

Holding on to the Dead: Grief and Survival in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Abstract

This paper examines *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as a profound meditation on grief, racial memory, and survival within the context of intergenerational trauma. Set in the contemporary American South, the novel intertwines the voices of the living and the dead to reveal how histories of racial violence, incarceration, and systemic neglect continue to shape Black subjectivity. Through the spectral presence of Richie and the memories carried by Pop and Mam, the narrative demonstrates that trauma in the novel is neither singular nor past—it is inherited, embodied, and persistently haunting.

Drawing on trauma theory and cultural memory studies, this paper argues that Ward redefines grief not as closure but as continuity. The ghostly figures do not merely symbolize unresolved pain; they demand recognition and ethical witnessing. The carceral system, poverty, and familial fragmentation operate as extensions of historical racial oppression, linking contemporary suffering to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow violence. Jojo's coming-of-age journey reveals how children inherit not only stories but also unprocessed trauma, positioning memory as both burden and survival mechanism.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that survival depends on confronting, rather than burying, the dead. By giving voice to silenced histories, Ward transforms mourning into resistance. Storytelling becomes an act of communal healing and reclamation, challenging national amnesia and asserting the necessity of remembering as a form of justice.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma, racial memory, cultural haunting, carceral violence, communal healing

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jesmyn Ward tells a story about families who live with the dead—not as memories that fade, but as presences that linger. The novel opens into an ordinary world of children, grandparents, addiction, and poverty, yet beneath its surface runs a deeper current of inherited grief. For Jojo, Leonie, Pop, and Mam, the past is not something finished. It breathes alongside them. It speaks. It refuses burial.

Set in rural Mississippi, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* connects contemporary struggles—incarceration, racism, broken families—to older histories of slavery and racial terror. Parchman Prison stands as more than a setting; it becomes a reminder that systems of confinement have simply changed form rather than disappeared. Pop's memories of imprisonment echo in Jojo's present, suggesting that trauma does not end with one generation. It is passed down in stories, silences, gestures, and fears.

Ward humanizes trauma by grounding it in intimate relationships. Jojo's quiet responsibility toward his sister Kayla, Leonie's restless grief over her brother Given, and the ghostly presence of Richie reveal that mourning is never solitary. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, grief moves through the body and through the land. The dead demand acknowledgment—not to frighten the living, but to be remembered.

This paper argues that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* portrays survival as an act of holding on rather than letting go. By blending the supernatural with everyday life, Ward suggests that healing does not require forgetting. Instead, it calls for witness, storytelling, and the courage to face painful inheritance. Through its layered voices, the novel insists that remembering is not weakness; it is resistance.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, trauma does not arrive as a single catastrophic event. It lives quietly within the rhythms of daily life. It appears in Pop's careful silences, in Leonie's restlessness, and in Jojo's premature maturity. The novel suggests that trauma is not only experienced—it is inherited. What one generation survives, the next must learn to carry.

Pop's memories of Parchman Prison reveal how violence seeps into identity. His imprisonment is not framed merely as personal suffering but as part of a broader racial history rooted in forced labor and systemic control. Yet Pop rarely speaks openly about his pain. His restraint reflects a survival strategy shaped by history: endurance without public complaint. Through him, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* portrays trauma as something often unspoken but deeply embodied.

Jojo becomes the emotional center of this inheritance. As a child navigating adulthood too soon, he absorbs the burdens of both his mother's instability and his grandparents' histories. His journey to retrieve his father from prison mirrors older journeys shaped by confinement and separation. The ghost of Richie, who accompanies Jojo, makes visible what the family cannot easily articulate—the unfinished business of racial violence. Richie's presence signals that the past is not distant; it walks beside the living.

Ward's use of the supernatural humanizes trauma rather than sensationalizing it. The ghosts are not horrors; they are reminders. They ask to be seen and heard. In giving Richie a voice, the novel performs an act of ethical remembrance, acknowledging lives cut short and

stories left untold. Trauma, in this sense, becomes relational. It binds the living and the dead together in shared memory.

Through these interwoven lives, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* suggests that memory can wound, but it can also connect. Survival does not mean escaping the past. It means learning how to live with it—how to carry grief without allowing it to erase love, responsibility, and hope.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, grief is not confined to death alone; it shapes relationships, especially motherhood. Leonie's character embodies a grief that has never found rest. Haunted by the loss of her brother Given, she carries unresolved sorrow that seeps into her parenting. Her love for her children exists, but it is fractured by addiction, resentment, and emotional absence. Ward refuses to portray Leonie as simply neglectful; instead, she presents her as a woman overwhelmed by pain she cannot process.

Leonie's visions of Given are different from Jojo's encounter with Richie. Given appears to her not to demand justice, but as a silent reminder of loss. His presence reflects a grief that has stalled her emotional growth. Unlike Pop, who transforms his suffering into quiet endurance, Leonie remains suspended in longing and anger. Through her, the novel illustrates how unaddressed trauma can interrupt the capacity to nurture. Grief, when unspoken and untreated, reshapes love into something fragile and inconsistent.

At the same time, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* offers alternative models of care. Mam and Pop provide Jojo and Kayla with stability grounded in memory, storytelling, and tradition. Their home becomes a space where grief is acknowledged rather than denied. Even in illness, Mam insists on preparing Jojo for the future, teaching him that survival depends on remembering who and where one comes from.

The children, especially Kayla, embody a different response to grief. Kayla's singing at the novel's close suggests that expression—through voice and sound—can reach where language fails. Her song becomes a moment of fragile healing, addressing the restless spirits and acknowledging their pain. In this gesture, Ward proposes that love, even when imperfect, can become a bridge between the living and the dead.

Through these layered portrayals of motherhood and care, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reminds readers that grief shapes families unevenly. Some are hardened by it; others are sustained through shared remembrance. Yet in every case, survival depends on confronting sorrow rather than burying it.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the prison is not merely a backdrop to the family's journey; it is a living symbol of history's persistence. Parchman Prison stands as a reminder that systems of racial control did not end with slavery. They evolved. The road trip to retrieve Michael from incarceration becomes more than a physical journey—it becomes a passage through layers of inherited confinement.

Pop's memories of Parchman reveal brutal labor, racial terror, and the constant threat of death. His experience connects directly to the ghost of Richie, a boy whose life was

violently cut short within the prison's walls. Richie's haunting presence insists that the suffering endured there cannot be sealed in the past. Through him, Ward collapses time, showing how the violence of one era bleeds into another.

The novel portrays incarceration as a continuation of racialized dispossession. Families are separated; children grow up with absence as a normal condition. Jojo's relationship with his father is shaped not by intimacy but by distance and expectation. Prison disrupts not only bodies but bonds. It leaves emotional gaps that children must fill prematurely.

Yet Ward does not present her characters solely as victims of systemic injustice. Their endurance—however fragile—becomes a quiet form of resistance. Pop's storytelling, Jojo's watchful responsibility, and Kayla's song all challenge the silence imposed by institutional power. The novel suggests that while the carceral state confines bodies, it cannot fully erase memory or relational ties.

By linking Parchman's history to the present, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* exposes what scholars describe as the "afterlife of slavery." Trauma is embedded in structures, landscapes, and generational experience. The prison becomes both literal and symbolic proof that the past remains unfinished business. Survival, therefore, requires not only personal strength but collective remembrance.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, ghosts are not decorative elements of magical realism; they function as ethical demands. Richie's presence does not simply unsettle Jojo—it asks to be acknowledged. His unfinished story embodies what trauma theorists describe as the "return of the repressed," where unspoken violence resurfaces because it has never been properly mourned.

Richie's haunting reveals that trauma resists linear time. He exists between life and death, between past and present. His inability to move on reflects a history that has not been reconciled. By granting Richie narrative voice, Ward performs a literary act of restorative justice. The novel becomes a space where silenced Black suffering is not only remembered but heard.

Importantly, haunting in the novel is communal rather than individual. The land itself feels marked by memory—the trees, the roads, the prison grounds. Trauma clings to geography. The South is not merely a setting but a witness. Ward suggests that historical violence saturates space, shaping the lives of those who continue to inhabit it.

Yet haunting also opens the possibility of healing. When Kayla sings at the novel's close, her voice addresses the restless spirits. Her song is simple, childlike, yet profoundly transformative. It recognizes the dead without denying the living. In that moment, Ward suggests that acknowledgment—not erasure—is the first step toward release.

One of the most devastating elements of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is its portrayal of childhood under the weight of inherited grief. Jojo is only thirteen, yet he carries responsibilities far beyond his years. He becomes caretaker, observer, and moral center.

Trauma theory often emphasizes how children absorb what adults cannot articulate; Ward dramatizes this with painful clarity.

Jojo's maturity is both strength and loss. He learns survival from Pop—how to read silence, how to endure humiliation, how to protect those weaker than himself. But this education comes at the cost of innocence. His childhood is shortened by systemic instability and maternal absence.

Kayla represents another dimension of inherited trauma. She does not fully understand the histories surrounding her, yet she senses emotional fractures. Her crying when confronted with ghosts suggests a heightened sensitivity to what others suppress. Children, in the novel, become emotional barometers of collective pain.

Ward refuses sentimentalism. Childhood here is neither idealized nor destroyed entirely. Instead, it becomes a site where the future struggles to emerge from the ruins of the past. Through Jojo and Kayla, the novel asks: what does survival mean for a generation born into unresolved grief?

Ultimately, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* insists that storytelling itself is an act of survival. Pop's recollections of Parchman, Mam's quiet instructions, Richie's testimony, and Jojo's interior reflections form a network of voices resisting erasure. Trauma isolates, but narrative reconnects.

Ward structures the novel through alternating perspectives, allowing readers to inhabit different emotional landscapes. This multiplicity resists a single authoritative truth. Instead, it models collective memory—messy, overlapping, sometimes contradictory, yet necessary.

Storytelling in the novel performs two essential functions. First, it preserves history. Without Pop's testimony, Richie's death might disappear into institutional silence. Second, it creates relational continuity. Jojo inherits not only pain but knowledge. Memory becomes both burden and inheritance.

The act of naming the dead, of speaking their stories aloud, challenges national amnesia. Ward suggests that healing does not come from forgetting trauma but from integrating it into communal understanding. To "hold on to the dead," as your title suggests, is not morbid attachment—it is ethical remembrance.

Sing, Unburied, Sing closes not with resolution, but with recognition. The novel does not offer easy healing or the comforting illusion that trauma can be neatly contained within the past. Instead, it affirms that grief is something lived with—carried in bodies, voices, landscapes, and generations. To hold on to the dead, as this paper has argued, is not to remain trapped in sorrow; it is to refuse erasure.

Through its layered portrayal of intergenerational memory, maternal fracture, childhood burden, and the lingering violence of the carceral state, the novel demonstrates that racial trauma in the American South is neither distant nor abstract. It is intimate. It shapes how families love, how children grow, and how communities remember. The ghosts in the

narrative are not simply supernatural figures; they are embodiments of unfinished history demanding witness.

Yet within this haunting lies a fragile hope. Ward suggests that survival depends not on silence but on storytelling. Pop's testimony, Richie's voice, Jojo's quiet endurance, and Kayla's song all gesture toward a form of collective healing rooted in acknowledgment. Memory becomes both wound and remedy. By naming the pain, the characters resist the national impulse to forget.

Ultimately, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* insists that grief, when faced rather than buried, can become a form of resistance. Holding on to the dead means honoring lives obscured by systemic violence and recognizing the continuity between past and present. In giving narrative space to the silenced, Ward transforms mourning into an ethical act—one that affirms dignity, preserves history, and imagines survival not as escape from trauma, but as the courage to remember.

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