The Haunted Black South and the Alternative Oceanic Space: Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Sodam Choi

Well I wonder will I ever get back home  
Well it must have been the devil that fooled me here  
I’m all down and out

Lord if I ever get back home, I’ll never do wrong  
Well if I can just make it home I won’t do wrong no more  
Lord I won’t do wrong no more

-Tangle Eye, “Tangle Eye Blues”

Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters  
with some dead Negro’s grief.

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

I. Introduction: Jesmyn Ward and the Black South

Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, starts with death: a thirteen-year-old biracial boy, Jojo says, “I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it’s something I could look at straight” (1). He wants to face death straight and to prove to his grandfather, Pop, that he can “get bloody.” He, thus, decides to help Pop slaughter a goat to barbeque for his own birthday. He doesn’t want Pop “to read [his] slowness as fear, as weakness, as [him] not being old enough to look at death like a man should” (5). And yet, his first attempt ends up with his running out of a shed and throwing up on the green outside. Ward scrupulously describes Jojo’s difficulty of “becoming” a black man in the South, as he is unable to digest the slaughter scene and, through vomiting, resists facing death and becoming a (black) man. Recurrently portraying eating and vomiting scenes through other black characters throughout the novel, she symboli-

---

1 This song appears in Alan Lomax’s compilation, *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm, 1947-48. Volume 1: Murderous Home.*
cally demonstrates black inability to psychologically digest the black South’s culturally traumatic history.

The story is set in Bois Sauvage, a fictional town located on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In her narrative, Jesmyn Ward looks into the history of the Black South through the voices of three narrators: Jojo, Leonie, his mother, and Richie, the ghost of a thirteen-year-boy who was imprisoned with Pop and died in Mississippi’s notorious Parchman prison farm, which is now turned into Mississippi State Penitentiary. The three narrators unveil black experiences in the South during Jojo and Leonie’s road trip to the Parchman prison to retrieve Michael, Jojo’s white father who is about to be released after his three-year sentence. Ward unfolds the social and cultural problems that the black South faces from poverty and violence to meth epidemic and to intractable racism; and, uncovers traumatic personal experiences of the blacks of the rural South little by little, calling the apparitional figures wandering around between the living and the dead. Jojo who failed in facing death in Pop’s slaughtering scene has to face death once again—this time, it is Richie—in order to survive as a (black) man. The road trip to Parchman prison in the Mississippi River Delta is, then, his odyssey to the traumatic past of the dead and the living.

The methodological approaches and the story of cultural haunting that Ward takes may not sound fresh enough. Readers are already familiar with, for example, Toni Morrison’s paradigmatic novel, *Beloved* (1987), Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), and Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Rather, Ward places herself within the modern African American literary tradition and lays out the unending “historical traumas” of blacks and cultural haunting in her narrative (LaCapra 80). Unlike Morrison’s ghost story that mainly focuses on female loss and trauma, more specifically, the deployment of the mother-daughter relation, however, Ward brings to the fore the story of a young black boy and demonstrates the difficulty of living while a black man in the American rural South. Living or dead, black males remain spectral as their frustrated black bodies are endlessly rejected and disembodied. It’s through Ward’s close attention to the notions of black masculinity and retrieval of (black) humanity through Jojo that the black South is remembered, recu-

---

2 According to Dominick LaCapra, unlike structural trauma that is a trans-historical experience of absence and loss, and thus “is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility,” historical trauma is “[t]he traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined” (82). It can be acted out and worked through. For more detailed discussion, see LaCapra.