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“This Is a Place for the Dead”: Reading the Child Ghost in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

“[A]ge after age, the uninstrucing dead”: so closes the final epigraph of Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. This quotation, taken from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Gulf,” captures how Ward’s book is characterized by a friction between the unregulatable persistence of the dead and the strategies the living, frequently traumatized by their losses, deploy to alternately disavow them or make their presence meaningful. Such a friction is, I argue, at its most painful yet productive in Ward’s depiction of the spectral child—both as a literal and as socially spectralized ghost. Through her exploration of the potential of such a figure for recalibrating a relationship with the dead, Ward creates a narrative of witnessing which can accommodate them, in the face of the obliteration of narrative—intrapsychic, intergenerational, and communal—which trauma imposes (Caruth 4).

To give a summary of the novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* tells the story of the African American Stone family, who live in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. The family comprises Pop, the Stone patriarch, who in his youth served a jail sentence in the notorious Parchman Prison; Mam, who is dying of cancer and practices Hoodoo, a syncretic form of religion native to America’s Gulf coast; their daughter Leonie, whose White husband, Michael, is serving a sentence in Parchman for drug dealing; and Michael and Leonie’s children, JoJo, thirteen and Kayla, three. Alongside the living family, two ghosts haunt the scene: that of Given, Leonie’s brother who is murdered at the age of eighteen by White acquaintances while out hunting and whose death is covered up as an accident, and that of Richie, a thirteen-year-old boy who was in Parchman at the same time as Pop and who is revealed to have been killed by Pop in order to save him from being tortured and lynched by a White mob. As the novel opens,

Leonie receives the news that Michael is being released from prison and decides to take their children with her on a road trip to collect him.

Ward's deployment of the child ghost in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* prompts a questioning of how the novel's unquiet dead children function as part of the negotiation between the living and the traumatizing traces of the past, a negotiation around which the novel is structured. In this analysis, I contend that the spectral child acts in Ward's novel to offer instruction for witnessing those whose loss is unacknowledged, via their re-organization of conventional modes of perception and of knowing. Furthermore, I demonstrate that these alternative modes of seeing (possessed by children whose own visibility and social acknowledgment are radically compromised), in contrast to Walcott's "uninstructing dead" of the novel's epigraph, give rise to potentially "instructing" narratives. These stories are necessarily "ghost" stories, yet the narrativization at stake here is not a story that exorcizes the ghosts of trauma or placates them. Crucially, these are stories of seeing and being seen which do not end but rather which must continue to be told and retold in order to shift in ways which accommodate the narratives and experiences of future generations alongside those of their forebears.

In comparison with Ward's earlier works, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is only now beginning to garner scholarly traction; however, what studies do exist acknowledge, through various critical lenses and to different extents, the significance of ghosts and haunting for the novel. Perhaps the most significant contribution to scholarship on the novel to date is Stephanie Li's chapter "Learning to Listen in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," in which Li proposes a particular kind of listening to be at the heart of an ethical education capable of containing shattering legacies of racial violence. However, while Li's chapter emphasizes the significance of the act of listening within the novel for moving from a traumatized state of perpetual experiencing into a state of knowing and remembering, an emphasis which this chapter draws upon, it does not take into account the spectral positions of the children in the novel, which

compromise, indeed at points negate, the possibility of such listening. Through bringing to bear a Deleuzian theoretical approach on Ward's novel, a framework that has yet to be deployed in Ward scholarship, I build on Li's careful attention to the significance of listening in the novel. In doing so, I demonstrate the presence in *Sing* of narratives of witnessing made possible by the figure of the spectral child who stands at the intersection between the living and the dead, crucially seeing and knowing otherwise.

Such a reading of the novel is already incubating within the critical reception of *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*, which has coalesced around an understanding of the work as a complex act of mourning rooted in a recognition that restores subjective integrity and social place to figures whose bodily, subjective and political presence has been negated by racial violence. In her review of the novel, Margaret Atwood situates *Sing* at "the not-buried heart of the American Nightmare" (qtd. in Ward). Atwood's statement invokes the idea of that which haunts 'because something went wrong with its obsequies,' not merely its burial but its being meaningfully mourned (Žižek qtd. in Davis 2). A review of Ward's novel from *National Public Radio* also understands the novel in this way, stating, "Ward lets the dead sing. It's a kind of burial." Paradoxically, here the burial is also a re-voicing. It is a burial not in the sense of a muffling, occluding, or forgetting but a burial that acts as a synecdoche for the live processes of mourning, a demanding and potentially unending *process* rather than a single act.

This chapter's theoretical framework builds on Jessica Balanzategui's model of the "uncanny child," who is understood as either "a mysterious ghost or spectre . . . or as an 'in-between,' seemingly alive yet acting as a mediator or being caught between the realms of the living and the dead, the present and the past, the material and the supernatural" (18). This "in-between" (a position JoJo and Kayla take up in Ward's novel) is a figure correlating to Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "child seer," a child figure whose experience of immobilizing trauma produces privileged knowledge and ways of knowing. As Balanzategui summarizes:

Deleuze explains that the seer surfaces when a powerless and confused child character experiences a disorienting breakdown in the sensory-motor schema.¹ . . . This sensory-motor collapse forces the child to experience a “purely optical or sound situation” (1997a, 5) that is divorced from the relentless progression of linear time. As a result, these children perceive the loss of a clearly defined, coherent meaning system—or what Deleuze terms an “encompassing situation” (1997a, 57). (124)

In addition to this deployment of the notion of the “child seer,” my analysis of the child ghosts of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and their positioning vis-à-vis intergenerational racial trauma, takes place in the context of the critically recognized tension that exists between the predominantly Eurocentric, psychoanalytic formulations of trauma—and the ghosts such traumas give rise to, whether as literary motifs or psychic symptoms—and the need to acknowledge, as Holly Cade-Brown does, how “Eurocentric, psychoanalytic frameworks of trauma . . . cannot account for the ways in which enduring legacies of racism operate” (4). Likewise, a recognition of the inadequacy of those event-based models of trauma² in accounting for what psychotherapist Laura Brown terms the “insidious trauma” generated by racism, both overt and structural, is also necessary (101). The trauma generated for Black subjects by the legacy of slavery and White supremacy in the United States has both event-based components and is also, as Cade-Brown summarizing Alexander Wheliye puts it, comprised of “uninterrupted psychic and physical violence that has been exerted on black subjects [that] renders black suffering in ‘the domain of the mundane’ . . . it refuses the idiom of exception” (15). If we consider this description alongside Clarke’s assessment of Ward’s work as dealing with “the unseen everyday” (Yaeger qtd. in Clarke 346), it becomes clear that trauma as quotidian, as part of the

¹ The “sensory-motor schema” refers in *Cinema 2* to “a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action which discloses it, or prompts a reaction which adapts to or modifies it” (Deleuze 5). This realist schematics of space and action is in opposition to the “purely optical or sound situation” which can arise “in any-space-whatever” (Deleuze 5).

² See Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2014) for his model of historical trauma as comprising an event and an absence resulting from that event which must both be worked through.

fabric of the ordinary, is what forms the ground of *Sing* and informs the narrative and symbolic significance of its child specters.

In populating her novel with such specters, Ward is working in a significant tradition of African American literature that thinks with and through the ghost, proponents of which, as Melanie R. Anderson points out, include authors such as “Toni Cade Bambara, Octavia Butler, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Lucille Clifton, August Wilson, Randall Kenan, and Tina McElroy Ansa” (19). Perhaps the most prominent example of this tradition in the contemporary moment is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a narrative concerned, as *Sing* is, with the ghost of a murdered African American child and which, to quote Anderson, “continues the emphasis that is present in twentieth-century African American writing on tracing the relations between past and present, often allowing for spectral eruptions of the traumatic past that accompany the return of an ancestor-figure” (18).³

1. “[W]hen the Dying’s Bad”: Different Kinds of Ghosts in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*

Before embarking on an analysis of the significance of Richie, Given, Jojo, and Kayla’s access to a radically different mode of seeing and knowing capable of accommodating this “unseen everyday,” it is important to acknowledge how the literal child specters, of the kind Given and Richie represent, relate to their equally but differently spectral living counterparts, and to map how Jojo and Kayla experience a form of social ghosting as their place in the biopolitical regime is rendered profoundly precarious. The notion that underpins the biopolitical—that of certain human lives not being visible, let alone mourned or remembered, as human—is present in much of Ward’s work to date. Sinead Moynihan recognizes the presence of this structure in Ward’s earlier novel *Salvage the Bones*, a text “populated by poor, African American characters that are subject to ‘the biopolitics of disposability’ . . . organized around the best way to remove or

³ This haunting significance of the ancestor figure within African American writing is explored in depth in Venetia K. Patton’s *The Grasp that Reaches Beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women’s Writing* (2013).

make invisible those individuals and groups who are seen as a drain or stand in the way of market freedoms, free trade, consumerism, and the neo-conservative dream of an American Empire” (551). Such biopolitical vulnerability is understood by Richard Crowshaw as influenced by “a history of the differential distribution of invisibility and visibility, life and death, . . . and the disposability and indispensability of human life across the US population” (226).

The carceral system in the United States serves as one such site where this “differential distribution” takes place, as recognized in Michael’s account of Parchman, the prison in which he is incarcerated for a drug offense. Michael states of Parchman, “*this ain’t no place for no man. Black or White. Don’t make no difference. This is a place for the dead*” (96; emphasis in original). Michael’s description of Parchman explicitly articulates the way that institutional racism and the industrial prison complex—the infrastructure of which was in some cases erected on the same geographical site as the plantations of the slavery era—spectralizes those subject to it. However, Michael’s notion that “*Black or White. Don’t make no difference*” is put under pressure by Richie’s own post-mortem experience of Parchman, which both confirms the literal and metaphorical truth of Michael’s statement and gives it a racial inflection. Towards the close of the novel, Richie describes his post-mortem return to Parchman, where he is stuck in a ‘sleep-wake’ cycle during which he journeys unpredictably through the site’s history, waking to “witness the new born Parchman,” but then “sleep[ing] and wak[ing]” to see the land itself, “the Delta before the prison,” occupied by “Native men,” and only then returning to the contemporary Parchman, where prisoners “sat for hours in small windowless rooms,” their faces “stiff as corpses” (186). Richie’s description articulates how his biological death forms only the completion of the social death he has already been subjected to and gestures towards the profoundly precarious quality of Jojo and Kayla’s socially spectralized existence as African

American subjects. This precariousness is, however, specifically compounded by their unacknowledged child status.

2. The Vexed Status of Children and Childhood

Richie's experiences at Parchman, and his eventual death, offer an unflinching illustration of the ways in which the kinds of social death produced by racist and White supremacist social, legal, and political instruments can instantly and catastrophically collapse into their biological counterpart. The precarious quality of childhood and child status (with the potential protections and recognition of vulnerability it might afford) for the African American and dual heritage children in the novel is another manifestation of this mechanism. This is strikingly demonstrated during the road trip section of the novel, in which Leonie attempts to forage for and prepare a herbal remedy to treat Kayla, who has become ill. While Mam is a gifted herbalist who has tried to pass her skills down to Leonie, Leonie is unable to connect with these practices. She avoids the "plant lessons" her mother tries to give her, can't remember the things she is told, and her recourse to herbal medicine is poorly remembered, made up of inappropriate and potentially dangerous substitutions:

Ain't no wild strawberries at the side of the road. It ain't boggy enough up here. . . . *I find wild blackberries. Mama always told me they could be used for upset stomach but only for adults.* But if there was nothing else I could make a tea and give it to kids. Not a lot, I remember her saying. From the leaves. Or was it from the vines? Or the roots? The heat beats down so hard I can't remember. (105; emphasis added)

Importantly, there is no differentiation in her approach to healing, as Leonie tries, unsuccessfully, to treat Kayla's upset stomach as though she is an adult by using the wild blackberries she finds. This "treatment" by Leonie of her children as adults dramatizes the denial of child status to children that takes place repeatedly in the novel, with reference not only

to Kayla and JoJo but to Richie also, incarcerated in the adult male penal environment of Parchman. The child and childhood itself are ideological tools or markers whose stability has been increasingly undermined in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One element of the way the child has been understood, which comes under pressure in the contemporary moment, is the political mobilization of the association between the child and futurity. As Lee Edelman puts it, “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust’ a symbol of ‘the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (11).

However, Edelman’s model does not account for the ways in which childhood and the status of the child are not guaranteed to the young but are dependent on a wealth of social and cultural factors. The refusal of the status of child, and the privileges and protections that should therefore apply to young people from certain communities, is a biopolitical practice wherein the children of marginalized groups are *a priori* denied a status as a full human subject. The societal reading of young Black men and women as older than they are and the treatment of them as such by state institutions has been extensively studied,⁴ and this phenomenon provides a salient example of the fact that childhood is repeatedly defined in ways designed to exclude certain children. As Jean and Richard Mills put it, “such, then are the problems of defining childhood, with its shifting visions, its lack of watertight compartments, its illusory and illusive nature, what Steedman refers to as its ‘extraordinary plasticity.’ It is clear that childhood or, rather, childhoods, are social constructions, cultural components inextricably linked to variables of race, class, culture, gender and time” (Mills and Mills 2). As Balanzategui argues, the child:

defaces clearly demarcated identities in an abject disturbance of symbolic orderliness, embodying the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, 4) that

⁴ For studies on this “adultification” of Black youth see Blake and Epstein (2017), and Atiba Goff et al (2014).

exists at the core of Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection, the traumatic "place where meaning collapses" (1982, p. 2). (47)

However, this traumatic collapse of meaning registers differently for the African American children in this novel, being constituted in the refusal by State actors to recognize their belonging to the "in-between . . . , ambiguous, . . . composite" category of "child," instead violently re-instating "symbolic orderliness" through their wrongful application of the category of adult. The children of Bois Sauvage bear this out repeatedly, but nowhere is this clearer than in Leonie's witnessing of Jojo's encounter with a police officer as the family returns from picking Michael up from Parchman:

It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It's easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. . . . Half of Jojo's face is in the dirt, but I can still see his frowning mouth, quivering at the corners: it's the face he made when he was a baby, when he was fighting the urge to cry. (163-5)

In this sequence, the refusal to see the thirteen-year-old Jojo as a vulnerable child rather than an adult threat is brutally asserted. The descriptive splitting of Jojo's face, such that one half is obscured and pressed into the ground while the other half remains visible, illustrates precisely the negation of Jojo's childhood in favor of his being treated by the criminal justice system as an adult. Here, Ward makes explicit the violently traumatizing and inappropriate nature of such treatment, the police officer's category error emphasized by the fact that the half of Jojo's face that remains visible is the half that makes "the face he made when he was a baby, when he was fighting the urge to cry." The explicit doubling of Richie and Jojo in this moment as Richie, who shares Jojo's age, verbally and haptically anticipates Jojo's brutalizing interaction with the

law, “sinking farther down, covering his ears with his hands” and stating, “They going to chain you,” further inflecting the scene as one in a continuum of racist violence committed or sanctioned by White law enforcement agencies (169). Even though Jojo tells Richie of Parchman, “they don’t send em there as young as you anymore,” the incident provides a dramatization of how the American criminal justice system still does not meaningfully differentiate between Black boys and Black men.⁵

If Edelman’s homogenizing understanding of the status of children and their relationship with futurity is negated to an extent by this exploration of the gendered, racial, and social factors that put in question a young person’s status as child, Kathryn Bond Stockton’s proposition that “[w]hat a child ‘is’ is a darkening question, . . . leading us in moments to cloudiness and ghostliness surrounding children as figures in time” (2) offers the possibility of a more productive way of thinking about the ghost and ghostly children in this novel, their functions and implications. In this context, I wish to move now to explore how, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, child ghosts and child seers confirm the specific uncanniness of the racialized child who is not understood *as a child* and the modes of seeing and knowing otherwise that this gives rise to.

3. Child Specters and Child Seers

While children are conventionally associated with tropes of innocence and “cuteness,” the child as a figure, in fact, incubates a series of uncanny paradoxes. As Chris Jenks points out, “the child is familiar to us and yet strange; he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another; he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being” (qtd. in Balanzategui 13). The figure of the child ghost literalizes these paradoxes, making them explicit while simultaneously rupturing the signifying system whereby the child is a byword for futurity. This rupture is, as Balanzategui puts it, “particularly

⁵ According to Atiba Goff et al, Black children are eighteen times more likely than White children to be sentenced as adults in the US legal system (526).

subversive for a figure whose central sociocultural function is to ensure intergenerational and historical continuity through embodying a link to the past while existing as an incubator for the future” (18).

Where Balanzategui posits the existence of two categories of uncanny children: child ghosts and “in-betweens,” child seers who possess supernatural insight into the world of the dead, I wish to argue that though these two categories are powerfully present in *Sing*, they shift and slip with regards to the children in this narrative, frequently functioning simultaneously or interchangeably. Richie and Given are literal child ghosts in the text, lingering in the world of the living following their deaths. However, while Jojo and Kayla are not biologically dead, they function as “spectral” children, not only in that their racialized and classed positions render them marginal but also in that their child status is not meaningfully or consistently recognized throughout the text. Their needs are frequently unmet, and their level of agency, vulnerability, and maturity are consistently misapprehended by the adults around them who repeatedly fail to prevent them from coming to physical and emotional harm. For example, early in the novel, Jojo recalls how Leonie leaves him at home alone, an experience he finds frightening and overwhelming, which results in him cutting his foot on a discarded tin can. When Leonie is confronted by her father about her treatment of Jojo she protests, “*He old enough,*” going on to try and confirm this with her son, asserting “*You alright, huh, Jojo,*” to which he responds “*No, Leonie*” (16; italics in original). This moment, where Jojo rejects both his mother’s assessment of his being “alright” and his being old enough to be left, encapsulates this ghosting, here produced by a failure of maternal attention. Moreover, Ward dramatizes the potential deaths of these children on several occasions in the narrative. After Jojo cuts his foot, he gets an infection that Leonie fails to treat. After potentially being poisoned by her mother’s herbal medicine, Kayla is not being held securely enough in the passenger seat of the family’s car and is injured when her father runs off the road (201). During the traffic stop discussed above, Leonie

hallucinates Jojo being shot by the police officer even though it does not happen (164). All these incidents remind the reader of the fragility of the borderline between life and death for Black children in the US. Likewise, while initially it appears that Jojo and Kayla function as “seers” in the novel, with their ability to communicate psychically with each other and to see and communicate with nonhuman life and with the dead, Richie and Given are also conceptualized in this way, their returns laden with insight and prescience that they struggle to deploy.

Three of these child characters, Jojo, Kayla, and Richie, whether biologically dead or socially spectralized, manifest explicitly as Deleuzian child seers, who emerge “when a powerless and confused child character experiences a disorienting breakdown in the sensory-motor schema. . . . This sensory-motor collapse forces the child to experience a ‘purely optical or sound situation’ (1997a, 5) that is divorced from the relentless progression of linear time. As a result, these children perceive the loss of a clearly defined, coherent meaning system” (Balanzategui 124). Such a “disorienting breakdown in the sensory-motor schema” is produced for Richie in the moment of his killing by Pop, which he experiences belatedly through Pop’s telling the story of it for the first time: “Richie had never been so still, so silent. His mouth frozen open, his eyes wide and black. He is balanced on his toes and he could be made of stone” (253). This frozen “motor helplessness” is twinned with Richie’s “purely optical” taking in of his situation, indicated by Ward’s unsettling description of Richie’s eyes: “Richie blinks. . . . His blinks start slow, but as Pop talks, they get faster until they’re blurred like a hummingbird, and all I see are his eyes, his black eyes with a scrim over them” (254).

Jojo and Kayla meanwhile experience such a moment of powerlessness and confusion during the traffic stop described above, with Jojo’s restraint by the police officer and Kayla’s restraint by Misty providing scenes of “pre-pubescent bodies effected by a certain motor helplessness.” This helplessness manifests in Kayla’s loss of control over her body as she “goes *rigid* all at once,” a “golden toss of vomit [erupting] from [her] mouth” (166), the syntax of

Ward's sentence rendering Kayla's body a passive vehicle for the vomit, whose eruption is figured as active. Jojo's powerlessness in this moment, as he is kicked to the ground and handcuffed at gunpoint, is unquestionable, as Jojo describes his heart feeling "like it was a bird, ricocheted off a car mid-flight, stunned and reeling" in a passage that centers upon the things he can hear and see, experiencing his interrogation by the police as another such "purely optical or sound situation." That this experience divorces Jojo from "the relentless progression of linear time" is registered in the persistence of the image of the gun and its somatic imprinting on Jojo's body:

The image of the gun stays with me. Even after Kayla throws up, after the police officer checks my pants and lets me out of them biting handcuffs, even after we are all in the car and riding down the road with Leonie bent over sick in the front seat, that black gun is there. It is a tingle at the back of my skull, an itching on my shoulder. . . . I rub the indents in my wrists where the handcuffs squeezed and see the gun. (170-1)

What is striking about these moments is that, while they align closely with the Deleuzian notion of when and how such a child-seer figure might come into being, the children's uncanny insight pre-dates these events, suggesting that for Black child subjects in the American South, these "breakdowns in sensory-motor schema," and resulting losses of "coherent meaning system[s]" are not singular catastrophic events but instead occur early and repeatedly, "refus[ing] the idiom of exception" (Cade-Brown 15).

4. "Time Floods the Room in a Storm Surge": Intergenerationality and the Simultaneity of History

There thus emerges in *Sing* a triad composed of the ghost, the child, and trauma whereby the figure of the child specter/child seer acts as an inscription of trauma, "a symptom of repressed knowledge [that] calls into question the possibilities of a future based on the avoidance of the

past” (Weinstock qtd. in Balanzategui 19). In composing this triad, these child specters/seers draw attention to the ways in which linear time is constantly ruptured by traumatic returns, which are simultaneously experienced as new events—this is typified by Richie’s traumatic reception of the story of how he died, receiving this as radically new information, despite having already experienced this fatal encounter with Pop. When Richie tells Jojo “you don’t know shit about time” (184), he voices Ward’s novel’s insistence on this unstable model of temporality that possesses a haunting simultaneity. Richie describes this experience of time with particular reference to Parchman, asking, “how could [he] 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 everything is happening at once?” (186). Mam echoes these sentiments almost exactly, stating “we don’t walk in no straight lines. It’s all happening at once. All of it. We all here at once. My mama and daddy and they mamas and daddies” (236). However, Mam’s repetition of Richie’s phrase, with its invocation of previous generations—“mamas and daddies”—also gestures towards an understanding of this simultaneity as partly arising from inheritance, the dead, their loves and their traumas, carried within the living. Indeed, when Leonie reflects, while collecting the graveyard rocks she needs for her mother’s death ritual, “[t]he weight of the stones in my shirt was heavy, remind me of what it felt like to carry Jojo and Michaela, to bear another human being in my stomach” (259), she offers a powerful image of the ways the living carry the dead with them, are ‘pregnant’ with their familial and communal pasts.

5. Haunted Landscapes

Having established how these spectral child seers come into being, the alternative temporality they generate, and the ability to see and hear what conventional narratives—historical, familial, or otherwise—exclude, it is productive to analyze the spaces occupied by and productive of

these figures who negotiate the borderland between the living and the dead, the past, and the present. Throughout the novel, Ward situates her characters in the “abandoned, decaying spaces of society [that] capture a temporal admixture of past, present, and future” (Balanzategui 247). This is evoked in Richie’s time-traveling “sleep-wake” cycle at Parchman, where he journeys unpredictably through the site’s history. However, a particular kind of space is invoked by Deleuze when he describes where the child seer might be found—the “any-space-whatever”: “deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste grounds, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction” (xi). As Richie takes his place in the novel, it is in a location that we could define as an “any-space-whatever.” When Richie joins Jojo and his family on the car trip back from Parchman, he does so by occupying the “waste ground” of the car’s footwell, amongst rubbish and refuse: “I settle in the crumpled bits of paper and plastic that litter the bottom of the car” (141). Richie’s supernatural compression of himself into a space that is too small for him unsettles Jojo: “Even though he’s skinny, arms and legs racket thin, he should be too big to fit in the space he done folded himself into. He’s sharp at the edges, but there’s too much of him, so all I can think when I look at him is *Something’s wrong*” (169; italics in original). This passage dramatizes the difficulty of encountering such dwellers in “any-place-whatever” and of “how to define them or physically interact with them” (Balanzategui 128), while also providing an image of the spectral child as capable of disrupting the terms of use of that most American of symbols, the automobile. Strikingly, the model of the family car is a “Nova.” Richie’s occupation of it, his pointing out of its hollows and absences, acts as a rebuttal of a linear progression towards the “new” by placing the old, that which comes from the past, at its heart, symbolically compromising any notion of a straightforward new future reached through avoidance of the past. It is here that Richie takes up his position and both showcases his alternative modes of knowing and seeing and confirms Jojo’s participation in these modes, his ability to “hear animals, see things that ain’t there” (183). It is also in this moment that Kayla’s

capacity for this supernatural cognition and perception is confirmed as Jojo looks at her, fearing a tantrum, but is instead confronted by the realization that “she has it. Like me. That she can understand like I can, but even better, because she knows how to do it now” (176).

In their capacity as child seers Jojo and Kayla also have a unique relationship to space and to landscape in the novel, which is most vividly drawn during their visit to Parchman that both children, to different extents, experience in a hallucinatory and temporally disturbed fashion:

Kayla points out to the fields, fields covered in fog, and says, “Jojo.” I walk across the parking lot, closer to the fields with her.

“What you see, Kayla” I ask.

“All the birds,” she says, and coughs.

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, row after row of them, picking at the ground, 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)

Both Jojo and Kayla experience Parchman in its contemporary manifestation and the resonances of its previous incarnations simultaneously. In their atemporal interactions with the space of Parchman, which are orientated around looking and seeing, Richie, Jojo, and Kayla produce, to quote Dylan Trigg, “less a direct fragment of a broken narrative, and more a murmur of the place where that narrative once existed” (99). Furthermore, Trigg’s definition of the “ruin,” whereby a structure’s “temporal admixture of past, present, and future” makes what was “formerly unnoticeable . . . visible” (238), offers a useful framework for understanding how these spectral children *themselves* function within these landscapes. In their status as the kinds of “repudiated, throwaway bodies, . . . disposable bodies denied by white culture” (15), which

Patricia Yaeger refers to in *Dirt and Desire*, Jojo, Kayla, Given, and Richie constitute human ruins. However, Trigg also proposes that:

the ruin frees us from an already formed definition of history. . . . [T]he false arrangement of the past, whereby the surplus remains are discarded, presenting history as an ordered, self-contained and rationalistic project, is overruled by the emergence of the past in the ruin, as fragmented and incomplete. (237)

In light of this passage, it is possible to read the persistent presence of Ward's spectral children, their refusal to simply disappear, as embodying this quality of the ruin, in that, through their haunting persistence, they make themselves, and thus the violence that murders or marginalizes them, "noticeable," renders them visible. By functioning in this way, these spectral child seers perform precisely the function that Deleuze attributes to the child as "generative force"—the power to act as "a vector of affect: an activator of change" (Hickey-Moody 272). In this case, this function activates the intersection between site, history, and trauma and allows "unburial" to give way to a more meaningful recognition of the marginalized dead (both biological and social) generated by racial and class-based violence. Crucially, these figures perform this work through a mode of witnessing that negotiates a path through the privileging of individual experience *as* individual and simultaneously recognizing that such experiences also possess collective, communal meaning, engaging in a tussle between "individual interiority and historical exteriority" (Benjamin qtd. in Balanzategui 124).

It is precisely this struggle that is staged in the moment of Mam's death, as Richie appears to try to claim the dying woman as a mother figure, while "Phantom Given" tries to keep him at bay and Leonie struggles to perform the ritual which would call the death Loa Maman Brigitte to help her mother pass over. Given rejects Richie's desire to take Mam for his own with the repeated phrase "Not your mother," refusing the interchangeability of familial ties which Richie craves and insisting on Mam's status as unique subject. Mam's encounter with

Richie is remarkable in that it speaks to the shaping of a death by the bonds of history. Mam says of him, “‘Ain’t lè mistè.’ *No Spirit. No God. No mystery.* . . . ‘He lè mò.’ *The dead*” (264; italics in original). Richie is not a representative of the ordered afterlife produced through lives recognized as lives and mourned as losses when they end. He is instead categorized as outside of the realm of spirituality. He is the nameless dead, “[p]ulling the weight of history behind him. . . . Like a cotton sack full of lead” (265). The cotton sack image here, redolent of plantation slavery in the American South, is productive in that it provokes a consideration of whether the individual must always be sunk beneath the (lead) weight of collective history, made a representative of the community rather than a unique subject.

Try as he might, Richie cannot “go home,” as he describes it, and cannot re-insert himself back into a narrative of individual subjectivity, particularly where that subjectivity is secured through familial bonds. Indeed, Ward implies that Richie’s ghostly “homelessness” predates his death, as he states, “Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats like your heart. Same time. Where my family lived . . . it’s a wall. It’s a hard floor, wood. Then concrete. No opening. No heartbeat. No air” (182-83; ellipsis in original). It is his poignant inability to find a place within communal and familial structures that underscores the profoundly risky quality of the negotiations these child seers and child specters undertake between the past, present, and future, between the individual and the collective. Jojo is nearly shot during the traffic stop while Kayla is nearly poisoned, but it is Richie whose negotiation of this borderline has the most catastrophic consequences, consequences that give an insight into who or what the “unburied” or Ward’s title might be. After Mam’s death, during which Richie is driven out by Given and Jojo and prevented from anchoring Mam in the same kind of haunting existence he possesses, Jojo finds him still present in the family’s yard: “curled into the roots of a great live oak, looking half-dead and half-sleep, and all ghost” (280). When Jojo

asks him why he is still there after hearing the end of his story, Richie replies, “I thought once I knew, I could. . . . Be home. . . . I can’t. Come inside. I tried. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole. Makes it so I can come in” (281).

Richie’s subjective existence is doubly compromised, his childhood status negated, and his humanity denied so that he cannot be mourned because he was never really present according to the social and political regime in which he lived. As such, his absence cannot generate a lack to be filled. He is not on his own in possessing this status—“so many crying loose. Lost” (282), as he puts it—and the novel’s closing passage illustrates this at length. In the final pages of the novel, Jojo looks up at the oak tree whose roots had sheltered Richie:

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 near to babies. . . . 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 they look as people. (282)

6. “Bright as Ghosts in the Dark”: The Spectral Child as Witness

This “tree of ghosts,” as Jojo refers to it, collapses the temporal and subjective distance between the dead, all of whom and all at once, attest to their racially motivated brutalization and murder in an unpunctuated stream of consciousness passage that makes it impossible to attribute a single subject to each moment of testimony. The description of the ghosts’ varied clothing, “rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies,” signifies to the reader the range of historical periods the dead in this passage span and resonates with Ward’s comment in an interview in *Mother Jones* that when she wrote this text, “[she] was thinking about Mike Brown, Philando Castile, Trayvon we have this trail of black bodies littering history. Some of the ghosts are wearing hoodies” (qtd. in Oatman).

In witnessing this testimony, Jojo is once again returned to the state of paralyzed stillness associated for Deleuze with the child seer, rooted to the spot, feeling “the skin on [his] back burn, like hundreds of ants are crawling up [his] spine” (283) in a passage that recalls the somatic effects of the police officer’s gun on Jojo’s body long after it had been holstered. However, Kayla’s response to the tree of ghosts is quite different. Able to see and understand the ghosts, Kayla demands to be allowed to address them:

Kayla begins to sing a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand. Only the melody, which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of the trees, that cuts their whispering but twines with it at the same time. . . . And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it’s how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla’s back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts leans forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. . . . *Home, they say. Home.* (283; italics in original)

One of the most significant elements of this passage is the way Kayla’s communication with the ghosts—which approaches but does not achieve “relief,” “remembrance,” or “ease”—outstrips conventional spoken language, comprised of a melody that harmonizes with the ghosts’ own communications and “mismatched, half-garbled words” that are beyond Jojo’s comprehension. In doing so, Kayla’s interaction with the dead resonates with Agamben’s assertion that “not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness” (qtd. in Trigg 93). Kayla’s comforting of the anonymous dead here, truly an act of witnessing, where the child seer embodies her role as “see-er,” one who sees, can only ever approach “something like” comfort, and indeed the ghosts do not go

“home” at the end of the novel, only articulate “*Home*.” Kayla’s communications with the ghosts combine with her gestures to move the child seer from the “purely optical or sound situation” referenced by Deleuze, back into an agentic embodiment. While, as David Martin-Jones puts it, “the child seer encounters something ‘intolerable and unbearable,’ something . . . beyond their power to act upon” (qtd. in Balanzategui 126), this climactic moment in the novel allows Kayla to use her ability to see and know otherwise to step into a “power to act” in the interest of recognizing and soothing the brutalized and forgotten dead.

In conclusion, I propose that ultimately, Ward’s novel uses the figure of the spectral child/seer to underscore the possibility of seeing and knowing the past, its dead, and the way they populate the present in a way that plots a route out of traumatized “not knowing,” a route that negotiates “individual interiority and historical exteriority,” while acknowledging the limitations of narrative and the receipt of narrative. Richie, who poignantly tells Jojo, “I need the story [of my death] to go” (230), understands his own life story as “a moth-eaten shirt nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased.” However, while believing he “could patch those holes. Make that shirt hang new,” Richie accepts that “the tails. The end” cannot be accommodated by his own storytelling (137). Ultimately though, hearing his story is not enough. Some narratives, far from being “objectionably consoling,” as La Capra puts it, remain horrifying, obliterating, as this description of Richie’s reaction to hearing how Pop killed him to stop him being tortured to death: “Richie’s head has tilted back until he is looking at the sky, at the great blue wash of it beyond the embrace of the trees. His eyes widen more, and his arms and his legs spread. . . . At first I think he is singing again, but the I realize it is a whine that rises to a yell that rises to a scream, and the look on his face is horror at what he sees” (256).

Immobilized by the “intolerable and unbearable” ending of his own story, Richie again takes up the position of the child seer, whose own story is of no use or comfort to him. Yet

Ward's novel engages, as Anna Hartnell identifies, with the form of the Jeremiad: a narrative "structured by the possibility of the redemption of historical conditions" and "the negotiation of historical conditions, not utter submission to them" (qtd. in Crowshaw 225). On the penultimate page of *Sing*, Jojo describes his sister contemplating the tree of ghosts: "Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulders Pop's, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (284). In this image of Kayla's embodied synthesis of ancestral pasts that nevertheless preserves those individuals, living and dead, is captured *Sing's* refusal to deny the power of narratives of witnessing to, at least partially, secure place for the displaced, ignored, and forgotten, to "take all the pieces of everybody and [hold] them together" (284).

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