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The Ghost of the Neo-Slave Narrative : Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing and the Evolution of the Black Gothic

Kabria Wimbush

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Abstract

Beloved by Toni Morrison, while clearly a neo-slave narrative, functions as a transition between the neo-slave narrative and the Black Gothic genre. Jesmyn Ward expands upon the Gothic elements in *Beloved* in her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. When examined together, the two novels demonstrate how the Black Gothic was influenced by the neo-slave narrative. Where *Beloved* examines the effects of slavery on those who were directly victimized by it, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* shows how the lingering effects of slavery still exist in modern times. Ultimately, Ward offers possible courses of action to make the future more inclusive and diverse without leaving the memories of the past behind.

Keywords: Neo-slave narrative, Black Gothic, slavery, ghost, prison, driving, spirituality

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The Ghost of the Neo-Slave Narrative: Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and the Evolution
of the Black Gothic

by

Kabria Wimbush

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

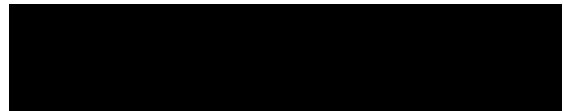
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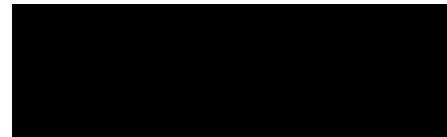
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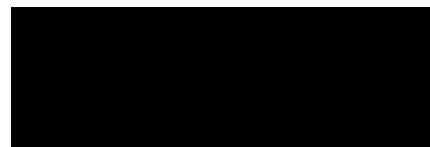
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THE GHOST OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE: JESMYN WARD'S SING, UNBURIED,
SING AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLACK GOTHIC

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Introduction

African American literature owes much to the tradition of the slave narrative, such as those by Frederick Douglas, who penned three autobiographies and Harriet Jacobs whose autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published in 1861. Both a foundation of tradition and an influence for new forms, the slave narrative documented slave life as it actually was from credible sources and also demonstrated to White critics and audiences the validity of Black writers. The neo-slave narrative, a label coined by Bernard Bell for fictional interpretations of enslaved experiences, gained its feet in the 1960s and 1970s. In her article “Neo-Slave Narratives” Madhu Dubey makes the point that “although it seems logical to assume that the genre of the neo-slave narrative emerged in response to historical amnesia about slavery, in fact it was preceded by a heightened public attention to slavery during the late 1960s” following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Dubey 333). The genre keeps many themes, tropes, and narrative devices from the first-hand account slave narratives such as forced labor, racial violence, and escape from bondage. Bell asserts that neo-slave narratives are “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (qtd. in Li 326-327). While slave narratives tell personal histories of slavery, the neo-slave narrative uses inspiration from these histories in plots that portray the lasting effects of slavery on enslaved peoples and their descendants. Examples of the neo-slave narrative include *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest J. Gaines published in 1971, *The Chaneysville Incident* by David Bradley published ten years later in 1981, and most famously *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, published in 1987.

While definitively classified as a neo-slave narrative due to its plot and themes that are characteristic to the genre, *Beloved* also functions as a transition text between the neo-slave

narrative and the more contemporary Black gothic genre. Early neo-slave narratives focus on realist plots such as the comprehensive life events of a young girl from her birth into slavery to the end of the Civil War, as is the case in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, or the investigation into a mass murder of thirteen escaped formerly-enslaved people like in *The Chaneyville Incident*. *Beloved* is a neo-slave narrative that centers on Sethe, a formerly-enslaved person who escaped from a plantation in Kentucky. When Sethe and her family are threatened with recapture, Sethe kills her own two-year old daughter and attempts but fails to kill the rest of her children. The novel focuses on the aftermath of this incident as well as the return of Sethe's daughter in the form of a ghost that haunts the house Sethe and her remaining family live in and later as a specter-made-flesh woman named Beloved. As a neo-slave narrative *Beloved* engages in a metahistorical truth-telling mode, featuring oral story-telling, multiple narrators, and a non-linear timeline. All of these elements are often found in the neo-slave narrative, though some scholars, such as Wesley Britton, acknowledge *Beloved's* Gothic leanings. According to Sheri-Marie Harrison, Gothic literature is defined as featuring "graphic violence and an interest in taboo subjects" (Harrison 3). *Beloved* certainly contains graphic violence such as the physical abuse that Paul D, a Black man who was enslaved at the Sweet Home plantation at the same time as Sethe, and the other Black men at Sweet Home had to endure as well as the sexual assault of Sethe. In addition, *Beloved* explores taboo subjects such as "bad" mothers and female sexuality. While it is clearly a neo-slave narrative, the supernatural elements of *Beloved* allow the novel to dabble in the Gothic genre. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a Black gothic novel published in 2017 by Jesmyn Ward, shares many similarities with *Beloved* and other neo-slave narratives. Taking place in the fictional American southern town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, follows the trials of a contemporary Black family. The story is imparted through three

narrators: Jojo, a thirteen year-old boy who takes care of his younger sister, Kayla, and is striving to become a good man like his grandfather Pop; Leonie, Jojo and Kayla's mother who is addicted to drugs and also partner to Michael, Jojo and Kayla's White father; and Richie, the ghost of a young Black boy who was murdered at Parchman Prison, which is where Michael is serving time for a drug charge at the beginning of the novel. Ward's novel builds upon neo-slave narrative characteristics such as oral story-telling and palimpsestic timelines. The abundance of ghosts, too, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* firmly plants it in the Black Gothic genre. The result is a novel that continues traditions, but in an innovative way. This essay will demonstrate the evolution of the neo-slave narrative to the Black gothic genre by arguing that *Beloved* is a neo-slave narrative that also serves as a transition into the Black Gothic, which allows us to see *Beloved* in conversation with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In her novel Ward not only upholds African American literary traditions that are found in neo-slave narratives, but also contributes contemporary elements in order to contemporize conversations about slavery and slavery's influence on the present.

Tradition and Ghosts of the Past

Perhaps the strongest common thread throughout neo-slave narratives, despite its status as a fictional genre, is a tone of truth-telling. First-hand accounts of slavery from slave narratives served as templates for the neo-slave narrative. Dubey writes that early authors writing neo-slave narratives would "take pains to cite the historical sources that went into the making of their fictional texts, demonstrating their investment in the truth-telling claims typical of realist historical fiction" (Dubey 336). Often, accounts of true but forgotten events appeared in neo-slave narratives to support and inspire dynamic plots. Further, the neo-slave narrative is a genre of fiction that explores the real consequences of slavery for a post-civil rights movement

audience. Before the 1950s and 60s, historical and realist accounts of slavery often misrepresented the severity of hardship for enslaved peoples and also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and generalizations about African American people. The neo-slave narrative strives to affect cultural and historical consciousness by addressing the disconnect between how American history is told and the actual reality of it. In this way neo-slave narratives possess a metahistorical nature by bringing to light misrepresentations and voids in how slavery is remembered and talked about in the United States. Neo-slave narratives start conversations about re-examining the realities of American slavery.

Following the metahistorical objective of the neo-slave narrative, *Beloved* holds the subject of slavery to the light and encourages readers to deliberately engage with and discuss the gruesome details when willful ignorance can oftentimes be the more acceptable, less taboo, cultural practice. *Beloved* is doubly metahistorical because the novel reframes a true historical event. Only 28 days after her successful escape from the Sweet Home plantation, the novel's antagonist, a slaveholder called Schoolteacher, finds Sethe, her children, and Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in Cincinnati, Ohio, prompting Sethe to kill her baby daughter in an attempt to spare her children from the violence that would surely await them if they were to be forced back into slavery. This point in the plot is modeled after the story of Margaret Garner, a real-life person who escaped enslavement in 1856 and succeeded in killing a child of hers before being reinstated back into a life of slavery. *Beloved* is engaging in the truth-telling element of the neo-slave narrative by echoing the real trauma of slavery in fiction. Morrison herself has "described *Beloved* as an effort to 'fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left,' ('The Site of Memory')" (Dubey 342). The novel takes an action, a mother murdering her child, that on the surface is most likely perceived as violently malicious and opens the door for different interpretation. A

repulsive act becomes, at least potentially, one of mercy when juxtaposed with the inhumane treatment of human beings at Sweet Home. The reader is asked to think critically about what life as a slave must have been like if a mother is willing to kill her child to keep them out of slavery. *Beloved* poses the question: what is worse, death or living enslaved? In the novel this question is addressed when Sethe tells Paul D that she killed her daughter to keep her children away from Sweet Home. Like the reader might, Paul D speculates that there could be worse fates than returning to Sweet Home. Sethe retorts that “it ain’t [her] job to know what’s worse. It’s [her] job to know what is and to keep [her children] away from what [she] know[s] is terrible” (Morrison 149). It is important to note that knowing “what is” or knowing the reality of a slave plantation, is what drives Sethe to her decision. After reading Sethe’s explanation and experiencing the trauma of Sweet Home together with her through flashbacks, the reader is also allowed to know of the reality of life and motherhood under slavery. Baby Suggs, who was also a mother under the oppressive thumb of slavery, had seven children taken away from her, either by death or the slave market. Therefore, the reader becoming enlightened to “what [slavery] is” can alter perspectives about Sethe’s decision and change how slavery itself is perceived and discussed culturally. Further, Morrison mimics the real atrocities of slavery in *Beloved* by describing tortures and punishments at Sweet Home at the hands of schoolteacher and his nephews in detail. The violence at Sweet Home is juxtaposed with Morrison’s endeavor to show Black enslaved people as fully human. Sethe rejects the limits of enslavement because she is human, like the reader. The reader must confront exactly what slavery was and its impact on African American people in the past. Thus, *Beloved* leans heavily into the metahistorical element of the neo-slave narrative in an attempt to make conversations about slavery more transparent, true to life, and inclusive.

Consistent with the truth-revealing values of the neo-slave narrative, quite a few African American novels centered around trauma are based on true events. Similar to *Beloved*'s inspiration from Margaret Garner's story, in Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose*, the titular character "is based on an actual enslaved woman, [...] who led an uprising and escaped from a coffle while pregnant" (Dubey 335). Real-life traumas are used in neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* as devices that mimic truth-telling and attempt to enrich the historical record. However, in addition to its truth-telling mimicry in regard to slavery in the United States, by revisiting slavery in the past the neo-slave narrative inspires honest re-examination of slavery and its after-effects. Dubey states that "most African American novelists since the 1970s have revisited slavery in order to apprehend 'history as an injury that has yet to cease happening,' (Hartman 772)" (Dubey 344). The portrayal of history as an ongoing injury is especially apparent in *Beloved*. Sethe suffers extreme trauma at Sweet Home and escapes. The threat of recapture dissipates with the departure of schoolteacher after white abolitionists, namely the Bodwins, fight for Sethe's release from jail. Sethe eventually resettles at 124, but her wounds remain open with the haunting and return of her daughter Beloved in 1873. Beloved's return demonstrates the on-going after-effects of slavery and the repetitive nature of experienced trauma. A part of her trauma comes back to life, meaning Sethe must continually interact with and confront her trauma while Beloved is in the house. The continuous revisiting of trauma can be described by "Toni Morrison's concept of rememory, introduced by Sethe in the novel, which suggests that traumatic histories can outlast the consciousness of those who directly experienced them and can be apprehended as memories by future generations" (Dubey 343). The trauma in *Beloved* bounces back and forth between generations, from mother to daughter and back again

when the embodied ghost of Sethe's dead child, Beloved, exacts revenge upon Sethe in multiple ways, such as choking her in the woods and gradually starving her.

Trauma is passed down through generations in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as well. Jojo understands his grandfather Pop's past trauma through the memories that Pop tells Jojo. Pop's stories are told orally, in a way that allows Jojo and the reader to experience the memories and the trauma that comes with them. This is supported by the fact that Pop's stories drop dialogue markers and are told in italics, as if the reader is being transported into Pop's memory, rather than being told a story. The reader experiences Richie's trauma both through the retellings of Pop and Richie's recounting in the chapters that he narrates. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, then, we see how one traumatic event can be passed down through multiple characters, which both exemplifies the non-linear timelines of neo-slave narratives and also aligns with the theory of generational trauma, or in Morrison's own words, rememory. Trauma understood through memory is an African American literary theme that Morrison exhibits through the use of non-linear timelines and the return of the dead, which Ward also utilizes, as will be discussed.

The repetitiveness and destabilizing effect of trauma is best demonstrated in non-linear timelines. The fracturing and re-stitching of timelines in neo-slave narratives often indicate an acknowledgement that the past has a direct link and influence on the present. This is absolutely the case with *Beloved*. The plot of the novel is not imparted in chronological order; past and present timelines often interrupt each other. According to Dubey, "the conviction that slavery is not yet a matter of history lies behind the various time-rupturing devices found in post-1970s novels of slavery, including rememory, time travel, flashbacks, flash-forwards, and possession" (Dubey 344). Each of these temporal devices evokes the theme of a lingering past in *Beloved*. Morrison combines the narrative past with the present in a way that resembles how memory and

trauma are processed. Flashbacks from the narrative past often interrupt the current events of the narrative present. The effect is that the reader experiences the events in the novel exactly as characters in the book do, always in relation to the past. For example, after running through a field Sethe washes her legs at a water pump and experiences a sudden flashback triggered by something in the present: “the splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes” (Morrison 19). Even after her escape, Sethe’s past at Sweet Home lingers alongside her present in Cincinnati. Ashraf Rushdy has named the works that feature this type of combined timeline “palimpsest narratives.” These are “novels that explore the impact of the past on the present by adopting a ‘bi-temporal perspective’ (Remembering Generations 5), inscribing two different historical periods on the same textual plane” (Dubey 8). Morrison creates a palimpsest timeline by interweaving past memories with the present. Morrison also plays with time in her novel through the character of Beloved. Beloved is initially introduced as a “spiteful” ghost that terrorizes Sethe’s family. The ghost caused a mirror to shatter as soon as Sethe’s son Buglar looked into it and made handprints in a cake for Sethe’s other son Howard. To escape the ghost’s anger both boys “had run away by the time they were thirteen years old” (Morrison 7). The ghost continues to cause trouble for Sethe and Denver until Paul D counters the ghost’s rampage with his own. The ghost leaves but returns as a corporeal young woman: Beloved. Although a stranger at first, it becomes clear that Beloved is the baby daughter that Sethe killed in her past. In this way the past, through the return of Beloved, haunts the present in both a figurative and literal sense. The haunting of a family at the hands of a ghost bends *Beloved* towards Gothicism. Morrison complicates the neo-slave narrative with elements of the Gothic by making her ghost a young victim of murder as a direct

result of slavery. Whereas early neo-slave narratives were rigorously realist, *Beloved* combines realist fiction, due to the influence of the Margaret Garner incident, with supernatural phenomena, specifically the ghost of Beloved.

Similar to *Beloved*, intrusions of the past into the present are channeled through ghosts in Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The past haunts the present through the ghost of Richie, a young boy from Pop's past. Richie follows Jojo from Parchman Prison and eventually settles at Jojo's family home to learn the truth about his own death. Richie learns this truth through one of Pop's stories that he tells to Jojo throughout the novel. Pop's stories of his own past at Parchman Prison, along with memories of the past from the narrating characters, converge with the narrative present to create a non-linear, or palimpsest timeline. Rushdy asserts that "palimpsest narratives deal with contemporary individuals who are haunted by family secrets that can be uncovered only by delving into the unofficial history of slavery" (qtd. in Dubey 337). In both novels the palimpsest timeline is connected to the return of the dead to uncover secrets. Though unlike *Beloved*, *Sing Unburied, Sing* contains more than one ghost, and thus, more than one secret. Given, the ghost of Leonie's deceased brother, appears to her whenever she gets high. Given had been murdered by a racist cousin of Michael's for beating him in a hunting contest. However, the incident is ruled as a "hunting accident" in court and Given's killer receives a light sentence of three years in Parchman prison and two years' probation, (Ward 45). The secret that Given's ghostly presence draws attention to is that his murder was deliberate and motivated by racial bias as well as indicating Leonie's inability to let go of her brother. Jojo is also haunted by Richie, the ghost of the young boy that Pop looked after while at Parchman. The secret here is that Pop killed Richie to save him from a brutal lynching. *Beloved's* influence can be seen here too. In both novels, an older caretaker figure, Sethe and Pop, murder a child in order to protect

them from worse trauma at the hands of a prejudiced, violent, and cruel overseer or overseer-like figure. The common thread between the ghosts Beloved, Given, and Richie is their death and its connection to slavery. Beloved's death is directly related to slavery, as Sethe desperately wishes for her daughter never to experience it. While Given and Richie's deaths do not have as direct a connection to slavery as Beloved's does, the connection is still apparent as Given is lynched and Richie is killed to spare him from being lynched at Parchman, revealing the results of a racist legacy that slavery left behind. Thus, *Beloved* demonstrates how the neo-slave narrative reveals unofficial histories of slavery while *Sing, Unburied, Sing* expands this tradition by examining the unofficial effects of slavery, even after it has been abolished.

As many neo-slave narratives are, *Beloved* is concerned with voice and oral story-telling. Any stories that characters impart is done so orally. The effect of voiced stories mimics authentic first-hand accounts of slavery. Since the neo-slave narrative sets out to fill in historical blanks, "in most realist fictions of slavery, the incorporation of oral voices and sources into the written medium of the novel functions as an analogue for the integration of subjective testimonies into the official historical archive of slavery" (Dubey 336). Denver loves the story of her birth, which was originally told to her by Sethe. When Denver remembers this story, it is imparted to the reader through her memories of the story and through the dialogue of Sethe telling the story itself. Later, while in Denver's room Beloved requests that Denver tell the story of her birth. Denver obliges and "swallow[s] twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (Morrison 77). Here "the telling" emphasizes the verbal significance of this story. Denver must pull together all of the times she has heard the story to then tell it to Beloved, resembling a story that is passed down through generations. Although there are published first-hand slave accounts, there are even more stories that are

passed down orally, and more still that have been forgotten entirely. Morrison mirrors the unofficial, oral histories of slavery through the stories that her characters tell. Characters like Sethe and Paul D, who have been subjected to schoolteacher's cruelty and the notebook in which he recorded it, push against the "dehumanizing master text of schoolteacher's notebook through the oral traditions of song, sermon, and storytelling" (Dubey 342). In her novel, Morrison puts what is spoken verbally onto the page to advocate for the significance of recording stories of formerly-enslaved peoples that may have only been told orally due to disproportionate representation between Black and White histories.

The importance of the voice is only amplified in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The narrative is polyvocal, as is *Beloved*, though *Sing, Unburied, Sing* emphasizes its multiple narrators by naming chapters after the respective character that narrates it: Jojo, Leonie, and Richie. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* uses song as a mode for the voice as well. At multiple points in the novel, singing is used to soothe, such as when Jojo sings "nursery rhymes with Kayla while Leonie throws up because [he wants] Kayla to pay attention to [him]" instead of the dire state that Leonie is in (Ward 132). At the end of the novel, Kayla sings to the ghosts in the tree to soothe them. The most important oral element of the novel, however, is Pop's story about his time in Parchman Prison. Pop's story moves chronologically though it is broken up throughout separate chapters. Richie is searching for his own history, that of his death, which he hears from Pop after traveling with Jojo. Richie learning the truth about his death through a story that is verbally imparted to Jojo greatly resembles how Denver tells the story of her birth to Beloved in *Beloved*, thus replicating the theme of stories verbally passing unofficial history through time. Throughout Ward's novel, singing and oral story-telling both comfort the characters of the present and settle the ghosts of the past. Though in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the significance of the voice is extended

to those that often do not have one. Animals and objects have voices too, though not everyone can hear them. Jojo can hear the family's farm animals. The goats ask for more salt and when Pop's horse rears Jojo can hear the horse tell him: "*I could leap over your head boy, and oh I would run and run and you would never see anything more than that. I could make you shake*" (Ward 21). Nearly everything in the novel has a voice. When Mam was young her "mama complained about her stomach ulcers. They was sounding to [Mam], saying, *We eat, we eat, we eat*" (Ward 39). Ward continues the African American literary tradition of centralizing oral history and storytelling but takes this tradition a step further by giving everything in her novel a voice. One may think that giving everything a voice would oversaturate the novel and decentralize the voices of the primary characters. However, in Ward's case the abundance of voices works to emphasize the importance of the voice overall, especially the voices of those who are not usually heard. This circles back to the neo-slave narrative and its goal of filling in the blanks left by slave narratives and also de-centers Western logic and rationality for one that is more inspired by African spiritualism. The narrative voices that the reader gets to hear from the most in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are victims of slavery's racist legacy: Jojo, a Black child; Richie, the ghost of a dead Black child; and Leonie, a struggling Black mother. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* builds upon the Gothic impulse in *Beloved* with both an abundance of ghosts and of voices.

Though the existence of other ghosts is mentioned by Baby Suggs, there is only one ghost that appears in *Beloved*, while multiple appear in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Again, Ward expands the Gothic element incited by Morrison in *Beloved*. The multiple ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* could symbolize the notion that there are many more victims of America's racist past than just those who were directly victimized by slavery. The aftershocks of race-based violence that slavery left behind still puts Black Americans prematurely in body bags, thus creating more

ghosts. In addition, after they are initially banished the ghosts in Ward's novel haunt in a different way than Beloved does in Morrison's. *Beloved* seems to support the stance that once the effects of slavery have been acknowledged, Black joy will allow the ugliness of slavery to fade into the shadows. At the end of the novel, after Beloved is banished by the women of the community, Paul D returns and commits to taking care of Sethe. Denver, no longer stuck at home and having found community among the neighbors, a job working for the Bodwins, and education with Lady Jones seems to have found her happiness as well. Meanwhile, although banished from the immediate lives of Sethe and Denver, the memory of the ghost of Beloved sticks around but fades into the background:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name.

Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (Morrison 236).

By giving Beloved claim even though "she is not claimed" herself, Morrison is making it clear that even though she no longer has control over Sethe and the house at 124, Beloved still takes up space and is still present (236). In fact, Beloved's name is the last word of the novel, despite no one knowing it anymore. Beloved does not leave but the other characters do move on and seem to leave her behind. The ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* do not leave either, but characters like Jojo and Kayla continue to acknowledge them as time moves on. Similar to the ghosts in *Beloved*, the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* can be temporarily banished but those who suffered a violent death motivated by racial bias always return. Jojo and Kayla can see and interact with these ghosts. At the end of the novel, Kayla tells the ghosts in the tree to "go home" and then sings to them (Ward 202). Even though the ghosts are pleased with Kayla's singing, they do not,

or cannot, grant her wish. The persistence of the ghosts in the tree and Kayla's engagement with them reveals Ward's understanding that even after a trauma is revealed and addressed the trauma does not fade in the same way that the ghost of *Beloved* does. The dead return in both novels. However, characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* continue to interact with the past, which is why the ghosts in Ward's novel remain more tangible while Morrison's ghost seems to become nearly incorporeal by the end of the novel. Jojo's experience with Richie and Kayla's address to the ghosts in the tree at the end of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also seems to support the opinion that contemporary youth should actively acknowledge and connect with the past, especially its injustices. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, expands the Gothic elements in *Beloved* to make the argument that the legacies of slavery must be engaged with and the memory of those lost, whether directly or indirectly, must be integrated into modern lives. *Beloved* highlights slavery and its effects eight years after its abolition, while *Sing, Unburied, Sing* extends the reader's attention into the future, though still in relation to the effects of slavery.

Of course, with the central figures of ghosts, the afterlife is addressed and described in both *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, though the ghosts in each novel experience the afterlife differently. In *Beloved*, Denver asks her sister what it's like "over there, where [Beloved] was before" (Morrison 76). Beloved tells Denver that the afterlife is dark, hot, and full of people. With these details it is possible to infer that the "heaps" of people that Beloved does not know are other deceased people in the cemetery that Beloved's corpse is buried in (76). Beloved was able to enter the world of the living by crossing a bridge. Perhaps the location of internment is significant to where ghosts can manifest. This speculation makes sense in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* because Richie is stuck at Parchman Prison until Jojo arrives, at which point Richie seems to anchor himself to Jojo in order to find River, or Pop. Even though Richie is stuck, he still

interacts with the afterlife in an extra-planar experience. Richie wakes up after his death and wanders through a “day that never ended, [and] tried to remember how [he] got there. Who [he] was before this place, before this quiet haunt” (Ward 102). Eventually Richie is able to recover most of his memory with the assistance of a spiritual guide: a white snake that turns into a black vulture. The shifting of Richie’s guide supports the breaking down of barriers, namely those between life and death. Once he remembers his name Richie becomes grounded and passes the time watching the turnover of prisoners at the prison until eventually the bird returns and leads him to Jojo in the car. The afterlife seems more tangible and possesses a more concrete sense of place in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* because the reader gets to experience it along with Richie. In *Beloved*, the short description of the afterlife is filtered through the perspective of Beloved, who was the ghost of a baby at the time of her experience of it. Ward takes the Gothic inclination in *Beloved* and runs with it, connecting it to alternative spiritual practices. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward takes the Black Gothic and the reader to other planes of existence.

Beyond Ghosts

According to Dubey, “phenomena that defy narrative realism and rational understanding abound in late twentieth-century novels of slavery” (Dubey 342). Authors following this trend offered no explanations of the impossible events in their novels. Morrison is one such author who “confounds reason through the ‘miraculous resurrection’ of a murdered infant daughter in *Beloved*” (342). The incorporation of irrational phenomena in later neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* is a “powerful critique of the unreason of slavery” (342). Unrealistic phenomena, as stated above, are also a device used in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. However, with her use of unrealistic elements, Ward does not seem as concerned with critiquing the “unreason of slavery” as Morrison does. Ward includes irrational phenomena in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to push against

dominant tropes of the literary canon. Jojo can hear the voices of animals and can see the spirit of Richie. Leonie can see the spirit of Given, but only when she is high. Mam also hears voices and knows Leonie is pregnant two weeks before Leonie tells her. Ward is one of “many late twentieth-century novelists of slavery [who] develop a counter-culture of modernity by reclaiming alternative forms of belief suppressed by the modern legacy. These other ways of knowing are often specifically identified as African” (Dubey 342). The reclamation of alternate belief systems pushes back against dominant hegemonic and monotheistic American belief systems. In her article “And Now She Sings It’: Conjure as Abolitionist Alternative in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*” Joanna Davis-McElligatt discusses conjure as a belief system and informs that “conjure values communitarianism, sacred ecological balance, and interconnected interdependence between all living things, existing things, and their domains” (McElligatt 104). Pop explains to Jojo that a boar’s tusk may be able to enhance a person’s strength and help him to split wood. However, the strength lent by the boar would never be “more than [Pop] could handle. The boar share so much, and [Pop] takes so much. No waste” (Ward 60). In Pop’s example, there is ecological balance and no waste. Conjure is “a system that envisions self, others, the natural world, and the spirit world as entangled and mutually constitutive” (Davis-McElligatt 105). The interconnectedness between humans, the rest of the world, and a world beyond life allows the characters in both *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to interact with the dead. Though in *Beloved* the ghost imposes her presence upon the living while in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* some living individuals are granted the ability of interacting with the dead. In both instances the Gothic element is clear, but in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* the Gothic contributes to a distinctly African American spiritual practice: conjure. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is “preoccupied with what Kameelah Martin calls ‘spirit work,’ or ‘an intimacy with both the healing and

harming ritual practices of African-derived religious practices that evolved in the New World” (Davis-McElligatt 105). Mam knows of such rituals and asks Leonie to perform one, so she can die peacefully. When Leonie initially refuses and asks if Pop can perform the ritual instead, Mam tells Leonie: “ I drew the veil back so you could walk in life, [and therefore] you’ll help me draw it back so I can walk in the next” (Ward 157). The ritual and the charms, such as the bag that Pop leaves in Jojo’s backpack for protection, are characteristic of a belief system that is African in origin. Ward includes beliefs that have African roots to make space for recovered ethnic traditions to challenge dominant Western belief systems. Although conjure is not explicit in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs claims to have a supernatural sense in which she “felt each one [of her children] go the very day and hour” (Morrison 20). Similar supernatural senses are central to the conjure in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. After honing her talents with the aid of an experienced mentor, Marie-Therese, Mam tries to foster conjure skills and abilities in her daughter, Leonie, as well. Conjure, a practice focused on natural healing, requires herbal knowledge and foraging skills. Leonie paid minimal attention while Mam taught her the different uses of various plants. For this, Leonie’s conjuring skills suffer. Once, when Jojo was sick, Mam asked Leonie to forage for roots to make a tea. Jojo only drinks the tea because he trusts Mam, not Leonie. The tea ended up making Jojo sicker and even killed a cat that tried to drink the leftovers outside. Leonie’s incompetence with conjure is made apparent again when she attempts to make a remedy for Kayla after she vomits. Leonie ultimately cannot find any milkweed in the woods but laments that she wishes she’d “listened more carefully” to her mother, Mam (Ward 82). At this point in the novel, it seems that Leonie is absolutely unskilled with conjure. However, Leonie is able to access her supernatural ability when she gets high. It is only when she is high that Leonie can see her deceased brother, Given. The fact that Leonie can tap into her conjure abilities but only while

she is high suggests a disconnect between contemporary African American individuals and traditional African American spiritual practices, of which conjure is only one. At the same time, this suggestion is countered by the conjure abilities of Kayla and Jojo, implying that a way to find justices for the ghosts of slavery and its legacies is for American youth to actively seek out and connect with these ghosts. Having both suggestions about conjure in the novel depicts a binary in which rejection of traditional healing practices results in further harm to the individual and acceptance of them allows for spiritual healing in both the present and the past. The Gothic characteristics introduced in *Beloved* expands to the distinctly Black Gothic spiritualism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

One way *Sing, Unburied, Sing* indicates its contemporary status is through Leonie's drug use, which is prevalent throughout the novel. Leonie regularly snorts cocaine and also delivers meth to Al, Michael's lawyer, on her way to pick up Michael from Parchman once he is released. Recreational drug use has permeated contemporary American literature in novels such as *Taipei* by Tao Lin and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh. In his article "Geographers and Drugs: A Survey of the Literature" Jonathan S. Taylor cites the United States "as the largest drug-consuming country, [and the United States] also has the dubious distinction of the highest incarceration rates in the world" (Taylor 415). With these facts, it is clear why depictions of drug use are emerging as a contemporary American literary tradition. In the novels that feature drug use, the characters that engage in this behavior often do so as a means of escape, usually from trauma and unpleasant feelings. Leonie is a prime example of a character using drugs in this vein. When Leonie goes to her friend Misty's to do cocaine, she reflects on her relationship with Jojo and how she has disappointed him. Leonie narrates: "I bent to the table. Sniffed. A clean burning shot through my bones, and then I forgot. The shoes I didn't buy,

the melted cake, the phone call” (Ward 34). Using drugs to forget one’s mistakes seems like a rejection of the neo-slave narrative traditions, which focus on recalling the truth of history, even if it is painful. Leonie is not the only character to indulge in recreational drugs, as Misty, Michael, and Michael’s lawyer Al also do cocaine. Still, the reader only receives insight into Leonie’s drug use. Leonie’s identity as a mother often clashes with the fact that she is a drug addict. Getting high allows Leonie to escape most of her guilt about mothering and the trauma of her brother’s death. However, the ghost of her brother Given always intrudes.

Similar to *Beloved*, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* features a “bad” mother. The character of the “bad” mother, one that neglects or harms her child, is taboo and Gothic in nature. Sethe is labeled as a “bad” mother in *Beloved* because of a single action: killing her baby daughter despite Sethe’s motivation being borne of love and a desire to protect her baby from a fate Sethe perceived as worse than death. On the other hand, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie is labeled as a “bad” mother as a result of continued habit and neglect of her children. Although, multiple factors contribute to Leonie’s struggles as a parent such as her consuming love for Michael, the traumatic death of her brother, and the cocaine she does in an attempt to escape that trauma. Further, Jojo and Kayla represent a combination of the oppressor, their cousin on their father Michael’s side, and the oppressed, their uncle Given. The difficulty of reconciling with the opposing forces in her children could offer insight into why Leonie finds parenting Jojo and Kayla so difficult. Ward challenges the reader to empathize with Leonie despite her behavior towards Jojo and Kayla. Thus, the reader is confronted with and ultimately accepts the Gothic entirely, taboo mother and all.

Leonie is introduced to cocaine by her partner, Michael, once he became addicted to it after an explosion on the oil rig that he worked on left him traumatized. Drug use is what lands

Michael in prison, and his release from which is the catalyst for the driving force of the novel's plot. The similarities between slavery and incarceration are many. In her article "Slavery and Prison – Understanding the Connections" Kim Gilmore says there exists "a long tradition of prisoners particularly African-American prisoners, who have used the language and narrative of slavery to describe the conditions of their imprisonment" (Gilmore 195). The direct engagement of prisoners with slave narratives makes the connection between slavery and prison abundantly clear. Prison is nearly indistinguishable from slavery in *Beloved*. Paul D is sent to prison "after trying to kill Brandywine, the man schoolteacher sold him to" (Morrison 102). The prisoners march in chains on their way to Kentucky and are forced to perform oral sex on the guards. When Paul D recalls his time as a prisoner, he refers to the prison as a "prison farm" and a "prison camp" (48 & 69). What is a plantation if not a prison farm? Sethe laments that she cannot tell stories of her past at the Sweet Home plantation without pain. Even when she speaks to Paul D, "who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there – like a tender place left in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (Morrison 62-63). Incarceration and enslavement in *Beloved* are functionally the same thing. Ward makes a similar connection in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The connection is clear when Pop describes his time at Parchman in his stories. Pop tells Jojo "Parchman the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls" (Ward 25). Pop's comment that one may think Parchman is not a prison is ironic because Parchman so closely resembles a plantation. At Parchman prisoners are forced to harvest cotton in large cotton fields. Pop's own account could be mistaken for a slave narrative. The hard labor that the prisoners must endure mimics slave labor. Pop makes the point that he is no stranger to hard work, but he's never worked like he has at Parchman, "never like that. Never

sunup to sundown in no cotton field. Never in that kind of heat” and never under the oppressive authority of the sergeant, who had “come from a long line of overseers” (27). The prisoners must pick cotton, the cash-crop largely farmed by enslaved peoples and what was responsible for the economic boom in the American South before the civil war. The familial association between overseer and officer implies a similar connection between slave and prisoner. To support this connection, after accidentally breaking a tool, Richie is horrifically whipped. It is evident that Parchman Prison is in essence a slave plantation by another name. By making this comparison clear in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward effectively modernizes the neo-slave narrative. In addition to being visited by ghosts of the past, the past lingers in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, so much so that Pop cannot seem to escape the memories of his. The novel takes place in “2010s Bois Sauvage, Mississippi” nowhere close to the time of slavery (Davis-McElligatt 104). Therefore, Parchman Prison becomes a location in which slavery does not fade with the past, but remains present, in a slightly modified form, in modern times. In his article, Jonathan Taylor states that “Corva (2008, 2009) made the link between U.S. policies at home and abroad by focusing on the way in which biopolitics scripts drugs as dangerous threats to society and the individual, necessitating the application of criminal justice penalties to marginalized populations conflated with drug users” (Taylor 423). In other words, drug-related “criminal justice penalties” tend to be more concentrated in marginalized populations. This, in part accounts for the fact that there is a disproportionately higher percentage of Black prisoners across the United States versus White prisoners. (“U.S. Incarceration Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2010.”). Yet, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Michael, who is White, is the one to go to prison for a drug-related crime. Though it is only through the perspectives of Pop and Richie that the connection between Parchman and a plantation is made. The reader receives little insight into Michael’s experience at Parchman

though his presence there does the work of getting Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla, with Misty along for the ride, on the road to pick him up when he is released. Michael's need to be picked up from Parchman sets up the plot to take place in a different policed space for Black people: the road.

Travel, especially over long distances, plays a complex role in African American literature. From the Middle Passage to escape narratives, travel is inherent in African American history and therefore an integral theme in Black literature. The entire plot of *Beloved* is reliant upon Sethe's harrowing escape from Sweet Home. To make her escape, she must travel from the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky all the way to Cincinnati, Ohio, alone and about to give birth. Typically, American portrayals of travel use the road to symbolize freedom and new beginnings. In *Beloved*, it can be argued that this is the case considering Sethe literally escapes from bondage and forced labor into freedom. In addition, Sethe gives birth and creates new life while she is on the road. However, a symbol for freedom is too simple an interpretation when considering a Black individual on the road. In *Beloved* the road is a false symbol of freedom because eventually Sethe is threatened with recapture when schoolteacher finds her in Cincinnati, which results in Sethe taking the life of her own child. Paul D travels North after he escapes from the chain-gang on the way to Kentucky. The journey is a long one, and Paul D takes years to reach 124 in Ohio, spending eighteen months in Delaware with a weaver woman on his way. Still, all of his time on the road does nothing to alleviate Paul D's lingering trauma. While reminiscing, Paul D laments that it took "some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest" (Morrison 108). Instead, traveling for the characters of *Beloved* is fraught with danger. In America the road has been a criminalized space for Black people ever since millions of people from various

countries in Africa were forced across the Middle Passage. In her article “Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*” Nicole Dib explores the road-trip narrative through a Black lens. Dib asserts that “the roots of African American mobility in the United States must be understood in terms that reveal how travel has been contested for black individuals and communities from the start” (Dib 139). Laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 criminalized travel for Black people in the United States by making escape from slavery a crime and allowing the legal arrest and transport of escaped formerly-enslaved peoples against their will. This history is evident in *Beloved*. Sethe leaves Sweet Home after being brutally whipped and she suffers greatly in her travels. The grueling nature of her escape is detailed in her continuous painful walking. On her way to Ohio, “Sethe [walked] on two feet meant for standing still. How they were so swollen she could not see her arch or feel her ankles. Her leg shaft ended in a loaf of flesh scalloped by five toenails. But she could not, would not, stop” because when she did, the baby in her womb kicked and thrashed (Morrison 39). The difficulty of making this trek while pregnant is not lost on the reader. Eventually Sethe collapses from exhaustion and is nursed back to health and also gives birth with the help of a strange White girl named Amy Denver, all while on the run. As demonstrated in neo-slave escape narratives like *Beloved*, “the relationship between mobility and policed, or otherwise governed, subjectivity is deeply entwined in African American histories” and the literatures that represent them (Dib 139). Similar to the evolution from *Beloved* to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the historical criminalization of Black travel has evolved with time and to accommodate modern conventions and technology.

Thanks to the emancipation of enslaved peoples in the United States, industrialization, and the improvement of the automobile, mobility for Black Americans became technically easier, but has proved to have just as many risks as traveling for Black Americans in the past. As

per Dib, “a historical understanding of black automobility recognizes that restrictions on movement have been differentially created for racialized subjects” (138). Driving in a car is a fundamentally different experience for Black individuals than it is for White drivers. This is acknowledged in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Ward exemplifies the road as a dangerous place for Black bodies, thus continuing the African American literary trope of dangerous travel. By using a road-trip narrative, “Ward demonstrates how for black travelers the road primarily functions as a policed space where they are subject to violence” (142). The climax of this demonstration comes in the form of a traffic stop. A police officer pulls over Leonie for swerving, though Michael is the one who is originally driving and the couple switches seats before stopping for the police officer. The officer handcuffs Leonie and Michael before he chooses Misty to hold Kayla while he “walks toward Jojo, his third pair of handcuffs out” (Ward 122). The fact the officer decides to handcuff Jojo, a Black child, instead Misty, a White woman implies that the officer is engaging in racial profiling. The discrimination is taken a step further when Jojo reaches into his pocket to feel the gris-gris bag Pop made for him for comfort. The officer assumes Jojo is reaching for a weapon and pulls his own gun on Jojo. While the officer has the gun pointed at Jojo’s face, Leonie reflects on how young Jojo looks: “he’s just a baby. [...] nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler” (122). Jojo’s youth is emphasized here to show that all Black bodies are in danger in transit, not just the drivers and not just the adults. Specifically, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is responding to and reflecting back the “contemporary discourses of ‘driving while black,’ a phrase that refers to black drivers who get pulled over for simply ‘being black’ and the violence to which they are susceptible because of this profiling” (Dib 139). Leonie, the only Black adult, must suffer the consequences of the stop by swallowing the drugs that she, along with Michael and Misty, are transporting to avoid discovery by the police officer. As a result,

Leonie nearly overdoses. The police officer's resemblance to an overseer is confirmed when the car is initially pulled over and Richie warns Jojo that "they going to chain you" before retreating and hiding in the car, despite being a ghost (Ward 125). Of course, Richie is proven correct when Jojo is handcuffed. Richie's confusion of the police officer for an overseer, again, suggests that the American crime and punishment system bears a resemblance to the institution of slavery when it comes to Black travelers. Having been a victim of the American prison industrial complex, Richie recognizes the markers of race-based bias and aggression. Richie's presence in the car during the stop is complex because he is the ghost of a boy murdered as a result of racial prejudice and "for him to join the family in hope of reuniting with River only for [the family] to fall into another situation of captivity by way of a traffic stop is telling of the cyclical violence that black travelers experience" (Dib 146). Richie is able to warn Jojo because he has experienced this cycle before, though in a different form.

The traffic stop is a cruel narrative reality compared to an earlier scene in which Jojo and Kayla are left with a young White boy at Al's while Leonie, Misty, and Al get high in the shed. The boy plays *Grand Theft Auto*, a video game in which the player steals cars and strives to become a notorious criminal. The boy at Al's house can play at criminality while Jojo must actually have criminality thrust upon him due to his race. The juxtaposition highlights the difference in childhood experiences and development between Black children and White children. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward puts the lingering effects of slavery on display, and makes them especially apparent on the road. While context may be different, the effects of America's race-based system of slavery still result in harsher policed spaces and violence on the road for Black people, especially Black males. Ward makes the relationship between the living and the dead more tangible by connecting a young Black boy that is alive, Jojo, to a young Black

boy that is dead, Richie. In the novel, “the ghost becomes a politically effective cultural mechanism through which we learn of the racist forces that turned a boy into a specter so that Jojo, the other boy, can grow up and avoid a premature death” (Dib 148). Through the convention of a road-trip narrative, Ward contemporizes the African American literary trope of danger on the road while also making a clear connection to the dangers of travel for African Americans in the past. Ward demonstrates that the threat of racial violence still exists for Black motorists and that modern African American literature can develop story-telling methods that evolve alongside changing technology in order to reflect modern Black experiences while still showing their resemblance to older forms.

Overall, Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* responds to and contributes to African American literary traditions that are commonly found in neo-slave narratives such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. A major concern of the neo-slave narrative is in the correction of misrepresentations of slavery in the official American historical archive. The objective to bring real-life events back into cultural consciousness fosters non-linear timelines and oral storytelling as African American literary traditions. In both novels the past directly interacts with the present in the form of ghosts who have suffered violent deaths. Ward amplifies the importance of the voice as an African American literary device. Even animals and objects have voices in the novel, which Ward uses to counter normative American belief systems. Ward also offers alternative healing and spiritual practices through the distinct African American tradition of conjure. Conjure in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* establishes the novel as Black Gothic, just as the supernatural elements in *Beloved* bend it towards the same genre. The desire to “fill in the blanks” of the historical canon also gave rise to the Black Gothic. The Black Gothic genre paints the gory details of slavery in a way that is consistent with the goals of the neo-slave narrative and also

demands confrontation with taboo elements of history, some of which may cause discomfort to discuss. In both novels ghosts literalize the persistence of the past. The dead victims of slavery and race-based violence return, symbolizing the lasting influence of slavery on the present. Even after being banished, the ghosts in both *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* remain, demonstrating that just acknowledgement of the past is not enough to make the ghosts disappear. Without a doubt, *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* share themes focused on the nature of trauma. Ward adds to the African American literary tradition of centering trauma by including the contemporary American literary tradition of drug use. Leonie uses drugs to forget, which pushes back against the goal of remembering and truth-telling in neo-slave narratives. Yet, when she tries to forget, she is always reminded of the death of her brother Given when he appears to her every time Leonie gets high. In addition, Ward addresses incarceration as a new form of slavery through Pop's descriptions of Parchman Prison, which is nearly indistinguishable in many ways from a slave plantation. Again, Ward contributes a contemporary concept to the form of the traditional neo-slave narrative. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is a neo-slave narrative whose supernatural elements lay the groundwork for the Black Gothic genre, which Jesmyn Ward picks up and expands upon in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Ward utilizes the Black Gothic genre in her novel to draw attention to new areas in which racial bias, as a result of slavery, still affects Black people in contemporary America. Ward not only connects the past of the neo-slave narrative to the present in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, but also sets up pretext for future authors to explore non-Western systems of logic in an effort to further diversify the American literary canon.

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