

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

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**Narratives of Survival: Memory, Trauma, and Healing in Jesmyn**

***Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing****



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## 1- Topic and Thesis Statement:

Jesmyn Ward has emerged as one of the new century's most prolific literary voices that attest to the turmoil of Black self-definition occasioned by the profound socio-cultural and political shifts that followed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. A writer of four novels and a memoir, Ward's literary works center around the Black past and contemporary experience in the American South. Memory and trauma present two primary tropes in Ward's cultural universe, especially in her two critically acclaimed novels, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Taking its cue from Ward's mnemonic interest, the dissertation examines the multiple aspects of cultural memory and trauma in Ward's two major novels, *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Set in the contemporary American South, Mississippi specifically, the two novels are connected not only spatially, but also thematically. They both present the everyday lives and struggles of two Black families with past and current traumatic events that affect the characters' lives, subjectivities, and relations. Although Ward's fictional narratives are grounded in a local Southern sense of place and history by focusing mainly on poor Black Southerners and reworking Southern cultural memories/traumas, the cultural scope of her texts extends beyond the regional to reflect on overarching aspects of the past and present Black experience in a wider national context.

The chosen theoretical foci of my dissertation rely primarily on memory and trauma studies, incorporating the "ethical turn" which has developed in conjunction with the reinvention of trauma studies in the 1990s as a product "affecting the humanities" (Craps 52) aimed at establishing historical justice through "the formation of history as memory" (Best 460). Triggered initially by major traumatic events, such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam War (Rico 2), the introduction of trauma theory into Black studies is relatively recent, hence it

deserves more critical attention as a growing field of research. Regarding the writer and primary texts, my focus on memory and trauma as a subject of study owes to Ward's particular literary interest in the themes as well as to the complex representation of the African American cultural experience, past and present, in her fiction which lends itself to scrutinizing memory and trauma in their textual and contextual interplay.

My contention is that in her revisionist fiction, Ward re-enlivens African American cultural memory and trauma to create counter-memories or counter-narratives where, to use Fred Moten's words, "blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity" (2). I argue that Ward recovers past and more recent memories and traumas to turn them into narratives of individual as well as communal survival and healing. The main mechanism of survival and healing that Ward emphasizes is *reconnection*: to the past, to ancestral values and traditions, to nature, to the family, and to the community. The reward of such reconnection is a grounded sense of identity and community through a reconfigured knowledge of the past. The diverse vectors of cultural memories and traumas presented by Ward and discussed throughout the dissertation are reflective of this multidimensional paradigm which moves beyond the discourse of victimization, that is, the mere representation of Black people as victims of a traumatic history, to endorse a more agentic view of African American cultural resistance, survival, and healing.

## **2- Chapter Description**

In order to cover most of the aspects of cultural memory and trauma in Ward's two novels, I divide the dissertation into five major chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect or trope in relation to memory and trauma. The first chapter, "Theoretical Underpinnings," aims to provide an overview of the notions of cultural memory and trauma in the literature both in general and in more particular African American and Wardian contexts. To that end, I split the chapter into three subchapters: the

first is dedicated to the theoretical definitions and delineation of key terms and concepts, that is, memory and trauma, in their intersection with other notions, mainly history, power, and cultural identity; the second subchapter links Black studies to memory and trauma studies to show the relevance of memory and trauma as conceptual tools for exploring the Black cultural landscape; the third and last subchapter provides a brief introduction to Jesmyn Ward as a Southern writer and to her literary topoi in relation to memory and trauma.

The second chapter, “‘Cultural Haunting’ in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,” focuses on the trope of haunting in Ward’s novel. Based on Kathleen Brogan’s concept of “cultural haunting” (149), I argue that ghosts in the novel can be approached from two different yet interrelated perspectives. First, from an Africanist perspective ghosts represent an all-pervasive element in African-based supernatural and spiritual beliefs that African Diaspora writers appropriate and deploy in their literary works as a means for cultural reclamation. Second, from a trauma perspective, haunting in Ward’s text performs the compelling function of historical “revisioning” by evoking historical painful events, slavery and Jim Crow in particular, and connecting them to their present iterations in everyday traumatic instances. The subchapter also highlights the healing effect of haunting in line with the two above functions of the ghost trope.

The third chapter, “Remembering in/through Nature: An Ecocritical Reading,” addresses memory and trauma in Ward’s two novels from an ecocritical perspective. Based on Kimberly Ruffin’s notion of the “ecological burden-and-beauty paradox” (2), I divide the chapter into two different yet related subchapters. The first one is dedicated to the beauty part of Ruffin’s ecological paradox by studying ecospirituality as a constituent of African American cultural memory in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and examining the symbiotic and healing relationship between the main characters and their physical landscape. The second subchapter relates to the ecological burden and focuses

on Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* as an individual as well as a collective/cultural trauma. It situates the hurricane in a larger African American historical context by looking at its socio-economic and racial dimensions and tracing “the biopolitics of disposability” (Giroux 174) that became more visible in its wake, theorizing them as everyday traumatic renditions. The subchapter ends by highlighting the ethics of survival and communal solidarity that emerged in the aftermath of Katrina.

The fourth chapter, “(Dis)continuing Black Motherhood,” focuses on the trope of motherhood as one of the main defining vectors of Black female subjectivity in Ward’s *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* and *Salvage the Bones*. The chapter deals primarily with the two female protagonists of the two novels, Esch and Leonie, respectively. It examines the construction—or the lack thereof—of their maternal identities as impacted by their familial relationships, mainly with regard to their mothers, as well as by other pressing socio-economic, historical, cultural, and environmental factors. By analyzing and contrasting Esch’s and Leonie’s characterization and maternal experiences in two respective subchapters, the chapter shows how the search for and reconnection with the mother and motherhood lead to an affirmation of a feminine identity (such as the case for Esch), whereas the cultural disconnection from motherhood and the motherline results in the dislocation of the Black female self (such as the case for Leonie).

Tightly linked to all the chapters, yet more so to the fourth one, the fifth and last chapter, “Healing through Caring: Community in Resilience” deals with the healing power of familial/communal care to both individual and collective traumas, especially maternal ruptures. Focusing mainly on sibling relationships and masculine caretaking due to their centrality as the most lucid survival strategies and healing practices in the two novels, the chapter is divided into two separate subchapters, each dealing with a different book and arguing for the resilience and

adaptiveness of the African American family in the face of both historical and present-day traumatic experiences.

### **3- Results**

Although each individual chapter focuses on a distinct aspect of memory and trauma, the dissertation's different chapters are linked theoretically and textually through their shared focus and analysis of African American cultural memory and trauma in Ward's two novels as well as through their emphasis on the healing effect of each aspect, that is, haunting, ecomemory, motherhood, and familial care. The diversity of thematic foci from one chapter to another owes to the very diversity and multiplicity of Black cultural memories/traumas as well as to the cultural richness and complexity of Ward's writing. Collectively, the analytical chapters prove the relevance of memory and trauma as conceptual tools to explore the African American cultural core as depicted by Ward. Though it is impossible to touch upon all the facets of Ward's literary figuration of memory and trauma in her two novels within the scope of my dissertation, I have attempted to address the most salient aspects of memory and trauma that Ward deploys to illuminate nodal elements of the African American experience, past and present, especially in the American South and her little Bois Sauvage community.

As Ward's cultural universe testifies, cultural memory, due to its cultural focality, presents a generative point of departure for African American cultural representation, reclamation, and authentication. In the novels, a specific focus on non-institutionalized forms and/or media of Black cultural memories, that is memories and stories passed down among generations in informal ways like storytelling or socialization, remains the most reflective of the African American cultural core. As the analytical subchapters on "cultural haunting," ecospirituality, motherhood, and familial care show, Black familial and communal epistemologies or values, together with ancestral spiritual

traditions and cosmological worldviews that organize and harmonize the characters' relations to themselves, to each other, and to their environment, embody some of the key cultural elements that Ward celebrates and proposes as—even universal—cure to social ills and cultural alienation.

Trauma, both individual and/or collective as well as event-based and/or quotidian, provides an equally central port of entry into the Black present and historical experience in the two novels, due not only to the painful nature of the past and its persistence as an unresolved, ongoing process, but also to the very import of remembering, even the most traumatic events, as an identity-unifying factor, on the one hand, and as an instrument for historical revisioning and possibly healing, on the other. As discussed in the different chapters, especially the ones on traumatic haunting in *Sing* and Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage*, the cultural traumas of the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow and their current recursions in overt systemic racialized forms of discrimination, such as the prison system, and/or in everyday instances of covert racial othering, namely, environmental racism and socio-economic injustice, are evoked both directly and indirectly in the two texts with a view to questioning the past and show its temporal continuum in the present as well as to instigate a process of “healing or psychic liberation” (Levy-Hussen 6).

Thus, by alternating between the discourses of subjugation and agency and incorporating memories of both Black pain and Black joy, Ward reconceptualizes past and more recent Black memories and traumas, turning them into narratives of survival and healing. As both texts confirm, the physical, emotional, and cultural survival of the individual and the wider community hinges upon a mnemonic process of cultural return, reconnection, and reclamation, which holds a therapeutic power in enabling psychological and cultural healing from within the culture and community itself.

#### 4- Conference Papers:

- **21-23 September 2023:** “Dismal Ecologies: Revisiting the History of the Maroon Communities in Jesmyn Ward’s *Mother Swamp*”, **Southern Studies Forum**, organized by Université de Jules Verne (UPJV), Amiens, and Université d’Artois, Arras, France.
- **20-22 October 2022:** “It runs in the blood, like silt in river water”: Ecospirituality as Memory in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*”, **Faulkner & Ward Conference**, organized by Center for Faulkner Studies, US.
- **26-29 June 2022:** “They were the children of history and place: Jesmyn Ward’s Fictional Representation of the American South”, **SSSL 2022 Biennial Conference**, Atlanta, Georgia.
- **6-8 April 2022:** “*The Deep: An Ecological Fable of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Memory.*” **Wastelands2022**, organized by the European Association for American Studies (EAAS), Madrid, Spain.
- **12 March 2021:** “Centering the Voices of Black Mothers: Trauma and Black Motherhood in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,” **Midwest Regional African American Studies Biennial Conference**, organized by Ball State University, USA.
- **6-8 November 2020:** “‘I am going home’: Haunting and Ontological Displacement in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,” **Narratives of Displacement International Conference**, organized by the London Center for Interdisciplinary Research, The British and Comparative Cultural Studies Research Group (BRICCS), University of the Balearic Islands, Spain, in collaboration with Research Project RTI2018-097186-B-I00 and RED2018-102678-T (MCI/AEI/ERDF, EU) (Online Conference)

- **17-18 October 2020:** “Biopolitics of Disposability: Environmental Racism and Communal Resistance in Jesmyn Ward’s Post-Katrina Novel *Salvage the Bones*.” **International Conference on Ecocriticism and Environmental Studies**, organized by Academic LAB, London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research. (Online Conference)
- **4 December 2020:** “African American Counter-Memory and Cultural Authentication.” **Networks International Conference**, organized by the Intercultural Studies Research Center at the Reformed Theological University, Debrecen (Hungary) and The Department of Languages and Literatures of Partium Christian University, Oradea (Romania). (Online Conference)
- **13-14 December 2019:** “This is where my two stories come together”: The Memory of the Brother in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Men We Reaped*,” **International Conference on “Alternative Realities: New Challenges for the American Literature in the Era of Trump**,” UCD Dublin, the Republic of Ireland.
- **29 November 2019:** “Memory, Power, and Identity: A Tripartite Nexus,” **Networks Conference**, Partium Christian University, Oradea, Romania.
- **30 May 2019:** “‘Bodies Tell Stories’: Remembering Katrina in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*”, **13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association for American Studies (HAAS 13)**, University of Debrecen, Hungary.
- **16 May 2019:** “Ghosts Tell Stories: Cultural Haunting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,” **BAS Conference**, University of Timisoara, Romania.
- **7 February 2019:** “Memory and Black Masculinity in a Selection of 21st Century Memoirs”, **Young Researchers Workshop**, the Institute of English and American Studies (IEAS), University of Debrecen, Hungary

- **31 January-2 February 2019:** "The Black Male Experience in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* and *The Beautiful Struggle*, **4th Biannual Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE 4)**, Veszprém, Hungary.
- **23-24 November 2018:** "The Traumatic Memory of Slavery in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*", TAELS's **4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on "Narrative of Power and Empowerment,"** Tunisia.



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Khedhir, Y.:** Cultural Memory: Trauma and African American Cultural Identity.  
In: Memory, trauma, and the construction of the self. Ed.: Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeczkó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem ; Oradea : Partium, Debrecen, 13-24, 2021, (Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 3.)
2. **Khedhir, Y.:** Memory, Power, and Identity: A Tripartite Nexus.  
In: Intercultural Occurrences: Diversity and Alterity. Szerk.: Péter Gaál-Szabó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Szilárd Kmeczkó, Debrecen Reformed Theological University ; Nagyvárad : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen, 89-99, 2020, (Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 2) ISBN: 9786155853319

#### Foreign language international book chapters (1)

3. **Khedhir, Y.:** "Tomorrow, I think, Everything will be washed clean": Water Imagery in Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina Novel Salvage the Bones.  
In: Bodies of Water in African American Literature, Music, and Film. Ed.: Sharon A. Lewis, Ama S. Wattley, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 89-109, 2023. ISBN: 1527502104

#### Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (2)

4. **Khedhir, Y.:** "It runs in the blood, like silt in river water": Ecospirituality as Memory in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing.  
*Philological Review.* 48, 49-70, 2023. ISSN: 0160-3124.
5. **Khedhir, Y.:** Ghosts tell stories: Cultural Haunting in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing  
*Brit. Americ. Stud.* 26, 17-23, 2020. ISSN: 1224-3086.





### List of other publications

#### Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

6. **Khedhir, Y.:** "The Burden" Or What It Means to Be Black in America Today.

*Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud.* 25 (2), 454-457, 2019. ISSN: 1218-7364.

7. **Khedhir, Y.:** The Black Male Experience in Ta-Nehisi Coate's *Between the World and Me* and The beautiful Struggle.

*Pro&Contra.* 2, 49-65, 2018. EISSN: 2630-8916.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2018.2.49>

#### Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

8. **Khedhir, Y.:** More than a Historical Narrative of one of America's Most Notorious Trials: Review of The Trial of the Chicago 7.

*The North Meridian Review.* 3 (1), 201-207, 2022. ISSN: 2769-5115.

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