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HAUNTING TIME IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to the collection of essays and poems she edited, called *The Fire This Time, A New Generation Speaks about Race*, Jesmyn Ward writes about how this book “confirmed how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present” (Ward 9). She adds, “We must acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, must recall the black diaspora to understand what is happening now” (9). I believe this is what she is doing in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, published one year later, in 2017. In this novel, Leonie and her two children Jojo and Kayla live with her parents in Mississippi. When the children’s father, who is white, is released from prison, Leonie, her friend Misty and the two children drive there to bring him back home. They also bring home the ghost of Richie, a young boy who was at Parchman at the same time as Jojo’s Grandfather Pop. The story, told by three narrators, Jojo, Leonie and Richie, stages how intertwined past and present are. I entitled this paper “Haunting Time” with the two meanings of the word “haunting” in mind: to appear to as a spirit or ghost but also to recur persistently to the consciousness of. In other words, the past is separate from the present, hence the presence of ghosts as a link between the two temporalities, but they are also merged through the present remains of the past: Parchman or the present racial discrimination Jojo and his family have to cope with. The analysis will focus on the way in which this aporia is configured or emplotted. Following French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s theory presented in *Time and Narrative*, I will try to show how, in the novel, telling stories creates a narrative identity that reinforces the African American community.

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1. GHOSTS AS RE-VISION

Ghosts are manifestations of the past, a past that can be more or less distant from the present. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* appear the ghosts of Given, Leonie's brother who was killed fifteen years before by a white teammate, of Richie, a young boy who was killed by Jojo's grandfather some 50 or 60 years before, and those of countless African American people who died during slavery or segregation throughout history. But from whenever these ghosts arise, they all have one thing in common: they are all manifestations of the brutality endured by black people in the United States throughout the centuries. In the novel Richie is back, through his ghost, to understand what has happened to him. He doesn't know exactly how he died so he wants Jojo, who can see him, to ask Pop to tell him the story of his death. This story will not only help Richie realize the cruelty of his end, it allows Pop to finally be able to gain some distance with what he did by putting words on it and it enables Jojo to learn about the horror of the situation of the African American community during the period of segregation. In that, the ghost of Richie permits what Joanne Chassot, in her book entitled *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, quoting Michelle Cliff, calls *re-vision* "[i]n the sense of re-visioning something, not in the sense of revising as in correcting it, or editing it, but in trying to see something from a different point of view" (11). Pop is re-visioning Richie's death as he is re-living it through words after decades have gone by, so from a different temporal perspective. At the end of his story, Pop, the strong father figure collapses in Jojo's arms: "I hold Pop like I hold Kayla. He puts his face in his knees and his back shakes" (257). The reversal of roles here between the two, with the grandfather breaking down and the grandson comforting him, shows how the re-visioning of his killing Richie releases him and brings some form of closure.

But the most vivid example of re-visioning through ghosts is when Jojo stumbles upon a tree full of ghosts after his grandmother's death:

And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them are near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people. 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. (282–83)

Faced with this tree full of ghosts, Jojo is confronted to the whole history of the African American community in the United States: violence, cruelty, torture. The repetition of the word “eyes” in this extract emphasizes the notion of vision and re-vision: Jojo sees what happened to them through their own eyes. The two visions merge, past and present become one for an instant and Jojo is transported into the past with them while they can be seen and heard in the present. The absence of punctuation in the accounts of what happened to these people as narrated by Jojo symbolizes how overwhelmed he is by these stories. He seems to be suffocating, like some of them when they died. He is reliving what they underwent, bringing the past out into the present. This recalls what Joanne Chassot writes in her book:

Without this connection and the continuity with the past that the ghosts enable, the living cannot understand, deal with, or work through their present situations, let alone envisage a future. Indeed, when they are unable to ‘integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory’, the living suffer from what Orlando Patterson calls ‘natal alienation’. (9)

This is exactly the case with Jojo: the ghosts in the trees connect him to his ancestors’ past, something he had been sheltered from as his grandfather had never finished the story about Richie’s death. Seeing ghosts, first Richie’s, then his uncle Given’s, and those in the tree make him realize the continuity of the past, but also the continuity between past and present. Contrary to his little sister Kayla who also sees the ghosts and tries to soothe them as if they were babies, Jojo sees them as threatening, as he says, “Knowing that tree of ghosts is there makes the skin on my back burn, like hundreds of ants are crawling up my spine, seeking tenderness between the bones to bite” (283). Indeed, the collective memory they bring him to is terrible to fathom and Jojo feels the pain of such an awareness. That’s why, just before seeing the ghost tree, the ghost of Richie tells him, “Now you understand. Now you understand life. Now you know. Death” (282).

The ghost of Given, that Leonie calls Given-not-Given, also allows re-vision. But contrary to Richie or the ghosts in the tree for Jojo, Given-not-Given doesn’t allow Leonie to re-vision a past she has not lived herself, but her own time.

When he is there, he makes time stop, as we can see when Leonie is overdosing in the car: “Given-not-Given turns away from the car and disappears: I understand. Phantom Given is the heart of a clock, and his leaving makes the rest of it tick tock tick tock, makes the road unfurl, the trees whip, the rain stream, the wipers swish” (167). The first thing that is interesting in this extract is the phrase “I understand”, which recalls the previous extract, when Richie said to Jojo: “Now you understand. Now you understand life”. For Leonie too, the ghost triggers a form of epiphany which leads the young woman to gain a new comprehension of his presence. His appearances bring about a form of suspension of time, in which Leonie sees her past entering her present: “When we were coming up, I couldn’t count how many times he fought for us on the bus, in school, in the neighborhood when kids taunted me about how Pop looked just like a scarecrow, how Mama was a witch. How I looked just like Pop: like a burnt stick, raggedly clothed. My stomach turned like an animal in its burrow, again and again, seeking comfort and warmth before sleep” (37) or “Given looked at me like he did when we were little and I broke the new fishing pole Pop got him: murderous.... He rode with me to the house, and I left him sitting in the passenger seat as the sun softened and lit the edges of the sky, rising. I crept into Mama’s bedroom and watched her sleep” (52). In the last two instances, Given’s ghost brings back the memory of the past in such a vivid way that Leonie becomes a little girl again and needs the comfort of a safe place or of her mother. Indeed, the memories he restores are negative and revisiting them years after they happened gives her the impression that the past is haunting her through Given: “Hoping that when I sit up, Given-not-Given will be gone back to wherever he stays when he is not haunting me” (150).

2. PRESENT REMAINS OF THE PAST

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* ghosts are thus a way to bring the past back into the present of the characters to make sure it is not forgotten. By doing so, the motif of phantoms shows that past and present are separate as ghosts are necessary to connect the two temporal dimensions. But in the novel, past and present are also merged through the present remains of the past: the Parchman prison or the racial discrimination Jojo and his family undergo. Indeed, Parchman, where Pop did his time and suffered terrible conditions, is the same one Jojo’s father was sent to. The Parchman prison, also called Parchman Farm, is the Mississippi State Penitentiary and it functions like a Southern plantation before slavery

was abolished. Indeed, Pop tells Jojo the story of how the inmates worked in open fields of cotton, from sunup to sundown, in the blistering heat, under the supervision of inmate guards called trusty shooters, chosen because they liked to kill. They were also guarded by dogs, “barking and slobbering at the mouth at the edge of the field” (23). So when Jojo, his sister Kayla, Leonie and her friend Misty go there to bring Mickael home, they find themselves in a place that compounds past and present. The most significant manifestation of this temporal fusion is the appearance of the ghost of Richie, who says:

I didn't understand time either, when I was young. How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once? (186)

Richie describes Parchman as having a temporal dimension of its own, in which time is not chronological but concomitant and forms not a line but some form of expanse. This spatial comparison shows that time and space are merged in Parchman, which becomes not only the actual state prison that has survived the ages but more importantly a figuration of the past haunting the present, manifested by the appearance of the ghost of Richie. The repetition of the verb “pull” in this extract shows not only how the place refuses to let the past go but also, and maybe more importantly, how geography controls time. Here, space seems to have stopped time. This recalls what Avery F. Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*:

Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where people reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about (139).

Through the setting of the Parchman prison, we can see that slavery in the South is still present, in both the spatial and temporal senses of the word “present”. But this presence is only a trace, as French philosopher Paul Ricoeur defines the word: “[H]istory is conscious that it is related to events that ‘really’ happened. The document becomes a trace for this consciousness, that is, ... it is both a remains and a sign of what was but no longer is” (5). Here we are not talking about a historical document but about the topos of Parchman used by Jesmyn Ward in her story: its presence recalls a past that is both gone, as slavery doesn't

exist anymore, and still present through the actuality of the place itself that is a constant reminder of what it used to be. It can thus be considered as a memorial, in that it preserves the memory of slavery, and can be seen as a threat, a symbol of white supremacy.

The trip to and from Parchman is a big part of the novel and counts a number of incidents, including one told by Leonie: the police stopping them on their way back. The reason for the police check is that the car was swerving, which is not a serious offence, and yet the situation escalates very quickly. Indeed, Jojo, standing outside the car, reaches into his pocket to touch the lucky charm his grandfather has given him, and the police officer forces him to kneel and points a gun at his head. This handling of the situation by the police is clearly racist from the beginning, when Leonie tells the officer they are coming back from Parchman: "I know it is a mistake soon as I say it. I should have said something else, anything else: Greenwood or Itta Bena or Natchez, but Parchman is all that comes. The handcuffs are on me before the *n* is silent" (162). An African American woman coming from Parchman is considered as necessarily suspicious by the police. But the discrimination doesn't end there as when Misty, who is white, and Jojo, who is black, get out of the car, "[t]he police officer looks between the two and makes his decision and walks toward Jojo, his third pair of handcuffs out" (163) and ends up pointing his gun at the young boy's head since he believes that Jojo is about to draw a weapon, because that is what he expects a young black man to do. This racist episode corresponds to what is called "Driving While Black" and is a present-day expression of racial injustice in the United States. It is an attempt at trying to enforce white supremacy and is another way in which the past haunts the present. As Paul Ricoeur writes: "time needs a body in order to externalize itself, to make itself visible.... Everything happens as though the visibility that phenomenology is incapable of according to time, without falling into error, fiction is able to confer upon it at the price of a materialization, comparable to the personifications of time in ancient prosopopoeia" (138). I believe that the incident we just mentioned is the materialization of how the Southern past still permeates the present. The police stopping them on their way back to Parchman can be seen as a reminiscence of the guards tracking the inmates who had escaped from Parchman, and before that, of the white men tracking down the fleeing slaves. The incident exposes what is supposed to be concealed, a cultural system based on the control of power by white people and is the manifestation of the spirit of the past weighing on the present.

3. REINFORCING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY THROUGH NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Although the story takes place in the diegetic present of the different narrators, there are also narratives about a more or less distant past, such as Pop's story about Richie, Leonie's accounts of her childhood or of Given's death. There is no omniscient narrator but three different narrators each telling parts of the same story. This is of course evocative of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, with the multiple voices and perspectives, but the difference here is that the narratives all originate from African American voices. What is at stake in this novel is not only to tell a story about the American South but about black Americans in the South. As Richard Gray writes in *Southern Aberrations*, "[t]hese are recollections inscribed in race, whose main cultural work is to identify what it means to be a *black* Southerner. As such, they are determinately other, outside and apart from the remembrances of whites—even the white dispossessed" (264). Nearly all of the memories in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are negative and are linked to racial injustice. Their presence in the narrative mirrors the experience of the African American community in the United States and including them enables Jesmyn Ward to bring forth what Paul Ricoeur calls narrative identity. Indeed, in *Time and Narrative*, he writes: "These events, which are said to be 'epoch-making', draw their specific meaning from their capacity to found or reinforce the community's consciousness of its identity, its narrative identity, as well as the identity of its members" (186). What is at stake in this novel is of course more than the lives of Jojo and his family. Kathleen Brogan describes what she calls *cultural haunting* as "bring[ing] to the foreground the communal nature of its ghosts" (152). She explains that "[s]tories of cultural haunting differ from other twentieth-century ghost stories in exploring the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche, but also of a people's historical consciousness" (152). Through this story, Jesmyn Ward is working on reinforcing African American identity by representing not only the tragedies of the past but also the everyday discrimination black Americans still have to suffer.

But narrative identity is not only engendered by this sense of belonging to the same community and enduring the same adversity, it also stems from storytelling. Indeed, telling stories about the past is a way to keep the memory of the community alive throughout the centuries. As Vicent Cucarella-Ramon writes in his article "Black Ghosts of the Diasporic Memory in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*", "the recovery of their diasporic memory will stand as the only

chance to re-define themselves and to re-claim their ancestry and their cultural legacy in North America” (65). Telling the story of one’s ancestors or telling one’s own story enables to find one’s voice and to add it to the chorus of the previous voices that have been heard. That is exactly what Leonie, Jojo and Richie are doing. Although we are reading a written text, their narratives echo the oral tradition of the African American community: they are written in the present tense, communicating a sense of immediacy, giving the reader the feeling that the story is being created before their eyes. Ricoeur claims that “[t]he notion of narrative identity also indicates its fruitfulness in that it can be applied to a community as well as to an individual.... Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history” (247). The metafictional dimension of the novel, visible through the character of Pop telling Richie and his own story, reflects the interweaving of narratives, mixing past and present, history haunting the story, making the present-day narrator the source of a past he has never experienced.

Pop’s story of his life in Parchman and of how he had to track down Richie, who had escaped, and kill him, is a form of retelling of a slave narrative. Although neither of them was actually a slave and Richie never achieved freedom, his fugitive state and the violence of his capture recall the genre. Pop’s story is a variation of a past narrative form, which is a way to look back to the past to interpret present stories or, in other words, to assess the present of the story thanks to past historical and literary references. But since Pop tells his story decades after it happened, there are three different temporal dimensions: the present of the telling, the present of the events told which is in the diegetic past, and the reference to past slave narratives. We can therefore see how the past shapes or haunts present storytelling but also how this storytelling engages the reader or listener retrospectively with the past in order to interpret the story correctly, forming a kind of hermeneutic circle. This, once again, recalls how Ricoeur defined narrative identity: “The third mimetic relation is defined by the narrative identity of an individual or a people, stemming from the endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one, and from the chains of refigurations that results from this. In a word, narrative identity is the poetic resolution of the hermeneutic circle” (248). In her essay “The site of Memory”, Toni Morrison explains that her goal in writing is, in a way, to rewrite slave narratives: “Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives” (99). This is also what is at play in this novel, because *Sing, Unburied, Sing* prolongs the dialogue between past and present African American literature

and reinforces the community's identity. As Kathleen Brogan writes: "Stories of cultural haunting record the struggle to establish some form of historical continuity that allows for a necessary distance from the past-breathing room, as it were" (155).

In her introduction to *The Fire this Time*, Jesmyn Ward defines how she sees the South:

A place where for all the brilliant, sun-drenched summer days, there is sometimes only the absence of light: America and the American South. A place where the old myths still hold a special place in many white hearts: the rebel flag, Confederate monuments, lovingly restored plantations, *Gone with the Wind*. A place where black people were bred and understood to be animals, a place where some feel that the Fourteenth Amendment and *Brown v. Board of Education* are only the more recent in a series of unfortunate events. A place where black life has been systematically devalued for hundreds of years (5).

Her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a way to restore the light in the South, a way to give voice to the community that has been silenced for so long, a way to reinforce an identity that has been stifled for centuries. Through her story, she does not only bring light, she also gives her community a new breath.

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HAUNTING TIME IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING*,
UNBURIED, SING

S u m m a r y

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a story about the past as well as about the present. It is peopled not only by characters living in the present South but also by ghosts representing past racial injustice. These ghosts are the manifestation of past racial brutality, the sign of the past haunting the present. But *Sing, Unburied, Sing* presents a temporal aporia: the past is separate from the present, hence the presence of ghosts as a link between the two temporalities but they are also merged through the present remains of the past: the Parchman prison or the present racial discrimination Jojo and his family have to cope with. The story thus seems to have a temporal dimension of its own. Following French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory presented in his *Time and Narrative*, I will try to show that the different narrators are telling their story, not only to try to make sense of this temporality they exist in, but also to try to achieve a form of narrative identity that reinforces the African American community.

Keywords: Jesmyn Ward; time; ghosts; Paul Ricoeur; narrative identity; African American literature.

NAWIEDZONY CZAS W *ŚPIEWAJCIE, Z PROCHÓW, ŚPIEWAJCIE*
JESMYN WARD

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Śpiewajcie, z prochów, śpiewajcie Jesmyn Ward jest historią zarówno o przeszłości jak i o teraźniejszości. Wypełniają ją bowiem postacie zamieszkujące współczesne amerykańskie Południe oraz duchy reprezentujące minioną rasową niesprawiedliwość. Duchy te są manifestacją dawnej przemocy na tle rasowym, znakiem przeszłości nawiedzającej teraźniejszość. Jednak *Śpiewajcie, z prochów, śpiewajcie* zawiera w sobie czasową aporię: z jednej strony obecność duchów jest łącznikiem pomiędzy dwoma odrębnymi przedziałami czasowymi, z drugiej strony przeszłość i teraźniejszość mieszają się ze sobą za sprawą pozostałości po czasie minionym, takich jak więzienie Parchman czy rasowa dyskryminacja, z którą Jojo i jego rodzina muszą sobie radzić na co dzień. W efekcie fabuła powieści wydaje się mieć swój własny wymiar czasowy. Wychodząc od teorii Paula Ricoeura z jego pracy *Czas i opowieść*, artykuł dowodzi, iż różni narratorzy opowiadają swoją historię nie tylko w celu zrozumienia wymiaru czasowego, w którym przyszło im żyć, lecz również po to, by osiągnąć formę narracyjnej tożsamości wzmacniającej afroamerykańską wspólnotę.

Słowa kluczowe: Jesmyn Ward; czas; duchy; Paul Ricoeur; tożsamość narracyjna; literatura afroamerykańska.