

GHOSTS TELL STORIES: CULTURAL HAUNTING IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

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Abstract: *In her novel Sing, Unburied, Sing, Jesmyn Ward uses the ghost as both a literary trope and a cultural element in order to investigate an erased or distorted past and to assert an authenticated African-American cultural identity. Based on Kathleen Brogan's concept of "Cultural Haunting", the paper aims to examine how the ghost of Richie (one of the novel's major characters and narrators) functions as a literary and cultural tool to revise history and re-enliven African-American cultural memory and identity.*

Keywords: *African-Americans, cultural haunting, cultural identity, ghost, magic realism, memory*

1. Introduction

MacArthur Genius and two-time National Book Award winner, Jesmyn Ward is considered as one of the most talented and influential African-American writers of the 21st century. Ward is hailed as "heir to Faulkner", as all of her works are set in the American South, Mississippi in particular, in a small fictional rural village called Bois Sauvage. Like Faulkner, she also tackles the issues of racism, poverty, family relationships, communal love, and rural life in Mississippi. Her writing style and use of multiple narrators, and sometimes complicated plots, especially in her latest book, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, reminisces of Faulkner's narrative style.

Sing, Unburied, Sing, the focus of the present paper, was published in 2017 and has won the National Book Award for Fiction. One major characteristic of the novel is the use of the supernatural and of magic realism. For instance, one of the major characters and narrators in the book is a ghost called Richie. However, unlike classical and Shakespearean ghosts, who often come back to life seeking revenge and retribution, modern African-American ghosts "signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (Brogan 1995: 150). Based on Kathleen Brogan's concept of "Cultural Haunting", the paper argues that, by inserting a ghost into her narrative, Ward sheds light on an authentic African-American literary and cultural tradition and challenges historical erasure by providing a counter-narrative about the past and its bear on the present.

2. Cultural Haunting

2.1. Definition

The use of ghost for storytelling is an old and common literary tradition. For African-American cultural and oral history, the ghost, or the apparition of a dead person, figures prominently in old folktales, in slave narratives and even in

contemporary African-American literature. Brogan (1995: 150) states that “one of the key elements of African religious thought to survive in syncretic forms of New World religious practice and in slave folklore is the belief in ancestor spirits... the appearance of ancestral ghosts... suggested in fact a literary Africanism”. Similarly, Gordon (2008: 151) argues that “[t]he significance of ghosts and particularly spirit work in African-American culture and letters no doubt owes some of its origin to their respected place in African life”. Thus, by opting for the ghost trope, Ward anchors her work in an African literary tradition and asserts first and foremost the Africanist side of the African-American cultural identity. However, in Ward’s *Sing*, the ghost conveys a deeper meaning and plays a far more important role. It represents “a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening (idem: 8). It is a literary and cultural tool, through which the writer recovers and investigates a past that is often, to use Morrison’s term, either “absent” or “romanticized” (qtd. in Redding 2001: 167) and re-enlivens the African-American cultural identity.

2.2. Cultural Haunting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*

Through her concept of “Cultural Haunting”, Brogan (1995: 151) explains how ghost stories are used in American literature of different ethnic backgrounds as a memory tool to show how the past interacts with the present and to expose multiple ethnic and cultural identities. She argues that ghosts in American literature serve mainly to restore lost cultural identities, to re-create an ethnic identity by recalling a collective history, and to disrupt historical chronology by introducing a meta-narrative and inserting fragmented or absent discourse. In particular, ghosts in recent African-American literature “signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history” (Brogan 1995: 150). In *Sing*, there are two ghosts, but the focus in this paper will be only on one of them, the more significant one, the ghost of Richie. Richie is a black thirteen-year-old boy, who was imprisoned back in the 1940’s for stealing food to feed his starving family. Years after he dies, his ghost is resurrected into the narrative, to communicate not only his own individual trauma, but also “the crises of a larger social group” (ibid.) and to tell the readers untold stories about the past, stories about slavery, lynching, racism, as well as stories about communal love and bonding. Richie comes back to Parchman prison after kneeling before a “white snake, thick and long... slither[ing] out of the shadows beneath the trees” (Ward 2017: 176). The presence of a snake with a magical power that enables Richie to go back both in space and time is noteworthy here. Knowing that the novel itself is abundant with direct and indirect references to voodoo religion and practices, the white snake could in fact refer to Damballah, the most important god of the voodoo religion in the Caribbean, who is usually seen living in trees close to water or streams. Again, by both using the ghost trope and including references to voodoo, Ward takes the side of Melville J. Herskovits (American anthropologist who argued, contrary to sociologist Franklin Frazier, that enslaved people retained some of their African cultural heritage when taken from Africa to America) in asserting the syncretic nature of African-American religious beliefs, and highlights the survival of some elements of Africanist cultures and traditions among African-American communities, especially in the South, until today.

Richie landed in a “field of endless rows of cotton [where he] saw men bent and scuttling along like hermit crab, bending and picking. Saw other men walking

in circles around them with guns” (Ward 2017: 176-178). Parchman prison is described as a slavery institution, where enslaved people (or inmates) work in cotton fields all day, with white masters (or sergeants) watching them. By making this rather blurring connection between the past and the present and disrupting historical chronology (for though the novel’s main story is set in the 21st century, the return of the past through Richie’s story blurs the distinction between what is past and what is present), Ward seems to argue that history for African-Americans remains an unfinished process and that the legacy of slavery continues to define their lives to the present day. This “temporal and ontological disjunction” that African-Americans experience is conveyed by the figure of the ghost, who represents, to use Derrida’s (2006: 5) definition of a ghost, “this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge... One does not know if it is living or if it is dead”. The dichotomous patterns of being and non-being, absence and presence and visibility and invisibility translate the mental and psychological state of Richie, who felt confused the first time he landed in Parchman after his death, and could not conceive how “Parchman was past, present and future all at once” (Ward 2017: 240). He claims: “This is where I worked. This is where I was whipped... I remembered my name: Richie. I remembered the place: Parchman... I burrowed in tight. Needing to be held by the dark hand of the earth. To be blind to the men above. To memory” (Ward 2017: 179). For Richie, the memory of the past is so traumatic and painful that he is unable to face it first. Being oblivious to memory and trauma is out of people’s control, because, sooner or later, it will come back to haunt their consciousness, dead or alive alike. The memory of Parchman is for Richie just like the memory of slavery for African-Americans, a painful and poignant experience that never ends, due to its everlasting traumatic effect and the absence of a real change, as asserted by him when he claims:

Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain’t changed none. It is like the cuffs all the way down to the bone. It’s like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside looks different when the scales change, but the inside always the same. Like my marrow could carry a bruise. (Ward 2017: 222)

Ward’s message in this statement is definitely political. It implies that that the current discourse about the end of racism and the beginning of a new post-racial era is misleading and false and that the racial binary continues to determine African-American life to this day. Richie’s trauma is not personal and individual, but rather collective. It translates the trauma of a group of people and reflects “a society’s inability to integrate with the present both traumatic experience and a pre-catastrophic lost past” (Brogan 1995: 153). The deep psychological and cultural trauma caused by hundreds of years of enslavement and dehumanization is not allowed to heal, simply due to the lack of any real change and to an inability to reckon with a traumatic past. Through the ghost trope, Ward challenges mainstream narratives about the present by negating the end of racism and shedding light on one of the major institutions that preserves it: the prison system. However, clear as it may be, the novel is more concerned with the past than with the present. Richie’s ghost is primarily an apparition from the past, who comes back to life loaded with stories, desires, and questions in order to illuminate a gloomy part of American history and to convey a people’s struggle to survive and affirm its cultural identity.

A brief account of Richie's story is needed in order to understand what follows. Richie, imprisoned at Parchman, is tortured, whipped, and humiliated, but finds refuge in another inmate, called River or Pop. River takes care of Richie, feeds him, saves him sometimes from being punished and cures his wounds when he is whipped. One day, Richie decides to run out of the prison together with another inmate, called Blue. On their way, they encounter a white girl and Blue tries to rape her, but Richie hits him on the head and saves her. Learning about the incident and about the inmates' escape, a white mob starts hunting for the two runaways and eventually finds Blue first. They torture him, cut his body into parts, lynch him and then set him on fire. Meanwhile, River tries to track Richie down, using his dogs and succeeds to find him before the angry mob reaches the place. River feels compelled to kill Richie by stabbing him in the neck, saving him thus from being tortured to death and lynched by the white mob. This violent and traumatic end keeps haunting Richie and hinders his burial and mourning process. Thus, he comes back to haunt the living, to tell stories about the past, to understand his own death and to find peace for his restless soul. By making Richie one of the story's narrators to tell first-hand stories about the past, Ward gives voice to the voiceless and the oppressed and endows him with the agency to re-create the past, shifting the focus from traumatic memory to narrative memory.

Wandering about Parchman, Richie's ghost meets Jojo, River's grandson, who came to the prison together with him mom, Leonie, and toddler sister, Kayla, to take their released white father back home. Being visible only to Jojo and Kayla, Richie goes back with them in the car to meet River and understand his own tragic end. Meeting Jojo for the first time, Richie says:

There's so much Jojo doesn't know. There are so many stories I could tell him. The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased. I could patch those holes. Make the shirt hang new, except for the tails. The end. (Ward 2017: 180)

Just like *Beloved's* ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Richie's ghost "enters, all fleshy and real, with wants, and a fierce hunger" (Gordon 2008: 139), for he needs the end of the story in order to be able to go. However, Richie's main purpose, besides finding answers to his tragic end, is to pass on stories about the past to Jojo (and thus to the readers), to fill in memory gaps and throw light on an erased or absent history. The ghost becomes in this sense a political tool through which Ward not only gives power and agency to the oppressed, but also revises history and refreshes memory to challenge oblivion and forgetfulness. In other words, African-Americans need to revisit history, to fathom it and to reckon with what happened to be able to reconcile with the present and the future. And Ward makes this possible by bringing Richie back to life to tell stories from the past, mainly atrocious stories about his life in Parchman, but also stories about the brutality of slavery and Jim Crow. Besides describing how inmates, especially black inmates, were treated as slaves in Parchman, some of the major shocking stories told by Richie are stories of lynching. One of these stories was told to Richie by a-black female inmate, called Sunshine Woman. It is about a black man and his lady, who did not step down into the street when a white woman was passing by and he accidentally touched her. The white woman went back home and told her husband that the black man, together with his wife, had molested her. So, a white mob went out looking for them and eventually hanged them. Richie provides a detailed and exhaustive image of the lynching scene:

She said their people went out in the woods and found them the next day. Said the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the trees was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire too. (Ward 2017: 243-244)

The shocking visual picture of lynching serves to highlight the extreme brutality of lynching and the ultimate inhumanity of white supremacy. The scene reflects white America's "dehumanizing, ungendering and defacing project of African persons" where "[t]he anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose- eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, bullet" (Spillers 1987: 67-72). In other words, using different means, the project of destroying and mutilating the black body (or "flesh"), which started with captivity and slavery, has in fact continued after that and is still present today. Through the detailed description of the torture and pain inflicted upon the black body, Ward seems to suggest that her use of the fantastic and of magic realism mimics in multiple ways the actual life of African-Americans. Ward contends that life during slavery and after it is closer to the fantastic than to the real and that any milder representation of it is a form of historical erasure and distortion. That is to say that, as magical realism is defined by Mathew Strecher (1999: 267) as "something too strange to believe", the horror and immorality of slavery and Jim Crow is, just like magic realism, hard to believe.

One other major symbolic element that is highly significant in African-American cultural memory and which directly invokes lynching is the tree. "The lynching tree is the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk about, because the pain of remembering - visions of black bodies dangling from southern trees, surrounded by jeering white mobs - is almost too excruciating to recall" (Cone 2011: 3). Just as Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* is branded and marked by a tree on her back from being whipped as a slave, reminding her of a "past that is nothing less than a tribunal of brutality" (Redding 2001: 169), Ward's *Sing* is also full of tree imagery. Richie is always found hanging on, ascending and curled under pine and oak trees. The novel itself ends with the powerful and metaphorical image of a tree full of ghosts:

He [Richie] ascends the tree like the white snake. He undulates along the trunk, to the branches... And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white... They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to the death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found that I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe.* (Ward 2017: 357)

While the lynching tree attests to the extreme violence and cruelty of white supremacy, it also testifies for a group's traumatic history and power to resist and survive. The ghosts here are not given voices to speak out their traumas, because the extreme violence and atrocity of what happened is too unbelievable and incomprehensible to be put into words. Besides recalling Faulkner's writing style, the stream of consciousness-like and uninterrupted narration of what happened (the italicized part in the quote above) indicates the continuous and unstoppable nature of the past, further confirmed by a mention of the different methods used, past and present, to subjugate and terrorize black Americans: raping, suffocating, starving to death, shooting, hanging, beating, etc. However, it is worth noting that the lynching tree in this scene as much as it suggests displacement and alienation, it also signifies reunion and communion. By bringing together "ancestral spirits" into the same site of memory, "the lynching tree," Ward highlights the communal and collective nature of the African-American experience and asserts that black Americans are united through their pain and traumas.

Though the overall picture of the past drawn by Richie's ghost is gloomy and ghastly, the flip side of the picture tells other stories as well – stories of love and emotional bonding. In fact, familial and communal love is one the major themes that dominate Ward's fiction. Despite all the pain and suffering experienced by Richie in Parchman, he claims that the place felt like home for him. As soon as Richie entered the prison, River felt compassion and sympathy for the thirteen-year-old boy. He took care of him, fed him, helped him to finish his work on time and thus escape punishment and cured his wounds when he was whipped. He acted like a surrogate father for Richie. Describing this paternal love, Richie says: "The way he [River] carried me to my cot, the way he bent over me made something soft and fluttery as a jellyfish pulse in my chest. That was my chest. That was my heart. Him my big brother. Him my father" (Ward 2017: 178). Coming back to life and seeing River, Richie was overwhelmed by love again. Getting closer and closer to River, he became like a cat "fresh-born, milk-hungry, creeping toward someone he'd die without" (idem: 283). The story of the father-son love relationship shows that despite the gloomy and traumatic life of African-Americans under the brutal system of slavery and racism, stories of human love and affection are there. The extreme inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow is juxtaposed with the ultimate humanity that brought together Richie and River. Indeed, just like extreme maternal love led Sethe to kill her own daughter and save her from bondage in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), it is also ultimate paternal love that led River to murder Richie, just to save him from being tortured and lynched to death.

3. Conclusion

Cultural Haunting in African-American literature often translates an inability to reckon with a past that refuses to be buried and a desire to be heard and seen. By coming back to life and intruding the narrative loaded with stories, the ghost of Richie shows that the past still lingers in the present and that it is only by excavating and interrogating an erased and often silenced history that the past's ghostly presence could be exorcised and "new forms of consciousness, identity and subjectivity may be wrought" (Redding 2001: 175).

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