras and […] eat[s] until […] [her] stomach eases" (286), reveals Thoreauvian qualities that imply that not only material ruins (the cabin), but also literary templates (nature writing) of the past can function as models to survive with

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and thrive on in palimpsestic ways. If we understand *Let Us Descend* more broadly as another story of "civilizational collapse" (for some)—and as another story of a *response* to such collapse—the novel not only presents a strong case for reading the Anthropocene racially as "perverse and unequal process" (Fressoz 292), but also hints at ways to overcome such a process. Ultimately, the strength of Ward's response to the racial sublime of slavery in *Let Us Descend* lies in pointing to a utopian potential for the Anthropocene sublime from an African American perspective, which involves neither continuing with an idea of the human that has birthed the plantation's world nor altogether ignoring the material and poetic ruins of that world.

Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to make three broader propositions as to the potentials of analyzing interlinkages of Blackness and the Anthropocene sublime in African American literature. First, it is important to recognize the analytical potentials of the Anthropocene sublime as a critical discourse for reading African American literature. My interpretations of Ward's use of the natural and the racial sublimes demonstrate that (re)reading African American traditions through the Anthropocene sublime adds to our understanding of how the Anthropocene has involved racial processes that are shaping current material, social, and aesthetic conditions. Second, and conversely, such readings and Black Studies perspectives more generally contribute to advancing the Anthropocene sublime as a concept. The Anthropocene sublime proposes to connect established theories of the sublime to the Anthropocene, and I argue that considering (African American and other) perspectives that have critiqued, resisted, and transformed such theories in the past due to their (initial) racial biases, should be part of a critical conversation today if the Anthropocene sublime is to avoid reproducing racialization. Third, I believe that reading Ward through the lens of the Anthropocene sublime shows how African American literature often seeks to articulate alternative, de-racialized figures of the human that can be included more prominently in the Anthropocene discourse. Both the play with collapsing temporalities in *Salvage the Bones* and with the elemental ghosts populating Ward's antebellum world in *Let Us Descend* are components of a broader call for an alternative humanism that salvages remnants of a horrific past while seeking an alternative framework beyond a sublime of mastery and othering. If we are to explore further "the function" of the Anthropocene sublime in its emergence and development in the twenty-first century, as Fressoz urges us to, and if we are searching for alternative narratives that move against a problematic Anthropocene sublime that "erase[s] inequalities […] for a depoliticized fascination for planetary collapse" (Fressoz 298, 297), Ward's fiction suggests that African American literature is a promising place to look.

Submission received 19 July 2024 Revised version accepted 27 February 2025

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