

Specters and Legacy: A Derridean Analysis of Racial Injustice in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Abstract

African American literature often employs ghosts as narrative devices to confront collective trauma and historical injustices. Jesmyn Ward's novel, Sing, Unburied, Sing, set in contemporary Mississippi, epitomises this tradition by depicting racial injustice and its enduring legacies through the presence of spectral figures. The narrative centers on Jojo as he embarks on a journey with his family to retrieve their patriarch, Michael, from prison. Along the way, they encounter spectral presences that evoke unresolved histories and ancestral suffering, impacting the living in the American South. Richie, who was killed by Pop, Jojo's maternal grandfather, to spare him from further suffering in prison, and Given, who was killed by Michael's cousin due to racial supremacy, both appear as spectral presences throughout the novel. This paper uses Derrida's concept of spectrality from Specters of Marx to examine the role of ghosts in the novel. Derrida uses the notion of the specter to demonstrate how past

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ideologies, events, and injustices continue to influence the present, despite their apparent disappearance. This research paper contends that Ward employs spectrality as a narrative tool, positioning spectral characters such as Richie and Given, in a liminal space that subverts conventional binary oppositions like life versus death and presence versus absence. Through this technique, the novel underscores the inescapable influence of history, which significantly shapes the characters' perceptions and experiences. The paper also posits that these spectral figures serve not only to highlight the enduring impacts of oppression but also to call for accountability and reflection.

Keywords: Trauma, Racial Injustice, Legacy, Specter, History, Oppression

Ghost stories, a genre rich in supernatural and eerie elements, have long captivated the human imagination with their timeless appeal. Rooted in ancient folklore and myth, these narratives transcend the boundaries between the supernatural and the real, exploring themes of life, death, and the afterlife. They offer a profound commentary on human nature, fear, and mortality. In African American literature, the presence of ghosts often extends beyond the confines of traditional Gothic storytelling, evolving into a unique narrative form that reflects cultural haunting. According to Kathleen Brogan, these stories differ from typical twentieth-century ghost tales by delving into “the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche, but also of a people’s historical consciousness” (Brogan 152). This narrative form serves to illuminate the persistent impact of the past on contemporary identities and experiences. It also enables writers to confront and reinterpret collective memories. Jesmyn Ward’s critically acclaimed novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* stands as a powerful example of this tradition. Set in contemporary Mississippi, the novel uses supernatural elements to illustrate the ways in which systemic racism and the prison system perpetuate oppression and brutality against Black individuals. The story follows Jojo, a biracial boy, as he embarks on a journey with his baby sister, Kayla, and their mother, Leonie, to rural Mississippi, where they are set to pick up his white father, Michael, upon his release from the infamous Parchman prison, which becomes a passage into the past, where they encounter ghosts symbolising the racial injustice that has oppressed Black individuals in the American South. The ghosts in the novel are not just supernatural beings but were once real people, as Jesmyn Ward writes in *Men We Reaped*: “But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that” (7). Richie, who was killed by Pop, Jojo’s maternal grandfather, to spare him from further suffering in prison, and Given, who was killed by Michael’s cousin due to racial supremacy, both appear as spectral presences throughout the novel. They haunt the memories of the characters, especially Jojo and Leonie. These spectral figures embody the lingering wounds of history, exposing how injustice continues to haunt the present. The narrative oscillates between multiple perspectives, primarily focusing on Jojo and Leonie but also incorporating the voice of the dead, the specter of Richie. Through its nonlinear structure and the interplay between the living and the dead, the novel interrogates

the ways in which personal and collective traumas are interwoven, suggesting that the past is not easily buried but instead continues to exert influence over the present.

Jacques Derrida, the renowned French philosopher, introduces the concept of specters in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. He explores the haunting presence of ghosts that destabilise the boundaries between the living and the dead, the past and the present. These specters, Derrida explains, are never at peace; they “never die; they remain always to come and to come back” (123). This perpetual haunting disrupts traditional ideas of linear time, challenging the notion that the present can ever be entirely divorced from the past. A specter occupies a liminal space, existing as “neither living nor dead, present nor absent” (Derrida 63). It serves as a potent reminder of unresolved histories, particularly those tied to injustice and oppression. Derrida suggests that these spectral figures compel individuals and societies to confront the unfinished business of history—those elements forgotten, repressed, or ignored. By doing so, the specter demands accountability for lingering injustices and calls for reflection and action to address historical wrongs. This research paper explores the manifestation of Derrida’s concept of specters in Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. This research paper contends that Ward employs spectrality as a narrative tool, positioning spectral characters such as Richie and Given, in a liminal space that subverts conventional binary oppositions like life versus death and presence versus absence. Through this technique, the novel underscores the inescapable influence of history, which significantly shapes the characters’ perceptions and experiences. The paper also posits that these spectral figures serve not only to highlight the enduring impacts of oppression but also to call for accountability and reflection.

The primary spectral figure that appears in the novel is Richie. Jojo describes Richie’s appearance as “a dark skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck” (*Sing, Unburied, Sing* 130) [Hereafter referred to as *SUS*]. His specter appears to Jojo because he deeply wants to uncover the truth about how he died. His goal is to find peace and closure. Richie, a twelve-year-old boy, was sent to Parchman prison, officially known as the Mississippi State Penitentiary, for stealing food to help feed his family of nine siblings. At different points in time, Michael, Pop (Jojo’s grandfather), and Richie all experienced incarceration at this prison. The prison, devoid of walls or traditional barriers, initially gives the illusion of freedom. As described in the novel, “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....Wasn’t no brick; wasn’t no stone” (*SUS* 21). However, the reality of life at Parchman was far from humane. Inmates endured gruelling labour, physical abuse, inadequate food, and a lack of medical care. Parchman symbolises both physical and psychological confinement, reflecting a society entrenched in systemic racial prejudice. Its operation serves as a modern-day extension of slavery, exploiting African American labour under conditions reminiscent of the plantation era. Richie,

small and frail, struggled to cope with the harsh demands of prison life but found some protection under Pop, who looked out for him. Desperate to escape the brutal conditions, Richie attempted to flee alongside another inmate, Blue.

An additional reason for Richie's escape is his persistent concern for his brothers and sisters, as he wondered if they were eating, reflecting his deep desire to provide for their well-being: "kept thinking about my brothers and sisters, wondering if they was eating" (*SUS* 181). Their plan failed, and Blue was brutally killed by the guards. In the aftermath, Pop, facing an impossible choice, ended Richie's life by stabbing him in the neck, sparing him further suffering at the hands of the guards. Jojo asks Pop to finish his story, as he used to share stories of his time in Parchman prison, especially about his fellow inmate Richie. Pop had been unjustly arrested and imprisoned at Parchman at fifteen, and the memories of that time continue to haunt him. Throughout the novel, he recalls his experiences, with Richie's story being a central focus. As Jojo stands beside Richie, he encourages Pop to reveal the truth of what really happened to Richie in the end. Pop explains that Richie escaped from prison alongside another inmate, Blue, who was later caught after attacking a white girl. Realising the impending violence that awaited Richie if he were discovered, Pop kills him with a knife to spare him from the brutal fate of lynching and mutilation that Blue suffered. Pop narrates the incident as follows: "They was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him... And Richie hunched down... Crying. Nose up, listening to Blue and the crowd... They was going to do the same to him. Once they got done with Blue" (*SUS* 254-55). This incident haunts Pop throughout his lifetime, leaving an indelible mark on his psyche. In the course of the novel, men are pursued, murdered, and mutilated in the woods of Mississippi. The Parchman prison system exemplifies white supremacy by unjustly targeting and dehumanising innocent Black men through systemic incarceration and brutal exploitation. It is only when Richie learns the truth about his tragic fate that he can finally find peace and cross over to the afterlife. At the conclusion of the novel, Richie ultimately discovers a sense of peace when Kayla begins to sing.

An additional spectral figure that appears in the novel is Given. However, his silent presence leaves his true intentions ambiguous. Given's specter brings to light a hidden trauma "that one doesn't yet know" (Chang 125). Given, Leonie's older brother and the only son of Pop and Mama, was a high school senior with a passion for football and friendships across racial lines, despite his father's cautions about white people. Pop warns Jojo as follows: "They look at you and see difference, son. Don't matter what you see. It's about what they do" (*SUS* 48). He often went hunting with a group of white men and, during one trip, made a bet with Michael's cousin over who could shoot a buck first. When Given won, Michael's cousin, filled with rage, shot him dead. Michael's family covered up the murder by asserting it was merely a "hunting accident" (*SUS* 50), leveraging their status and power to protect themselves. The use of a derogatory term to describe Given in the sentence, "This fucking hothead shot the nigger for beating him" (*SUS* 49), highlights the deep-

seated racism that devalues Black lives. The person responsible for Given's death was sentenced to a relatively lenient punishment of three years in Parchman prison, followed by two years of probation. Given's death illustrates the supremacy of white individuals over people of colour in America, as his fatal encounter with Michael's cousin reflects the dangerous consequences of racial injustice, despite his attempts to connect with white peers and ignore his father's warnings. After his death, Given's presence lingers as a spirit, primarily haunting his sister Leonie. "He smiled at me, this Given-not-Given, this Given that's been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill" (*SUS* 34). Whenever Leonie attempts to forget, she is consistently haunted by the memory of her brother Given, who appears to her each time she gets high. Although he never directly communicates with her, his ghostly presence demonstrates the lingering effects of unresolved traumas on their lives.

In the novel, it is not just Richie and Given who appear as ghosts; several other spectral figures also make their presence felt. The tree in the backyard of Jojo's house is crowded with spirits. "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 perch like birds, but look as people" (*SUS* 282). Jojo can see all of them—men, women, and children, some just infants. So, Jojo asks his grandmother, Mama, if she will become a ghost when she passes away because she is dying of cancer. She explains that a person only becomes a ghost if they die in a particularly violent or traumatic way. Mama says, "The old folks always told me that when someone dies in a bad way, sometimes it's so awful even God can't bear to watch, and then half your spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water" (*SUS* 236). She describes how, in such instances, the death is so horrific that even God cannot bear to witness it, leading part of the spirit to remain behind, seeking peace much like a thirsty person longs for water.

Although the ghosts in the backyard don't show how they died, Jojo can sense their suffering through the sorrow in their eyes. "None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes" (*SUS* 282). Jojo's encounters with the ghosts of his ancestors, including Richie and his uncle Given, reveal to him the painful connection between the past and present, a realisation that unsettles him deeply, unlike his sister Kayla, who tries to comfort the spirits. Kayla begins to sing, producing "a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing I [Jojo] can understand. Only the melody, which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of the trees" (*SUS* 284). As she sings louder, the ghosts part their lips as if crying, yet no sound emerges, symbolising their silenced voices. As Michelle Alexander emphasises, "since the nation's founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form" (21). This reflects how, as Alexander notes, the voices of people of colour have been systematically silenced through various institutions. At the

conclusion of the novel, Kayla's singing to the spirits serves as her means of establishing a connection and urging them to return home.

This paper reveals that Ward employs spectrality as a narrative tool, positioning her spectral characters within a liminal space that disrupts conventional dichotomies, such as life and death, or presence and absence. Through this technique, Ward emphasises the inescapability of history and its profound impact on the characters' experiences and perspectives. Through the tragic deaths of Richie and Given, as well as the haunting spirits tied to Jojo's backyard tree, the novel weaves together past and present, confronting the legacy of racial injustice, particularly the painful history of slavery and systemic oppression.

In the novel, the spirits serve as a bridge to Jojo's family's painful past, guiding him through the complex journey of emotional growth as he grapples with inherited trauma. Beyond merely seeking the truth about his death, Richie's primary purpose is to impart the buried histories of the past to Jojo, illuminating forgotten narratives. This intent becomes evident when Richie reflects: "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" (*SUS* 137). As Dib observes, the ghost helps Jojo "grow up and avoid a premature death" (148).

Jojo's journey toward maturity is significantly shaped by the incomplete life paths of Given and Richie. For Leonie, her struggles with addiction and unresolved grief over her brother's death create a fractured identity, affecting her ability to care for her children. Given restores painful memories for Leonie, making her feel haunted by the past. She wishes for Given's ghost to disappear: "Hoping that when I sit up, Given-not-Given will be gone back to wherever he stays when he is not haunting me" (*SUS* 150). However, the presence of her brother Given's ghost persistently haunts her. She remains trapped in the past, unable to embrace the present or envision a future free from grief. Pop, connected deeply to the family's history, uses storytelling to help Jojo understand resilience and the cyclical nature of racial oppression. Pop lives in a paradox, seemingly free yet bound by the haunting memories of Parchman, Richie's death, and Given's loss. These memories haunt and define his existence: "I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out...When Given died, I thought I'd drown in it. Drove me blind, made me so crazy I couldn't speak. Didn't nothing come close to easing it until you came along" (*SUS* 256-57). Kayla's innocent connection to the spirits hints at the possibility of healing across generations, offering hope amid the family's suffering. Kalya appears to comfort the ghosts, who smile with "something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (*SUS* 284) and say, "home" (*SUS* 285). The spirits, through their presence, reveal the enduring impact of unresolved injustice on the family's experiences. Ward's depiction of ghosts in the novel effectively illustrates "the continuity of past traumas in the present" (Antoszek 13).

Furthermore, the spectral figures in the novel not only highlight the enduring consequences of oppression but also call for accountability and reflection. As the old saying goes, “The axe forgets, but the tree remembers.” This proverb resonates deeply with the experiences of Black individuals in the U.S. justice system. While those in power may move on from the injustices they have inflicted, those who suffer under them carry the pain, just as the ghosts in the novel bear witness to the unhealed wounds of the past. The study also demonstrates how Ward’s ghost echo “a kind of heightened memory, much like the ghosts of Toni Morrison” (Quinn). This heightened memory emphasises the necessity of remembering the past to forge a path toward healing and justice in the present and future.

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