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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

Waking up the Ghosts: Trauma Resurgence as a Possibility in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)

Le réveil des fantômes : la résurgence du traumatisme comme vivier des possibles dans Sing, Unburied, Sing *(2017) de Jesmyn Ward*

Myrto Charvalia

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Myrto Charvalia

PLAN

TEXTE

Introduction

1 The publication of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* granted Jesmyn Ward the National Book Award for Fiction for a second time, but most importantly it rendered the transgenerational predicament of black families' lives in the South more visible, fortifying the sense of hope to the people of her community. Aligning with Alexandre Gefen's affirmation that contemporary writing[1] privileges its "therapeutical" angle (11), Ward's novel bears on revisiting the post-plantation South, and restoring the traumatic past of mass incarceration. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* enters into the realm of the literature of reparations and empowerment, as the novel seeks to "patch" the profound wound that chronic injustice regarding minorities and the generalized feeling of antiblackness have left in the history of the United States. For Gefen, "identifying, and acting upon global wounds […] are at the epicenter of contemporary literary projects", a double inducement whose genealogy can be traced in "diverse aesthetic traditions", namely in social empathy, in what he calls "mystic empathy", in coping with grief or in writing about catastrophes (11, 13, my translations).

Although Ward's novel revisits intergenerational trauma, it does not seem to conform with the examples that Gefen has pinpointed. The aforementioned literary explorations mostly focus on singularities, which eventually give access to the communal. Ward's point of departure, nonetheless, is the sedimentation of trauma and injustice that a family faces—a miniature societal schema and prerequisite to the formation of more complex entities—an example that she uses to shed light upon community empowerment.

2 Notwithstanding its "therapeutical" or "reparative" nature, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is far from being a "soothing" novel. Ward chooses very carefully the identities of her characters, providing a spatiotemporally heraldic book; the rapid sedimentation of the present (or what Pierre Nora called the "acceleration of history" [2]), as well as the tracing of future expectations, spring from the re-emergence of the past. In the novel, the past is not only echoed, it re-emerges in an embodied way with the return of Richie, the ghost of Pop's close friend from his prison time at Parchman.

3 The use of the ghost in the novel serves multiple purposes: it bonds the past with the present and future of the narration; Richie's first-person diegesis transforms the book into a polyphonic account of individual and social trauma; simultaneously, it adds another layer to the depiction of a multicultural South where the presence of spirits surpasses the "supernatural" or the "folkloric" and becomes part of the cultural specificities of the area. Most significantly, however, Richie encompasses a multimodal kind of resurgence.

4 Resurgence being the main hinge or point of departure, in this paper I wish to explore what is at stake when the trope of the specter, a commonplace in Southern Gothic, [3] is revisited in contemporary fiction. [4] Placing *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in the Southern Gothic tradition is relevant but such venture would call for a diligent elaboration (lengthier than this text). Instead, the focal point of this analysis is to read Richie's apparition as a textual leap which surpasses individual trauma as well as the supernatural and the grotesque—recurrent elements of the Southern Gothic—to provide another interpretative possibility. Similar to Beloved in Morrison's eponymous novel, his spectral resurgence underpins collective racial injustice, and the "disposability" of black bodies. The profound sense

of annihilation will be discussed as the initial trigger of, and the locus of preparation for Richie's apparition. Related to the mendacity and doggedness [5] of the spectral figure, Richie's mischievous resurgence and eventual ostracism will be also explored. Eventually, the figure of the specter or the revenant will be associated to Gefen's elaboration on the possibilities of the literature of reparations (11).

"The goat is inside out": spectral preparations

5 There is something unsettling that permeates the opening scene of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Jojo, a thirteen-year-old mixed-race adolescent, follows his grandfather Pop/River Red outside the house to help him slaughter a goat and prepare its meat:

> I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled. […] I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday. I grab the door so it don't slam, ease it into the jamb. (1)

In Jojo's articulation, death and birth merge dialectically. Wanting to prove that he is mature and courageous enough, he accompanies his grandfather in the killing and evisceration of the goat on the very day of his birthday. Simultaneously, not wanting to wake up Kayla, his baby sister, and Mam, his grandmother who is suffering from cancer, he tries to exit the house as gently as possible. The novel begins with the promise of an uninterrupted calm tinged by rustic tones of southern life, but as Jojo and Pop are about to slaughter the goat, a subtle yet unsettling energy, an unhomely thing seems to lurk behind the scene of initiation: "I try to look like this is normal and boring" (6), he says, but the act of killing will very soon bring into play Jojo's understandable vulnerability as a child:

> I know it's stomach and intestines, but all I can see is […] the soft eye of the goat and then I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then I am out of the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside. My face is hot, but my arms are cold. (6)

Initially, Jojo is desirous to show his experienced steadiness. By eviscerating the animal, he thinks that he faces the image of death. But the grotesque scene, tinged with the color of hot animal blood and the foul smell of the goat's entrails, makes him empty his stomach. Referring to desire and the state of the abject, Julia Kristeva contents how "apprehensive, [the subject's] desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (4). It seems that Jojo is himself unconsciously "apprehensive" of the animal's fungibility; his vomiting is a coping mechanism for the grotesque eeriness he experiences since his young self cannot yet accommodate the experience of death. Hence, the evocative scene of the goat's evisceration or Jojo's failed initiation into "death-learning" are followed by his need for storytelling: the young narrator asks his grandfather to tell the story of his past—a prison story that he has repeated to Jojo many times but that never seems to come to its end: "Pop, you going to tell me about you and Stag again?" (16). In other words, the image of blood resuscitates a need for reassurance, which Jojo tries to quench by asking to hear his grandfather's story. Most importantly, however, the goat's and Jojo's "turning inside out" connote the spectral re-emergence of Richie and Given further on in the novel. Both the dissecting and gutting of the animal and the movement of the fluids from the inside to the outside could metaleptically hint at the "revenant's" movement whose presence springs from the invisible chronotope of the past to the visible present. In other words, his abjection could be an indicator, or a "sign" to use Avery Gordon's words, of an elusive event that permeates the scene to the point of haunting it (Gordon 8).

6 Greg Chase reads Pop's lesson as a "modeling [of] the art of humanely killing a goat", an art that Jojo needs to master in order to survive in the environment of antiblackness of the novel (212). The boy's invisibility is accentuated from the opening chapter of the book, where Jojo reflects on the behavior of his racist grandfather, Joseph, "the man who ain't never once said my name" and his father, Michael: "Back then I didn't realize how Michael noticed and didn't notice, how sometimes he saw me and then, whole days of weeks, he didn't" (10). Pop's lesson could be an act of empowerment of his young grandson, but could also allude to death's proximity, a fact that has permeated Pop's lifetime and is proved to be true for Jojo too who almost gets shot by a policeman on the family's way back home from Parchman.

Isolated by the policeman, scared Jojo reaches in his pocket to touch the gri-gri bag his grandfather made for him, but the officer translates his gesture differently, believing that the boy carries a gun:

> I feel Pop's bag in my shorts, and I reach for it. 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. [...] *But then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me. Kicking me. Yelling at me to get down in the grass. Cuffing me.* Asking me, "What you got in your pocket, boy?" as he reaches for Pop's bag. (170, emphasis added)

During the goat's preparation, Pop's gestures have a gentle quality in them, as if the animal's death was an inevitability which he then interrelates to Pop's tormented past and the unjust but inevitable death of his son, Given. Boasting about his hunting skills, Given goes hunting with some white youths, but when he manages to win a bet and kill a buck with his bow first, Michael's slow-witted and irritable cousin ends up shooting him fatally. The sheriff dismisses Given's death as a "hunting accident" (50), concealing under the heavy gravestone of history yet another unprosecuted case of a young black man's murder. Lucy Arnold goes as far as to say that Given's death aligns with the dehumanizing state where "a human is substituted for the intended prey" (229), a logic reminiscent of slavery. From then on, his parents, Philomène and River, will lead a life of bitter grieving, and his sister, Leonie, will suffer from the loss of her brother that re-emerges as a ghost every time she consumes drugs: "Three years ago, I did a line and saw Given for the first time" (51).

7 The disposability of the animal's life, which is soon downgraded to meat, is paralleled to the disposability of black life in the inhospitable South, where a single instance of the boldness of youth may cut a black man's life short. Unfortunately, Given is not the only absence River has had to endure in his lifetime. At the age of fifteen, River was sent to Parchman penitentiary for sheltering his mentally unstable and delinquent brother, Stag. During his years as a prisoner, River befriended a twelve-year-old boy, Richie, who was sent to prison for having stolen food for his sick and famished siblings: "Richie, he was called. Real name was Richard, and he wasn't nothing but twelve years old. He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat" (21). Richie's passing acquires the nature of a traumatic burden in Pop's

heart which he carries in the form of a fragmented story into his late years.

8 Consequently, Jojo's somatic vulnerability gives access, although partially, to Pop's traumatic past. The act of vomiting functions as a metonymic reenactment of the suffering black body, an element that has impregnated Pop's life from his teenage years well into parenthood. As a matter of fact, Pop loses his friend, Richie, to a raging lynching mob: "They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing" (255). To prevent Richie from utmost agony, Pop decides *he* will be the executor. Years later, his son, Given, will be killed for having bragged about his bow skills and having won the bet, Michael's white cousin shooting him dead out of jealousy. Like Given's body which hit the floor next to the dead buck, an image rendering animal and their death equal, Richie's dead body lay next to lynched Blue, who had been skinned like an animal after "they […] had cut pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose" (254). Hence, when gutting out the goat, Pop's careful gestures elucidate pieces of a past where the black body "[was] literally disassembled, through ritual lynching" to the point of losing its human characteristics (Lloyd 248). The idea of death being more urgent than life for black youths, whether at the hands of a lynch mob or Pop, consolidates the notion of human fungibility. This translates Richie and Given's deaths into the consequences of white people's shortcomings. Consequently, Richie's unburied body, and subsequent lingering state, together with the injustice behind his death, contribute to his spectral transformation.

9 Announcing the resurgence of the past through bodily rejection is recurrent in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*. In fact, in Ward's fiction, vomit acquires the position of an overarching trope that can be traced to her earlier novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), where Esch's father falls sick and his body abjures to hold any fluids in. His sickness foreshadows the ravaging hurricane Katrina which mirrors his condition accordingly. In fact, when Esch contemplates on her destroyed neighborhood, she describes how the bay from her childhood memories has now "swallowed" (Ward 2011, 178) her neighborhood, Bois Sauvage, and spat it out in pieces:

> With all the trees gone, it is easy to see that we are approaching the train tracks, the same train tracks that carried the trains we heard blowing raucously when we were younger, swimming in the same oyster-lined bay that came in and swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine, and *vomited it out in pieces*. (*Salvage* 197; emphasis added)

10 In *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*, stomach sickness announces the arrival of another uncomfortable incident. As in the opening scene, the trope permeates the family's long journey to Parchman for Michael's release too. Unable to hold any fluids down, Kayla's sick stomach, her vomiting, could be read as a rejection of the problematic mother figure [6] but also as a preparation for something unfathomable, or "indigestible", like the blue Powerade she drinks, which makes her vomit a blue fluid (100). Indeed, on their way back from the road trip, Jojo and Kayla realize that a liminal presence has accompanied them in the car; it is undeniably that of Richie, who, having felt Pop's generational presence, has been resuscitated. His re-emergence happens gradually: when Kayla sees birds picking the ground for worms, Jojo realizes that the shadowy figures with the benched backs look like humans:

> I look out at the fields but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second, I see men bent at the waist, [...] looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me. (125)

Jojo is unaware of the signification of the men in the fields that look like a "murder of crows" and pays little attention to the "one shorter than the rest" but for the not-yet-ghost Richie, the scene constitutes a point of anagnorisis. However, his re-emergence, which will be discussed in the next part, encompasses more than an individual story of sadness and brutality; in fact, I read his haunting exhumation as a possibility, or a source of empowerment for the new generation, as I will argue later in this paper.

Ghosts, social haunting and the meanness of the dead

11 The reasons behind Richie's resurgence are neither auspicious, nor do they chime with Given's. Given's ghost is the product of drug-induced hallucination and his sister's incomplete mourning; he re-emerges only when Leonie uses narcotics, something that Marco Petrelli interprets as a way to protect Leonie when she is in danger or about to take the wrong decision, providing an "ethereal yet enduring support" (322). These traits yield a beneficial angle to his ghostly presence. Despite his hallucinatory point of departure, he represents the void that his absence has caused to Leonie. He, therefore, is a personal ghost: Leonie's lost "object of love", whose loss she has not yet processed (Abraham and Torok 427). Given's fabrication by his sister is further confirmed by Abraham and Torok's statements that ghosts are human inventions made in order to "objectify" […] "the lacuna" that "the concealment of the object of love's part of life has created in us" [7] (427, my translation). Failed mourning makes Leonie carry her dead brother inside her, in the form of a crypt (427). Richie, however, does not belong to this category of spectral entities. Even if he represents Pop's traumatic past of cruel, juvenile incarceration at Parchman, his emergence extends to the communal level.

12 The aftermaths of tracking down Pop's grandchildren and his insisting on "going home" (*Sing* 131) are as dubious as the very notion of "home" in Ward's novel. While at Parchman, Richie's urgent decision to escape is inspired by his need to return "home" (126); nevertheless, even after what he used to call "home" has been effaced, he clings to the remaining substitute of family, namely, Pop or River Red, as he was nicknamed in prison: "Him, my big brother. Him, my father", and "That I knew him when he was called River Red" (135, 136). The absence of home and Richie's desperate need to belong somewhere draw his spirit to Leonie's car. For the ghost's reclamation of a "place" in the world, temporal circumstances further facilitate his resurgence. Avery Gordon contends that being in a spectral state also "affects being in time" which means that liminal entities transgress the accepted temporal conditions of present, past

and future (xvi). In chapter six, Richie describes how before coming back to the present, he lingered weightless in a liminal space:

> In the beginning, I woke in a stand of young pine trees on a cloudy, *half-lit day*. I could not remember how I came to be crouching in the pine needles, soft and sharp as boar's hair under my legs. *There was no warmth or cold there. Walking was like swimming* through tepid gray water. *I paced in circles.* I don't know why I stayed in that place […]. (134, emphasis added)

Nonetheless, upon remembering Pop, "[Richie] drop[s] from [his] flight, the memory pulling [him] to earth" (136). The "magnetic" power of traumatic memory, so powerful it outweighs forgetfulness, raises specters and alters the notion of time (Gordon xvi). What differentiates Richie's rise from Given's is that the former's is related to a socially, rather than individually, unavowable fact. For Gordon, traumatizing events—in this case, mass incarceration and insufficient law enforcement—are sources of haunting, as "to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects" (190). After all, ghosts are only "signs" that designate that something larger, haunting, is taking place, as she states at the beginning of her groundbreaking book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (8).

13 Temporal circumstances do not only include Richie's memory reacquisition, as I argued earlier, but also Pop's state. Mam's health has deteriorated greatly, and the potential repercussions of Michael's homecoming can only be seen with great skepticism. In a word, with Pop's home under siege, Richie's resurgence not only intensifies the family's peripeteia, but has been induced by its very "ill" state. As Gordon suggests: "These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view" (xvi). With Pop preoccupied by the new problems that have arisen in the household, she pushes his traumatic past aside, a gesture that renders Richie even more obstinate.

14 Initially, the ghost returns in an attempt to belong somewhere, to "go home" as he repetitively claims (*Sing* 126, 131, 255). His pursuit carries the egotism and malevolence concomitant to the "revenant" in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Drawing on the stage

directions of *Hamlet*: "Enter the Ghost, Exit the Ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before", Derrida elaborates on the spaciotemporal specificity of the specter: "A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because *it begins by coming back*" (13, emphasis added). Having returned to the present, Richie urges Jojo to persuade his grandfather to confide in him the end of his story, namely Richie's death at Parchman, a fragment that Pop refuses to unveil. Richie explains to the young boy that the reason he needs to know the entire story is because it will help him to get back home, but his statement is dubious:

> "I guess I didn't make it." Richie laughs, and it's a dragging, limping chuckle. Then he turns serious, his face night in the bright sunlight. "But I don't know how. *I need to know how.*" He looks up at the roof of the car. "Riv will know." "*It's how I get home.*" (181, 182, emphasis added)

Eventually, when his grandfather shares the end of the story he explains that during his last interaction with Richie, he promised to take him home, only to kill him with his knife: [8] "'I'm going home, Riv?' […] 'Yes, Richie, I'm a take you home', I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck" (*Sing* 255). In lieu of leaving Richie suffer in the hands of the lynching mob, Pop kills his friend. By placing it in the context of Jim Crow-era Parchman, Greg Chase alludes to the possibility Pop has to get rewarded or even freed for having killed a black delinquent, since his "act […] could easily be read by prison authorities as contributing to their project of racial control" (212). Nevertheless, the old man is driven by remorse for many years after: "I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out" (256). Another act of violence with similar consequences, committed for the purpose of agency is traced in Morrison's *A Mercy*, where "minha mãe" gives away her daughter Florens to Jacob Vaark, as she sees in him the possibility of a life away from the obscenities and sexual abuse of D'Ortega's tobacco plantation: "Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes" (*A Mercy* 158). Her seven-year-old daughter is unable to read through her mother's act of abandonment, an event

that haunts both mother and daughter for life. To draw a parallel, unable to understand that Pop offered Richie a dignified and less painful death, Richie resorts to repressing the circumstances around his death from his memory. Consequently, the fact that for black people death and abandonment acquire the status of an ultimatum transcends time. To wit, similar mechanisms around agency are used both in pre-national America, in the case of *A Mercy*, and in post-plantation United States, in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*.

15 Chronic injustice and black life fungibility truly contribute to Richie's spectral profile that goes beyond gothic or supernatural traits. First he is bound to the social violence that requires a 12-year-old boy who stole food to be sent to Parchman—a place that years after Michael describes as "no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference. This a place for the dead" (*Sing* 96). But Richie's specter encompasses not only his individual strife and tortuous life in prison, it is also emblematic of the lives of all those black people who were lynched, tortured, raped, silenced, enslaved. His rising makes him a "social figure" (Gordon xvi) that has "register[ed] the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present" (Gordon 8). Hence, the specter transcends its representational cocoon—dead Richie—and instead becomes a point of conflation that Gordon calls a "dense site" where "history and subjectivity make social life" (8).

16 Spectral resurgence echoes historic injustice toward black and ethnic minority people; nevertheless, the mendacity that characterizes spectral entities persists in Richie's case too. As psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have theorized, the phantom's resurgence is not related to the uncovering of the truth, but to the maintenance of a buried secret. Resonating with Abraham and Torok's work, Colin Davis also argues that "ghosts are liars" whose eventual plan is to further repress the secret in question that haunts the future generation and not simply the carrier: "its effects are designed to mislead the haunted subject and to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery" (Davis 10). Thus, transgenerational trauma takes the form of a secret transferred among a family or community, in this case, the existence of secret in Richie's death is known to Jojo, but because the secret is never really shared, its haunting power eventually prevails, leading to its transformation into a "phantom".[9]

The phantom is then known to the child, who soon becomes a "phantom carrier" (Berthin 5).

17 Howbeit, after learning the truth of his death, Richie's ghost will not go away; in fact, he will try to disrupt the fragile balance in Jojo's family so as to prevail. With Jojo being haunted by Richie, Pop's secret eventually emerges to the surface as the ghost's personal request. Similar motifs can be traced in many ghost stories, namely in *Hamlet*: the ghost of the dead king does not simply return to unveil the truth of his poisoning to his son, but to haunt him asking for revenge. Accordingly, in *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter re-emerges to visit her, an act that leads to a longed for anagnorisis. Nonetheless, after tasting Sethe's motherly nurture, Beloved's ghost becomes insatiable: "[Denver] saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved […], everything except her basket-fat stomach" (285). Beloved threatens Sethe's physical and mental health (292), as Sethe becomes "listless and sleepy with hunger [to the point that] the flesh between her […] forefinger and thumb fade" (285); Beloved also moves Paul D out of household (134); and isolates Denver who becomes the observer of her mother's demise (285–286).

18 Both in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* and in *Beloved*, the unquenchable perseverance of the specter leads to its ostracism. Once he has taken hold of his full story, Richie turns to Pop's loved ones. Vainly trying to quench his thirst for belonging, the ghost will not leave; instead it seeks a new mother figure in Pop's dying wife, Philomène/Mam: "'He want Mam!' [Michaela] screams" and "'Says he want me to be his mama'" (262, 265). Found hanging "half off the bed, half on" (263), Mam is attacked by Richie, the "bird" that only Kayla can see in the bedroom, which is now permeated by the eerie smell of death: "The room smells like Mama has been turned inside out. Like piss and shit and blood" (263). Using the same olfactory and visual imagery as at the beginning of the novel, Ward prepares the reader for Mam's scene of passing. Already preyed upon by Richie and her illness, Mam is conquered and her deathbed transforms into a liminal space where ghosts become visible: at first Leonie can only see her brother's ghost but soon she will discern the figure of the "black bird" Kayla refers to:

> There's no time. This moment done ate it all up: the past, the future. Do I say the words? I blink, and up on the ceiling there is a boy, a boy with the face of a toddler. I blink again, sand scouring my eye, and there is nothing. (267)

Eventually ushering "Maman Brigitte, Mother of all the Gede. Mistress of the cemetery and mother of all the dead" (268), Leonie manages to put an end to Mam's unnatural suffering with the help of her Hoodoo traditional knowledge. Her litany redresses the initial interstitial state of time: "Time floods the room in a storm surge" (269), helping her ailing mother to leave the world and the ghosts that haunt her. Leonie's litany manages to terminate Mam's suffering as her son, Given "come[s] with the boat" to get her (269), but it is not clear if Richie's ghost has been affected in the same way. As the latter has started haunting Jojo even before his apparition through Pop's stories, his conjuring has yet to fully take place. Instead, a few days later, the animals of the forest, whose voices are audible to Jojo, bring the news of Richie's return, or, more precisely, the news of his static state: "Another day, a large white snake drops onto the path in front of me […] The rasp of scales against bark: *The boy floats and wanders. Still stuck*" (280).

Haunting as a possibility

19 Richie's resurgence even after he has been ousted from the house could be interpreted in various ways: "Until I see the boy laying, curled into the roots of a great live oak, looking half-dead and half-sleep, and all ghost" (280). Still visible to Jojo, Richie's needy specter lurks in the forest for its next chance to belong somewhere, namely the family's next moment of weakness—something that is arguably possible as after her mother's death, Leonie spends less and less time sober with her children. Looking weakened, "half-dead, half-sleep", Richie's banishment resembles the end of *Beloved* after the neighborhood's women come to conjure her out of 124 Bluestone Road. Her visible traces are gone and yet her ghost has not fully disappeared:

> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. *The rest*

> *is weather.* Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but the wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. (*Beloved* 324; emphasis added)

"Curled into the root of a great live oak" Richie's mingling with the forest's vegetation, where he "floats and wanders" (280), echoes Beloved's movement out of the house and her transformation into "weather": into the "unaccounted for" and barely noticeable backdrop of history and social memory. And although "by and by all trace is gone" and everything is gradually forgotten, the specter of Beloved is dislocated but not completely gone. As a matter of fact, since the only remainder of Beloved's communal exorcism is mere "weather", her liminality acquires an all-encompassing quality. This idea could be reinforced by Christina Sharpe's exploration of weather, for whom it is "the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (104). Thus, "weather" and the atmospheric shifts of nature carry the haunting memory of antiblack violence that refuses to be completely effaced, instead it becomes unnoticeably ubiquitous.

20 By the end of the book, Richie tries to attain "home" anew and this time by becoming part of the "song": "'I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could'—the word sounds like a ripped rag—'become something else. Maybe, I could. Become. The song.'" (281). The song is an element that had been scarcely explored up to that moment in the novel although it features in the title. Richie's initial resurgence has caused great trouble to Jojo's family. It shocks Leonie and causes her violent feat against her son instead of articulating her thoughts: "*What you seen, boy, what you seen?*" (272). It disappoints Mam who wished the first ghost she would see upon her last living moments would be Given's: "'I always thought—' […] 'It would be your brother.' […] 'The first dead I see …'" (265). And it brings great pain to Pop who has to cope with the loss of his wife at the same time as the terrible memories of his prison times are resuscitated:

> […] looking where she looked when she died, his eyes staring, heard him calling her name, a name I hadn't heard said since before the cancer: *Philomène*. And then: *Phillie*. And then I knew what he was doing when he thought us asleep. (279)

As much as this is true, his haunting comes together with a possibility for resilience and, eventually, change. This hope can be traced throughout Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* where, as she suggests, haunting opens the door for "something-to-be-done", an element that differentiates haunting from trauma, she argues (Gordon xvi).

21 Undoubtedly, by the end of the book Leonie's alienation, together with the embracing of her drug-addiction leave but small space for hope. Her fall has been carefully constructed throughout the novel, at first indicated in her mitigated interest in her children's welfare during the trip; and then, in her failure to practice the traditional knowledge that her healer mother tried to pass down to her. Conquered by her unfinished grief of family members, her figure concentrates a sense of rejection and futility. She is afflicted by the gravitational forces of loneliness, drug addiction and social exclusion to such an extent that Leonie vacillates in a liminal state where she rejects all social roles and physical functions: "*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*" (*Sing* 274). But it is because of the mother figure's alienation that her children find ways of self-agency. Jojo supports his sister ever so actively, and, most importantly, two-year-old Kayla manages to "sing" Richie home, impersonating the resilience of future generations when it comes to facing the past or the uncertainty of the future.

22 Kayla's song echoes Gefen's statement about reparatory narratives, as new writers seek to rewrite what was historically left out and to give voice to those silenced—in a word, to "sing" the little that is left of history's "cenotaph" (Gefen 222). "When the writer comes too late to intercede in matters of the present", Gefen poignantly suggests, "then it is the wounds of the past that he aims at healing" (221, my translation). Ward transposes the task of healing to Kayla. But before exploring her contribution toward the end of the novel, it should be underlined that ghostly resurgence would not lead to new possibilities but to obstructions, had Mam not bequeathed her traditional knowledge of Hoodoo and Haitian Vodou practices, to Leonie and, indirectly, to her grandchildren. Jojo and Kayla manage to see something that for the rest of the characters remains invisible, impalpable, non-existent. They see Richie's transformation from an invisible bird into a ghost in human shape; Jojo is able to converse with him, despite being unable to make him go: "You got what you

came for. Now get" (268). One of the key characteristics of Hoodoo is that it seeks to seal the foundations of community through family by strengthening their sense of "spiritual belonging" (Arnold 226). This is exactly what Mam and Pop have accomplished through their methodical nurturing, encouraging their grandchildren to be available or well disposed toward "otherness". Besides, the different African spiritual practices on the American Gulf Coast are characterized by the "intertwined relationship between human and non-human" (227) which reinforces their availability to events that are seen as supernatural, fictitious or even fake in Western epistemology. This relationship is extensively explored in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*; from the very beginning Jojo is able to listen to the animals speak or think, an ability that was passed down by Mam: "When I was younger, my mama complained about her stomach, how she had ulcers. They was sounding to me, saying, *We eat*, *we eat*, *we eat*; I was confused and kept asking her if she was hungry" (41).

23 Jojo and Kayla's engaging with their spiritual heritage throughout the novel functions as a preparation for the last chapter. As shown earlier, Richie's ghost has merged with the dense vegetation of the forest, expanding next to Pop's line of property. Richie explains to Jojo that he thought Pop's testimony would help him attain home and disappear, instead, he is indeterminately blocked in the present: "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" (*Sing* 281). The ghost is bound to its liminality, but its inability to surpass its traumatic past further corroborates its collectivity. Richie says that "there has to be some need, some lack", confirming Gordon's elaboration on haunting as something more than individual trauma. Indeed, Richie's ghost is bound to linger on earth exactly because his resurgence is not exclusively linked to Pop's and Richie's forced incarceration stories. Instead, Richie's ghost is elevated, encompassing the "law enforcement specter" in its borderline presence Lloyd explains (247), or becoming, according to Petrelli, "a reluctant symbol of unredressed anti-Black violence" (322). To a certain extent, his ghost represents not only the chronic injustice against black life in the United States, but also the way this injustice is actually a mutation, an "afterlife"[10] of slavery (Hartman 6).

24 A glimpse of possibility to redress the traumatic past can be found in the last chapter of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, when both Jojo and Richie seem unable to surpass the burdens of history: "'There's so many' Richie says. His voice is molasses slow. 'So many of us,' he says. 'Hitting. The wrong keys. Wandering against. The song'" (282). Richie momentarily loses his human traits climbing a tree "like a white snake" (282). It is precisely at that moment that a sighing tree unfurls in front of Jojo; its branches are full of ghosts "perch[ing] like birds, but look[ing] as people" (282). The use of the tree is not accidental. It conveys both the Hoodoo cultural belief that spirits reside on trees and the racially targeted practices of lynching, where the victim is hung and tortured, and vice versa. In a word, the use of the tree full of ghosts could allude to "the condition of haunting in this Mississippi landscape" (Lloyd 250).

25 Hanging from the branches, the ghosts narrate their stories of unfathomable suffering which bound them to their liminality, representing the multiple dark angles of history:

> 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 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 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. (282–283)

A momentary tabula rasa of traumatic memories, Kayla listens to the ghosts' testimony, and responds. She offers to bandage their festering wounds in the way she can, providing a powerful song, a call for the unburied to accompany her and to sing. Her song, "of mismatched, half-garbled words, [which is] nothing that [Jojo or Pop] can understand" (284) becomes an embodied "speech act" whose urgency does not so much lie in its meaning (locutionary act), but in the force it emits (illocutionary act) and in its power to convince (perlocutionary act) (Austin 120). The performativity of Kayla's babbling transcends conventional speech ("nothing that I can understand") outmatching the ghosts' haunting stories. What is more,

it should be highlighted that her vocal improvisation is especially meaningful when placed in the context of the tradition of jazz music. Her "mismatched" lyrics of her improvised song are reminiscent of "scat singing",[11] for instance; and the fact that her song comes as an answer to the ghosts' speech alludes to the "call and response" technique, reaffirming the importance of orality in African American literature and music.

26 Adopting Mam's stance, "the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam" (284), Kayla reaffirms the power of her ancestry offering an alternative way to converse with the ineffable. Her song, only decipherable by the liminal presences inhabiting the tree, has the power of a remedy that alleviates their bitterness and sorrow, "enabl[ing] the ghosts to relinquish some of the trauma" they carry (Lloyd 250). Lastly, her song confirms Derrida's suggestion that for the "intellectual" the only way to "learn to live" is to learn to live with the ghosts (221). Jojo's sister manages to make the ghosts comply with reality, offering them a kind of "home", a new sense of belonging in the world leading to the novel's powerful closure: "*Home*, they say. *Home*" (285).

27 Taking a decisive step, Kayla offers to "mother" those ghosts, calming them from their malicious energy and offering reminiscence. Echoing the title, her act of singing becomes her very first instance of empowerment, ascertaining her being-into-place and offering a link between past and future. Thus her "memory-work" is registered at a level of corporeality bringing *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* closer to the contemporary "embodied" and "material" ways to commemorate the past, to use Lloyd's terminology (251, 252). Ultimately, her song brings calm; it makes the ghosts "smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (*Sing* 284).

Conclusion

28 Despite his mendacious nature, Richie's apparition and eventual ostracism clear the ground for possibility. Accelerated by Richie's intervention, Mam's death does not contribute to Richie's fading; instead his ghost remains chained to a liminal space. Richie mingles with the background, gets to be part of an all-encompassing atmosphere, echoing once more Beloved's exorcism and her

becoming part of the "weather". In the last chapter, Richie is depicted as part of a spectral whole that inhabits a sighing tree, a symbol of Southern scenery and of the legacy of spectacle lynching. Hence, the ghost magnifies its point of departure to verify its nature as a "sign" of greater haunting (Gordon 8). To a certain extent, Richie's ghost is a collective social figure, exposing America's recent past of racial terror to the present, and showing the persisting image of black life as an easily disposable one, which Morrison referred to as "fodder" ("Unspeakable Things" 161).

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NOTES

1 His elaboration begins with literature but goes beyond it, hence the imprecision.

2 In his article "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*", Pierre Nora defined the "acceleration of history" as a "rapid slippage of the present

into a historical past that is gone for good" (7). The importance of the present wastes away while the past gains more and more ground.

3 The term southern Gothic refers to a literary genre prevalent in the South of the United States since the 19th century. It is considered an evolution from European Gothic. Edgar Allan Poe had been recognized as the first "Southern Gothic" writer (he was inspired by the landscape of Virginia), yet it was William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor who consolidated and modernized the genre. Appropriated by African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Jean Toomer, Alice Walker or even Octavia E. Butler, their work led to a re-invention of its potential: the "grotesque" and the "supernatural" elements of the Gothic, among others, transformed into tools of representing the horrendous reality of antiblackness as well as the legacy of slavery in the area. For more, see Bjerre.

4 Some modern Southern Gothic novels are: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), to name but a few.

5 In *L'Écorce et le noyau* (2009), Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok chart the dead men's reasons behind their return: "more often than not, they return to lead the living into an ill-fated trap, or to send them down some tragic spiral" (426, my translation).

6 Teenage motherhood as well as motherhood and addiction or precarity feature among Ward's recurrent themes. Leonie's problematic motherhood, Michael's absence as a father figure, and their drug-addiction are of considerable significance in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*. As for *Salvage the Bones*, teenage motherhood and precarity have been explored by Chiara Margiotta and Zsuzsanna Lénart-Muszka in their respective papers in *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* (edited by Sheri-Marie Harrison, Arin Keeble, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo, Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

7 In the original: "Un fait est certain : le fantôme — sur toutes ces formes — est bien l'invention des vivants […]. Une invention [qui] doit objectiver […] la lacune qu'a créé en nous l'occultation d'une partie de la vie d'un objet aimé."

8 Pop liberates Richie by killing him; a similar ambivalence of freedom overarches in the African American tradition of spirituals. For example, in *Swing Low*, *Sweet Chariot*, the return home, and the sentiments of

liberation it carries, are achieved through death. This detail adds a cultural layer to any interpretation of the scene. For more, see Andres.

9 In their work, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok use the term "phantom". In this paper, I use the terms "ghost" and "specter" interchangeably. It should be mentioned, however, that Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren draw a distinction between the two, relating the former to more "mundane" entities. They argue that the use of the term "specter" is often prioritized because of its association to issues of visibility and vision. For more, see Blanco and Peeren.

10 According to Saidiya Hartman, slavery is still politically [sic] relevant not because of an obsession with a long-gone past but because a "racial calculus" still disparages black life (6). This is what she calls the "afterlife" of slavery.

11 Scat singing is a vocal improvisation technique widely used in jazz music. Generally, it is when a singer emulates the sounds of musical instruments (namely of the trumpet). It is easily identifiable in Ella Fitzgerald's performance of *How High the Moon* in 1966, or of *One Note Samba* in 1969, and in Louis Armstrong's *Dinah* in 1933. For more about the genealogy of scat singing, see Tonelli.

RÉSUMÉS

English

What is at stake when the trope of the specter, a commonplace in the genre of the Southern Gothic, is revisited in contemporary fiction? In this paper, I argue that Richie's apparition surpasses the supernatural, representing much more than individual trauma. His spectral resurgence fights against collective racial injustice, and refuses the "disposability" of the black body, echoing Beloved's specter, in Morrison's eponymous novel (1987). Related to the mendacity of the spectral figure, Richie's mischievous apparition seeks to break the fragile balance in Jojo's family, an act leading to his ostracism. Based on Avery Gordon's idea of the specter as a "social figure", Richie's ghost will be examined as a case of agency or "counter-resistance" for the next generation, represented by the children in the novel.

Français

Qu'est-ce qui est en cause lorsque le trope du spectre, un lieu commun du « Southern Gothic », est revisité dans la fiction contemporaine ? Dans cet article, je montre que l'apparition de Richie dépasse le cadre du surnaturel et représente bien plus qu'un traumatisme individuel. Faisant écho à Beloved dans le roman éponyme de Morrison (1987), sa résurgence spectrale

combat l'injustice raciale collective et refuse l'idée d'un corps noir « jetable ». Liée à l'imposture de la figure spectrale, l'apparition espiègle de Richie cherche à rompre l'équilibre fragile de la famille de Jojo, un acte qui conduit à son ostracisme. S'inspirant de l'idée d'Avery Gordon selon laquelle le spectre est une « figure sociale », le fantôme de Richie sera examiné comme un cas d'agentivité ou de « contre-résistance » pour la génération suivante, représentée par les enfants dans le roman.

INDEX

Mots-clés
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AUTEUR

Myrto Charvalia
m.charvalia[at]parisnanterre.fr

Myrto Charvalia is a PhD student at Paris-Nanterre University, under the supervision of Prof. Françoise Král. Her work focuses on the representations of "haunting" in the works of Toni Morrison, M. NourbeSe Philip, Jesmyn Ward and Toni Cade Bambara. Her research interests include trauma studies, memory studies, and the rewriting of myths in contemporary literature. She has published a series of short stories and translations in Greek literary magazines.