Magical Realism in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Abstract

Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing is a polyvocal narrative that touches on death, institutional racism and intergenerational trauma. The novel explores the trials and tribulations of a broken Mississippi family through the perspective of a twelve year old boy named Jojo, his mother Leonie and a ghost by the name of Richie. The family undergoes a journey to Parchman Prison where en route Jojo is exposed to the drug business, racial stereotyping, and the haunting of his grandfather's past. Ward uses the realistic setting of Bois Savage, Mississippi to add fantastical elements of ghosts and voodoo in order to create a juxtaposition between the real and unreal. The effect of this technique allows readers to question the reality of black minorities and to open a sociopolitical discussion of systemic racism's perseverance to today's day and age. Ward uses this approach to deter her predecessors that approached the 1970's with the use of neo-slave narrative. The prerogative of this type of narrative was to enable a first-person narrative of the antebellum slave narrative to maintain authenticity (Dubey 340). However, Ward's magic realism opens an alternative to historic realism by molding African-American spiritual traditions with reality. The addition of the African-American spiritual tradition to the narrative confirms the African identity and instills protection of protagonists like Jojo during his journey to Parchman Prison. As James Mellis writes in his article, "Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Tradition in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad and Jesmyn Ward's Sing Unburied, Sing: "African based spiritual traditions… are a literary trope, a tie to originary African identity, and most importantly, for this essay, as a means of empowerment for characters to control or punish, or as protection from and resistance to a racially oppressive society" (2)." Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Singchallenges early 1970's neo-slave narratives by using the magical realism technique to analyze themes of racism, trauma and African spiritual traditions.

Keywords

magical realism, *black trauma*, *neo-slave narrative*, *spiritualism*, *paranormal activity.*

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a polyvocal narrative that touches on death, institutional racism and intergenerational trauma. The novel explores the trials and tribulations of a broken Mississippi family through the perspective of a twelve year old boy named Jojo, his mother Leonie and a ghost by the name of Richie. The family undergoes a journey to Parchman Prison where en route Jojo is exposed to the drug business, racial stereotyping, and the haunting of his grandfather's past. Ward uses the realistic setting of Bois Savage, Mississippi to add fantastical elements of ghosts and voodoo in order to create a juxtaposition between the real and unreal. The effect of this technique allows readers to question the reality of black minorities and to open a sociopolitical discussion of systemic racism's perseverance to today's day and age. Ward uses this approach to deter her predecessors that approached the 1970's with the use of neo-slave narrative. The prerogative of this type of narrative was to enable a first-person narrative of the antebellum slave narrative to maintain authenticity (Dubey 340). However, Ward's magic realism opens an alternative to historic realism by molding African-American spiritual traditions with reality. The addition of the African-American spiritual tradition to the narrative confirms the African identity and instills protection of protagonists like Jojo during his journey to Parchman Prison. As James Mellis writes in his article, "Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Tradition in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing Unburied, Sing: "*African based spiritual traditions… are a literary trope, a tie to originary African identity, and most importantly, for this essay, as a means of empowerment for characters to control or punish, or as protection from and resistance to a racially oppressive society" (2)." Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* challenges early 1970's neo-slave

narratives by using the magical realism technique to analyze themes of racism, trauma and African spiritual traditions.

Jesmyn Ward utilizes magical realism to analyze racial injustice in the novel. In the second chapter, readers are introduced to Leonie's drug addiction and her ability to see her deceased brother, Given. Given was murdered during a hunting trip after he won a competition against a white colleague. Since his death, Leonie chases his presence whenever she is at a crossroads of poor decision making or in a vulnerable state of mind. Leonie is an absent mother as she struggles with grieving her brother's premature death, missing her convict companion and being a role model to her children. Given's death sets the tone of the novel as Leonie recounts the day Given went up to the Kill and was shot after killing a buck. Ward writes, " The uncle had slapped his son across the face, once and twice. *You fucking idiot,* he'd said. *This ain't the old day.* And then his cousin had put his arms up and mumbled: *He was supposed to lose, Pa*" (Ward 50). Big Joseph's commentary on the old days tells readers that there was a time where killing black people was not an issue and in fact, a normal way of life. Yet, despite the elapse in time, the killing of innocent black minorities goes unchanged. Given's racially charged murder was labeled as a *hunting accident* and in accordance with today's racially biased judicial system, the murderer was given a petty sentence of three years at Parchman and two years of probation. Ward intentionally writes about the murder trial to evoke a reaction of injustice and purposely, uses italics for "hunting accident" to emphasize the lie that closes the case. Given's ghost appears in the novel as a reminder of his premature, heinous death. Megan Ashley Schwartzfager delves into the existence of the paranormal and their significance. She writes in her article, "Ain't no more stories for you here": Vengeful Hauntings and Traumatized Community in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*:" " First,

the fact they never achieved manhood or the sense of community and love that Ward believes is essential to it, makes their deaths almost impossible to grieve, and this feeling is compounded by the fact that neither youth's untimely death receives adequate recognition" (314). In essence, Given's ghost is a physical reminder of the unrecognized injustice of his murder.

Another example of Ward's use of the paranormal in magical realism is her addition of Richie. Richie was a fellow inmate of Jojo's grandfather at Parchman Prison. He endured long, strenuous hours of forced labor for stealing food for his siblings. At the age of 13, Richie surprisingly escaped with another inmate by the name of Blue and was prematurely killed by River to avoid capture and a miserable death. During Richie's narration, Ward uses magical realism elements to describe his afterlife. She writes:

I slept and woke and rose and picked my way through the prison fields, lurked in the barracks, hovered over the men's faces. Tried to find River. He wasn't there. Men left, men returned and left again. New men came. I burrowed and slept and woke in the milky light, my time measured by the passing of all those Black faces and the turning of the earth, until the scaly bird returned and led me to the car, to the boy the same age as me sitting in the back of the car. Jojo. (Ward 136)

One of magical realism's elements is time being unbound. Richie's afterlife has no time constraints and goes through years of the same routine of waking and sleeping to finally arrive in the present with Jojo. His paranormal presence is a significant symbol of racialized trauma as he's stranded in the same place where he died. Despite Parchman Prison being Richie's purgatory, his final resting place is with River, Jojo's grandfather. This is the reason why Richie's first words to Jojo were, " I'm going home" (Ward 131). Schwartzfager writes,

"Richie's ghost having a literal present in the present; symbolizes the closeness of the past in the household. The past is not a distant memory, in fact, it is the framework of this family's connection and social geography" (326). Richie's paranormal presence in the present allows the past to have a presence of burden on the family and in consequence, the inability to move forward. In consequence, Jojo's family is succumbed by racial trauma through the ghost of Given and Richie.

Systemic racism is an undercurrent topic in *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* In one moment in the novel, Jojo's family en route home from Parchman Prison is pulled over by a cop. Leonie is handcuffed and the officer tells Jojo to exit the vehicle. While Jojo is handcuffed, Leonie narrates, "[Jojo is] just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler" (Ward 163). Richie throughout the scenario interjects in fear for Jojo's life as he grimaces and says, "They going to chain you" (Ward 169). Richie's discomfort throughout the encounter with the police depicts the systemic racism that still exists even after many years have passed. In Nicole Dib's "Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*" she discusses the mobilization of Jojo's family and the hurdles they encounter along the way. She writes, "[Richie's] hope of reuniting with River only for them to fall into another situation of captivity by way of a traffic stop is telling of the cyclical violence that black travelers experience" (146). Dib acknowledges that the physical mobilization of the family, despite sounding unrestrained, is far from freedom due to the racially biased law enforcement. Ward's magical realism technique of the paranormal opens a discussion on systemic racism and its effects. Dib also adds, "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" (148). With the use of magical realism, there is a layering of meaning in Ward's writing as she approaches sensitive topics like racial biases, profiling and systemic racism.

Magical realism opens discussion on topics such as racism to address the socio political issues of today. The use of the neo-slave narrative in the late 20th century made its objective clear: to recover the authentic voice of slaves. Due to the limitation of the genre, it became clear that there was a need to execute the same reaction of awareness, but in a different fashion. Magical realism allows Ward to depart from the 20th century narrative realism by critiquing the traditional historiography of contemporary slave narratives (Dubey 340). With the use of the paranormal and African-spiritual traditions, Ward gives voice to the dead that are haunted by their racial trauma and protection to the living against their racially oppressed society. Each scenario found in the novel echoes the sociopolitical issues we face in the 21st century. From police brutality to racial injustice in our judicial system, Ward opens the topic of discussion through the use of magical realism. The deaths of both Richie and Given as two young, black males that die prematurely in two different times, "show that little has changed between the early days of Jim Crow and the post-Hurricane Katrina murder of Given" (317). The fear of being black and traveling has not changed as the Black Lives Matter movement exists today to represent the high rate of black motorists dying at the hands of the police. Dib writes, " [Ward] linkes automobility-the particular mobility derived from one's ability to drive oneself- to a ghostly interpersonal connection that is haunted by racialized injustice that takes place on the road" (134). Ward creates the connection in her novel to today's politics to fill the gaps of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as she captures the core of the current judicial system and the racial biases that take place in everyday traffic stops similar to Jojo's experience.

African spiritual traditions are a recurring theme in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* Magical Realism enables supernatural elements like voodoo to become part of the present. In the novel, it's known that Philomene (Jojo's grandmother) is a renowned midwife with expertise in concoctions and anecdotes to alleviate and/or cure various illnesses. Leonie finds out in chapter two her mother's profession, but more importantly, the ability to possibly see the dead. Philomene says, "I think it runs in the blood, like silt in river water. Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees…Rises up over the water in generations. My mama ain't have it, but heard her talk one time that her sister, Tante Rosalie, did. That it skips from sister to child to cousin" (Ward 40). The use of African-spiritual tradition binds the family together as they create gris-gris bags and create anecdotes to help one another. During one of Leonie's chapters, she explores the walks she would go with her mom and the various teachings she would give regarding the different plants and each of their effects. Philomene teaches Leonie to help herself in the future and more importantly, to pass down the knowledge of their ancestors. Mellis writes, "Ward suggests, African-based spiritual practices offer characters in the novel protection, relief and the key to discovering a sense of identity through their usage" (Mellis 2). Towards the last hike before they reach Parchman, Kayla is sick and starts vomiting in the back seat. Despite Leonie's protest to keep stopping, Misty is overwhelmed by the smell of the vomit. Leonie pulls over and decides to give Kayla Powerade. However, this is no solution since Kayla refuses to drink and if she does, she consecutively vomits. At this moment, Leonie remembers: " Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world" (Ward 102). She struggles to remember her exact words, but she grabs wild blackberries. The insistence to find a remedy for Kayla with the use of her mother's spiritual traditions solidifies an intergenerational connection between all three

women. Mellis writes, " In *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing*, there is no doubt of the reality and power of these practices. In presenting Mam, Pop, Jojo, Kayla and Leonie, Ward shows how African-based supernaturalism can serve to protect and heal even the most traumatized and dysfunctional communities"(Mellis 9). Just as Philomene uses anecdotes to aid in moments of sickness, Jojo's grandfather uses the gris-gris bag as a form of protection. Jojo discovers the gris-gris bag within his recent departure to Parchman. He mentions:

A small bag, so small two could fit in the palm of my hand secreted in the middle of my bundle of clothes…It's smooth and warm, soft to my touch. Feels like leather, and it's tied together with a sinewy leather trip…I find a white feather smaller than my pinkie finger, tipped with blue and slash of black…[an] animal tooth, lined with black in the chewing grooves, sharp like a canine…Then I see a small gray river rock, a little perfect dome…a piece of paper, rolled thin as a fingernail. In slanted, shaky script, in blue ink: Keep this close (Ward 71).

The purpose of the detail is to create the authentic imagery of the traditional, African gris-gris bag. The purpose of the bag is to offer protection and to ward off evil. Since Jojo's grandfather could not come with them, he left the amulet to protect Jojo in his absence. Jojo uses the gris-gris bag during his family's visit to the Deltas. As Leonie's retrieving the package of methamphetamine, Jojo encounters a rabid dog. Jojo searches for the gris-gris bag in his pocket, " My stomach burns. I sneak back around to the front of the house, fingering Pop's bag in my pocket, wondering if that tooth is a racoon's. If it makes me so quiet and quick that even the dog won't hear me when I circle around to the front of the house and ease inside" (Ward 89). The gris-gris bag offers empowerment to Jojo during moments

of vulnerability. Ward's magical realism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* offers an authentic view into African spiritualism and their methodologies used to protect and empower.

In the second half-of the novel upon their departure from Parchman, Jojo uses the gris-gris bag again. The family is pulled over and once the cop asks Jojo to come out of the vehicle, Jojo grows anxious and searches for the gris-gris bag in his pocket for comfort. He says, " Figure if I could feel the tooth, the feather, the note, maybe I could feel those things running through me. Maybe I wouldn't cry. Maybe my heart wouldn't feel like it was a bird, ricocheted off a car midflight, stunned and reeling" (Ward 170). The genuine yearning of comfort from the gris-gris bag nearly causes his own death as the cop raises his gun to Jojo's head. After Kayla's intervention in midst of all the tension, the cop finally reaches into his pocket and finds, as he says, " A damn rock in his pocket" (Ward 166). The unbalance of power and the ignorance of the white police officer is a symbolism of the current society in America. Mellis writes, "However, that Jojo is not only unarmed, but that his protective talisman is regarded as a a 'damn rock' by the potentially deadly agent of the state, speaks to the wide cultural differences between Jojo, Pap, Leonie and Kayla and the deadly white power structure they must survive within, here embodied by the young police officer" (11). As the gris-gris bag nearly kills, yet saves his life: Jojo is nonetheless traumatized by the experience. Between the supernatural elements of the amulet and Richie's ghost presence in the car: there is an overwhelming sense of weakness. Dib writes, "Transport away from the scene does not let Jojo move away from the memory, and the feeling in his body of the violating and nearly lethal encounter lingers and becomes part of his physical memory. Ward further stokes our empathy and our indignation by affirming how this situation nearly resulted in Jojo becoming what Richie is…" (147). The memory of the gun and the handcuffs

on Jojo linger as they drive away from the incident. Nevertheless, Pop's gris-gris bag deters the dangers of incarceration and death.

Another aspect of magical realism within the text is the deathbed ritual of Philomene. Once Leonie returns home from Parchman Prison, she goes directly to see her mother. Leonie observes, " Mama is laying in the bed with her face turned to the wall, and her chest is still, the bones from the spoon of her clavicle close…Her arms are all bone, the skin and thin muscle overlaying them…She swallows, and I feel relief wash through me" (Ward 213). Leonie understands that her mother is withering away and more importantly, her time should have been spent by her side. Philomene requests Leonie to prepare for the deathbed ritual, despite all her efforts to attempt to cure herself through remedies and offerings. Philomene says, " The last mystère. Maman Brigette. Let her come into me. Possess me. She the mother of the dead. The judge. If she come, maybe she can take me with her" (Ward 215). Leonie is then tasked to gather rocks, cornmeal, rum, and cotton for the ritual. She leaves the house overwhelmed with the duty to help her mother's transition to the afterlife. Despite her emotional turmoil, the ritual brings Leonie closer to her family and renews her role as a committed daughter. Mellis writes, "African-based spiritual practices can empower them in a racist society and help create and maintain familial ties, fostering a sense, for most of the characters, of communal belonging" (9). Magical Realism enables spiritual tradition to have a meaning outside of healing anecdotes and protective gris-gris bags. Once Leonie begins reciting the litany, all members of the family are brought together, including her deceased brother Given. Ward writes, " Mama takes one long, ripping breath, her breath and blood and spirit beating frantic as a moth caught in a spider's web…Time floods the room in a storm surge" (Ward 269). Leonie's narration of her mother's passing is an uncontrollable turning

of events for herself and her family. The death of Philomene is a symbol for both a beginning and an end. The end of the matriarch's wisdom and maternal care, but also the beginning of Leonie's spiral into disparity. Her last narrative chapter in the novel ends with the thoughts: "I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe" (Ward 274). Ward uses magical realism techniques like spiritual traditions to mend wounds and bring together Jojo's fragmented family.

Jesmyn Ward's magical realism techniques touch on trauma and its effects in Jojo's family. From the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to death being a topic of discussion for Jojo and his grandfather, River. Throughout their time together, we become acquainted with River's past and his time at Parchman Prison. He discusses the harsh labor, his time as a dog handler and his dear friend, Richie. Richie is a twelve year old boy that shares a cell with River during his sentence at Parchman and goes through a difficult time in meeting the laborious demand. River becomes a proxy to Richie's father as he aids him in moments of danger and takes care of him after whippings. River carries the boy's memory with him even after years have gone by and now that Jojo is in the same age group of Richie, River instills with him the same skills to protect and to be self-sufficient. Jojo admires his grandfather and aspires to meet his expectations on maturity. As the novel progresses, we gather more details on River and Richie's past, but never receive the end of Richie's story? As Jojo's grandmother says, " Your pop don't know how to tell a story straight. You know that? He tell the beginning but don't tell the end. Or he leave out something important in the middle" (Ward 67). Jojo thus holds onto the fragmented stories of Richie as he recalls them throughout his journey to Parchman. Upon their arrival, Richie smells the blood of River and finds the path to Jojo. As they journey together back to Pop's house, Richie begins

interrogating Jojo about his grandfather and their relationship back at Parchman. During their conversation, Richie begins to display signs of child-like behavior: animation and hunger for love and attention. Ward builds the momentum through these small conversations and heightens Richie's urgency to meet River. Once they reach Pop's house, Jojo narrates:

I'm looking at Richie, who's looking at Pop, who's looking out to the black yard, the far road. The boy's face shows in fire, and I ain't never seen that look before…Richie looks at Pop: all the hope on his face, plain in the circle of his mouth, his wide-open eyes…and he's a cat then, fresh-born, milk-hungry, creeping towards someone he'd die without (Ward 220).

Richie's demeanor changes completely from the innocent child in the car with Jojo. Richie's quick metamorphosis depicts his true state: a starving child. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Richie is a symbol of racial trauma, "as he helps to clarify the risks and stakes of being targeted as a young Black boy in the American South" (Schwartzfager 318). But, Richie is also a symbol of a disparity as he seeks closure from the purgatory he's endured for what seems an eternity. Schwartzfager writes, "Richie's pursuit of knowledge about his death and his profound emotional need for parental figures are ultimately destructive impulses that threaten to destroy the present by dragging in the past " (Schwartzfager 324). Ward's magical realism technique allows trauma to be represented through the paranormal presence. Richie's objective comes to fruition when Jojo interrupts his grandfather breaking up one of the pens. Jojo requests to hear the final part of Richie's story at Parchman. As Pop recounts the story, Richie is uncomfortable as his jaw clicks back and forth and his teeth grind. On the other hand, "all the lines of [Pop's] face, sliding against each other like the fault lines of the great fractured earth. What undergirds it: pain" (Ward 253). By the end of

the story, Richie lets out a shriek of horror and morphs into a blackhole until he disappears. Pop drops to his knees and his back quivers as Jojo hugs him. River's trauma has been spoken and there is no subjection to secrecy anymore. In essence, Richie's voice is the missing narrative required in order for Pop to embrace the past and begin healing. As Richie concurs in his narration, " 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 that shirt hang new, except for the tails" (Ward 157).

Along with the racial and psychological trauma, Ward uses magical realism techniques to describe the afterlife. During Philomene's passing, she encounters Richie attempting to possess her body. She mentions, " Pulling all the weight of history behind him…Like a cotton sack full of lead…But still a boy…Hungry for love…Say he want me to be his mama…Not…Your… Mama" (Ward 265). Richie's anger from River's betrayal and loss of a father figure forces him to take the family's matriarch. As Schwartzfager writes, "Instead of finding closure in the completion of his story, he finds only a need for vengeance, hoping to take part of Pop's family and make it his own in order to find the love and sense of home that he no longer feels he had with Pop" (326). After Given appears and bids him farewell along with Jojo, Richie disappears and Philomene can now transition to the afterlife. Ward carefully makes death a lifting of the veil as Given approaches Philomene. Ward writes, "Given's hand flutters above her face like he is a groom and Mama is a bride and he has pulled the veil from her head and let it fall back so they can look upon each other with love, clear and sweet as the air between them" (Ward 269). The death of Philomene and witnessing her transition from human to spirit, conserves the family as they wail in sorrow from their

loss. The afterlife is a technique of magical realism used to create a comfort of an ending and a message of unity for Jojo's family.

By the end of the novel, Jojo and Kayla go to the forest behind their Pop's house and encounter a tree filled with ghosts. Their souls emanate their individuals traumas, " *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 to death while I listened tom ybabies playing with her in the yard*" (Ward 282). All souls lost due to violence that left them stuck on earth, unable to find home. Ward creates this image of wandering souls to depict the countless black lives that have died without cause by the hands of white people. Richie is found curled in the same tree along the roots. Despite his inability to transition to the afterlife, he is unable to go inside Pop's house. He says, " I can't. Come Inside. I tried. Yesterday. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole. Makes it so I can come in…You've changed. Ain't no need" (Ward 281). In essence, Richie fed on Jojo to reveal the ending of his life story. Now that he's aware of his death, his existence persists along with the other ghosts due to the continuing violence against the black body. Ward's finale is a mixture of magical realism's elements of the paranormal and spiritual traditions to encompass the African-American struggle of racial justice and trauma.

In spite of Ward's confirmation that the novel is in the genre of magical realism, James Mellis believes the novel's genre is in African-spiritualism. He mentions, " [Ward] draws on a long tradition of African-based spiritual traditions in African American literature…[the novel] explores the legacy and repercussions of the African diaspora and its effects" (Mellis 2). In result, Ward uses African-spiritualists, "as a locus for power, protection and protest in a racially oppressive society" (Mellis 2). Mellis believes that magical realism is too generic a

genre for the specificities of African spiritualism: amulets, voodoo, rootwork, and hoodoo. Magical realism tends to be used for Latin-American narratives as Mellis mentions (i.e, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years In Solitude*) that used magical realism to criticize their oppressive societies and politicians. In this case, Mellis defines *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as its own form of magical realism labeled: African-based spiritual fiction. Mellis writes, "[This genre is] defined here as African-American realist fiction with African-based spiritual and religious elements (particularly Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork) incorporated into the universe of the work" (Mellis 3). Overall, Mellis believes Ward's technique deserves recognition beyond magical realism and should be its own genre of African-based spiritualist fiction. However, it's imperative to mention that Ward does not solely rely on these techniques in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Mellis relies on African-spiritualist traditions to further her argument, but there is more than voodoo and rootwork that contribute to Jojo's family. The paranormal is a universal element that occurs in magical realism that does not pertain solely to African-based spiritual fiction. The role of the paranormal is to physicalize the racial trauma of Jojo's family. Despite magical realism's potency in Latin American literature, Ward can also challenge the status quo and make magical realism African-American based. Using the freedom of magical realism, Ward enables herself to explore territory beyond African-based spiritualism. Her prerogative in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is more than solidifying the African identity. The overarching theme in the novel is finding homecoming. In the literal sense in Jojo returning to Pops, but also in the spiritual sense for his grandmother and the other paranormal figures. To place Ward in the confines of African-based spiritual fiction, it's placing Ward in the confines of a sub-literary genre when *Sing, Unburied, Sing* explores beyond the communicating with the dead and wild blackberry anecdotes. The premise of

magical realism is to bring the supernatural into the present, in order to question its existence. This analysis leads to further exploration of sociopolitical issues such as institutional racism, racial profiling, and drug abuse in minority communities. All subjects which Ward incorporates into *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to push the boundaries of the traditional neo-slave narrative while questioning government institutions. One item in Mellis' article that resounds with Ward's magical realism techniques: "For those looking for healing and community in America, the way forward may be to look to and embrace the past" (Mellis 13).

Ward's use of magical realism technique enables her to create a narrative on African diaspora through the use of the paranormal and spiritual traditions. Both methods bring topics such as racism, psychological and racial trauma to the forefront. Ward challenges her predecessors of the 1970's by straying away from the neo-slave narrative by going beyond the boundaries of realism. With the implementation of the supernatural, Ward unveils different techniques to create a juxtaposition between reality and fiction. In effect, creating a discussion of the sociopolitical issues of the current state of the country: systemic racism, drug abuse in minority communities and racial disparities in policing. Through the use of the paranormal, characters such as Given become a symbol of racial injustice. His premature death, similar to Richie, are both examples of Ward's attempt to make them a representation of trauma. In accordance with their symbolism, they are literal as well since both ghosts are able to be seen and communicate with the living. The objective behind their merge with the present is to question the significance of their presence: to protect, to find love and to seek closure. Homecoming is what brings all the characters together by the end of the novel when Philomene dies. Through spiritual traditions, the family preserves its bond to use their powers of rootwork, hoodoo and communicating with ghosts to lay their matriarch to rest. All in all,

Jojo's family accomplishes to find home as they embrace the past, remember the present and look forward to the future.

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