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<CH>“Something like praying” (p. 279): Syncretic Spirituality and Racial Justice in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)

Abstract:

On the 5th November 2020, the University of Southern California hosted “Spiritual Protest: The Role of Faith in the Fight for Racial Justice”, an event exploring the role of spirituality within the Black Lives Matter movement. In her keynote speech for the event, Hebah Farrag recalled her experiences of that summer’s Black Lives Matter protests and described seeing “protestors clad all in white, burning sage across militarized police lines, chants and the pouring of vivations in front of court houses invoking the spirits of ancestors and those killed by police.” (Farrag 2020) The actions Farrag describes have their roots in syncretised African-American spiritual traditions including Hoodoo, and Haitian and Louisiana Vodou. It is these systems of belief and the practices associated with them, including root work and medicine, conjuration, and the invocation of loas and other deities, which structure the metaphysical landscape of Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

In this chapter I map Ward’s deployment in her fiction of the practices, language and iconography of Hoodoo, and Haitian and Louisiana Vodou, a deployment that is neither a straightforward documentation, nor uninterested in historico-social specificity. I propose that this strategy constitutes an effort to produce a new ontology specifically capable both of identifying the ways violently oppressive racial ideologies impose ‘creaturely’ⁱ existences on marginalised subjects and of accommodating modes of knowing and being in the world (child-like modes, animal modes) potentially capable of dismantling such ideologies. In so doing, I place Ward’s literary strategy in conversation with wider contemporary trends in the intersections between political activism and African-American spirituality.

Key Words: Hoodoo, Vodou, *Sing Unburied Sing*, syncretism, Black Lives Matter, racial justice, spirituality

On the 5th November 2020, the University of Southern California hosted ‘Spiritual Protest: The Role of Faith in the Fight for Racial Justice’, an event exploring the role of spirituality within the Black Lives Matter movement. In her keynote speech, Hebah Farrag recalled her experiences of that summer’s BLM protests and described seeing ‘protestors clad all in white, burning sage across militarized police lines, chants and the pouring of vivations in front of court houses invoking the spirits of ancestors and those killed by police’(Farrag 2020). The actions Farrag describes have their roots in African religious traditions such as Ifá which became syncretised as part of African American spiritual traditions including Hoodoo, and Haitian and Louisiana Vodou. It is these systems of belief and practice - including root work and root medicine, conjuration, and the invocation of loas and other deities - which structure the metaphysical landscape of Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and, for some characters, interact with the sensory disorganisation resulting from drug use, and with traumatic hallucinations. The novel tells the story of the African American Stone family, who live in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. The family comprises patriarch Pop, who in his youth served a jail sentence in the notorious Parchman Prison, Mam, who is dying of cancer and practices Hoodoo, the syncretic form of religion native to America’s Gulf coast, their daughter Leonie, whose white partner Michael, is serving a sentence in Parchman for drug dealing, and Michael and Leonie’s children, JoJo, thirteen and Kayla, three. As the novel opens Leonie has received the news that Michael is being released and has decided to take their children with her on a road trip to collect him.

In this chapter I map Ward’s deployment in her fiction of the practices, language and iconography of Hoodoo, and Haitian and Louisiana Vodou, a deployment that is neither a straightforward documentation, nor uninterested in historico-social specificity. An analysis of Ward’s representation of syncretic African-based spiritualities is begun in James Mellis’

‘Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*’ (Mellis 2019). However, here I contextualise Ward’s engagement with the intersection between African-based spiritual traditions and political protest, resistance and protection, by placing it in conversation with the manifestation of these practices within the Black Lives Matter movement specifically. Furthermore, I propose that this representation is more complex than has previously been suggested, offering a vision of a potentially politically protective set of spiritual practices which are, for young African American subjects in the South, unevenly available and unevenly efficacious. In so doing, I place Ward’s literary strategy in dialogue both with wider contemporary trends in the intersections between political activism and African American spirituality, and with less well-recognised manifestations of such spirituality as protection and protest. I argue that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* demonstrates the complex evolution and presence of Hoodoo in Southern African American life and culture, and the ways in which the protection, subversion or resistance it might be understood to facilitate has become more complex or difficult to access for younger African Americans, whose ability or desire to engage with these belief systems and practices should not be understood as homogenous.

Ward’s representation of the African-based spiritual traditions predominantly practiced in the south of America, including Hoodoo and Mississippi, Louisiana and Haitian Vodou,² and their relationship with political protest and protection is complex. To appreciate their nuances various contexts must first be established. The first is the longstanding relationship between African American spirituality (both in terms of mainstream Christian traditions and in terms of traditions such as Hoodoo) and African American social justice movements from the slavery era to the present day. A significant body of research has emerged in recent decades on the relationship between African American Christian traditions and social justice activism in America. From analyses of the ways in which black Christianity shaped politics in the

antebellum South (Ford 2012) to studies of the significance of evangelism and religious experience in black women's activism (Booker 2021), the interactions between African American Christianity and the civil rights movement and its forebears is well-documented. A more recent development in scholarship in this area is the analysis of how practices taken from African-based spiritual traditions have historically formed a concealed praxis of political protest and resistance and have recently started to form a key element of the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Elise M. Edwards states, the Black Lives Matter agenda 'is holistic, and the movement embraces spiritual practices' (Edwards 2017). Despite these spiritual practices being invoked in often profoundly visible and explicit ways during Black Lives Matter rallies and protests,³ this facet of the movement has been largely excised from its mainstream media representation. To quote Hebah Farrag:

<EXT>What is generally missing from these depictions are images like the white-clad black woman burning sage across a militarized police line; documentation of the chants in front of the Los Angeles courthouse declaring 'summon our ancestors,' and grassroots organizations' use of spiritually infused tools to heal those directly impacted by state violence. (2018, 76)</EXT>

It is within this socio-political context, where what Farrag terms 'traditional African faith practices' are being self-consciously and visibly mobilised as part of a 'very new toolbox' for political protest, resistance and healing (2018, 87), that Ward's representations of these practices in *Sing* must be analysed.

<A>Defining Hoodoo

The American Gulf Coast, where Ward has set all her novels to date, is a location which, according to Zora Neale Hurston, has historically had the highest development of African

spiritual practices in the United States (1931, 318). These spiritual practices, which are syncretic in nature, developed as a result of the forcible displacement of people by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Yvonne Chireau puts it: ‘While Africans were unable to replicate their religious institutions, they usually created new, sometimes clandestine traditions that served their collective needs’ (2003, 31) While there are numerous such syncretic belief systems which developed under these circumstances, the belief system which became dominant in the American South, and in Mississippi in particular, was known as Hoodoo.⁴ To quote Timothy Ruppel et al:

<EXT>Hoodoo [. . .] combined African ethnic beliefs with elements of Christianity and Islam. In the late nineteenth century, Hoodoo spread across the United States wherever African Americans moved after emancipation. In this process, African based spiritual practices from across the South merged into a fairly cohesive practice. (Ruppel et al 2003, 326-7)<EXT>

Despite Ruppel’s contention that Hoodoo as practiced in the American South formed a ‘fairly cohesive practice’, it is vital to recognise, as Billy Middleton does, that ‘in seeing “Southern black” or “slave” culture as a single uniform culture or Voodoo and Hoodoo as a uniform set of folk practices, we are being reductive’ (2016, 158) and to acknowledge that the practice of these spiritual systems was always, to quote Danielle Clausnitzer ‘highly individualized and contextualized’ (2017, 213). This is borne out in Ward’s work, where her protagonists (particularly Mam), draw on Hoodoo alongside elements of Haitian Vodou, including the invocation of loa.⁵ Nonetheless, two key features of Hoodoo and Haitian Vodou can be identified as central to *Sing*. The first of these is the presence of a specific understanding of the natural world. As Katrina Hazzard puts it ‘[s]ince the forces of nature were everywhere and highly accessible, the transference from lost African divinity back to nature could be accomplished. Evidence of this process is observed in later Hoodoo rituals which responded to

and honored these forces'.(Hazzard-Donald 2011, 199). This blending of the material and the spiritual also registers itself in another feature of Hoodoo and associated syncretic religious systems: the significance of family, community and spirit. To quote West:

<EXT>[f]or early African Americans, one's place in the community constituted a spiritual belonging—one's soul, one's humanity was confirmed through community. Early African American communities consisted of enslaved people who formed bonds that guided them in living through the commonplace violence and terror of slavery, maintaining their collective understanding of the world and themselves as sacred. [. . .] Moreover, when slavery was abolished, freed black people continued and passed on this tradition of community and spirit. (West 2020, 427)<\EXT>

The specific relationship with the animal and botanical world, an emphasis on the significance of community and 'spirit' in the specifically African American spiritual sense, the invocation of loa, the practice of herbal medicine: all of these features of Hoodoo and Haitian Vodou are present within *Sing*. The question then arises of what functions they serve and effects they create within Ward's novel, in the context of the recently visible and self-conscious presence of African-based spiritual traditions in Black Lives Matter and other African American social justice movements.

<A>Hoodoo, the Human and the Non-Human

The intertwined relationship between the human and the non-human found in Hoodoo and Vodou belief is present thematically throughout *Sing*. This is illustrated in Pop's understanding of the mutually beneficial exchange which is possible between the human and the natural world. As Chireau outlines, within numerous African cultures there exists a concept of the 'force vitale, an omnipresent energy [. . .] [t]he power of this life force was believed to dwell within organic and inorganic objects, in the elements of nature, and in the bodies of all

animate beings. Through ritual, it was thought that human beings would be able to tap supernatural power for manifold purposes' (2006, 39). While cutting wood Pop explains to Jojo how his great grandfather:

<EXT>"Said there's spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. [. . .] You need a balance of spirit. A body, he told me, is the same way. [. . .] Like this. I'm strong. I can split this wood. But maybe if I had some of the boar's strength, a little bit of wild pig tusk at my side, something to give me a little bit of that animal's spirit, then maybe, just maybe," he huffed, "I'm better at this. Maybe it come a little easier to me. Maybe I'm stronger." (73) <\EXT>

This intertwined quality of the human and the non-human is borne out in Jojo's ability to comprehend the communications of the animal world. However, it is also reproduced linguistically by Ward, where it structures the metaphorical ground of the novel. Pop is described as 'straight and slim and brown as a young pine tree' (1), his bones 'indomitable as cypress', while Mam, suffering from cancer, is 'dried [. . .] up and hollowed [. . .] out the way the sun and the air do water oaks' (3).⁶ Ward's linguistic invocation of the interrelation between the human and animal world is at its most potent in Richie's description of Jojo as carrying the 'scent of leaves disintegrating to mud at the bottom of a river, the aroma of the bowl of the bayou, heavy with water and sediment and the skeletons of small, dead creatures, crab, fish, snakes and shrimp' (133). This description chimes with Mam's metaphorisation of her family's bloodline, and the spiritual skills and cognisance which come with it, as the flow of the Mississippi waterways: "I think it runs in the blood, like silt in water. Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees. [. . .] Rises up in the water over generations'" (40).

<A>'*Because humans is animals*' (226): Dehumanisation and the Rhetoric of Racism

Ward's use of metaphor to underscore the inextricable relationship between the human and the animal within the novel is in the above instances indicative of a source of power and connection. However, in *Sing*, the instability of the boundary between the human and the animal is paralleled by a dehumanising equivalence drawn between Black communities and animals which underpinned the logic of slavery and its legacies. The division between these two categories of being is one which the biopolitical regime exploits 'to mark racialized bodies as non-human [. . .] By projecting animality onto socially subjugated groups, these individuals are framed as neither animal nor human' (Cade-Brown 2017, 3). Ward's novel acknowledges this in Pop's recollection of his enslaved great-grandmother: 'her mouth shaped to a muzzle. [. . .] made into an animal under the hot, bright sky' (69). Creaturely life is what Eric Santner refers to as 'the dimension of undeadness, the space between real and symbolic death' and it is to the creaturely that I wish to turn now (2006, xx). Santner defines the creaturely as 'signify[ing] less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field' (2006, xix). While the troubling of the animal/human boundary permeates *Sing* it is Ward's child characters who are subjected to the most painful entanglements with creatureliness.⁷

Such entanglements can be found as standalone metaphors, as in the case of the image of Kayla as 'her most animal self, a worm-ridden cat in [Jojo's] arms' (110) or when Jojo, aware of the danger involved in being introduced to his racist white grandparents, is described as 'hear[ing] like an animal' (203). However, the comparison is at its most visceral in the novel's opening depiction of the slaughter of a goat by Pop, an event which underscores the disposability of animal bodies. Jojo experiences the odour of the animal's entrails and observes the tenuous quality of the border between life and death: 'It's the smell of death, the rot coming

from something just alive, something hot with blood and life' (6) while in his mind Jojo is unable to separate the goat's body from the body of his sister:

<EXT>I grimace, wanting to make Kayla's stink face, the face she makes when she's angry or impatient; to everyone else it looks like she's smelled something nasty [. . .] I know it's stomach and intestines, but all I can see is Kayla's stink face and the soft eye of the goat. (6) <\EXT>

As Crownshaw puts it: 'the distinction between [Ward's characters] humanity and the surrounding animal life is blurred; their bodies are caught in an interminable process of evisceration revealing the animal within' (2016, 228). This pairing of Black bodies with animal carcasses is repeated in the image of Given's corpse which is doubled with that of the buck he shoots, found 'lying long and still in the pine needles, his blood a black puddle beneath him [. . .] A hundred yards off, the buck lay on his side, one arrow in his neck, another in his stomach and all of him as cold and hard as my brother, their blood congealing.' (49-50) The repetition of the comparative 'as' in this sentence combines with the use of the phrase '*their* blood congealing' to conflate Given and the buck, a conflation continued in the repeated lie that Given's death is a hunting accident, a situation in which a human is substituted for the intended prey.

The repeated comparison of the Black and dual heritage children in the novel to animals acknowledges an equation of Black bodies with animal bodies which bolstered white supremacist thought and which still underscores race relations in Ward's America, as illustrated in Jojo's recollection of his white father, Michael, telling him about his experience of the Deep Water Horizon oil spill which has killed whole pods of dolphins on the Gulf Coast:

<EXT> then Michael said something I'll never forget: *Some scientists from BP said this didn't have nothing to do with the oil. That sometimes this is what happens to*

animals. They die for unexpected reasons. Sometimes a lot of them. Sometimes all at once. And then Michael looked at me and said: And when the scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals. And the way he looked at me that night told me he wasn't just thinking about any humans; he was thinking about me. (
226) <\EXT>

Jojo's recognition of his father's complex and disturbing attribution to him of a potentially 'animal' status is shocking precisely because it takes place in a stream of consciousness rather than in an overt discussion of race. The passage confirms the 'creaturely' existences which are conferred upon children such as Jojo and Kayla by a society still structured by the legacies of slavery, even by those who might be expected to most energetically acknowledge and shelter their human status.

The insistence upon the instability of the human animal binary in *Sing* performs, then, two oppositional functions. This strategy offers a vision of an African-based spirituality which 'revolve[s] around exchange and connectivity between the spirit, the human, the animal and the plant realms in a way that maintains a cosmic balance' (Nweke and Okpaleke 2019, 250). Such a vision is powerfully evoked in Jojo's ability to '[hear] as an animal', not merely in terms of the sharpness of that sense, but his capacity to comprehend the animal world. Early in the novel he recalls how, while in his grandparents' yard: 'it was impossible not to hear the animals, [. . .] and it was like I was looking at a sentence and understanding all the words, all of it coming to me at once. [. . .] I knew the animals understood me then too' (14-5). Conversely, Ward points not to a communication between the human and the non-human but a perverse substitution of one for the other which facilitates acts of racial violence, a substitution which is possible only through the Puritan Christian separation of the material and the spiritual. If, many African spiritual traditions, '[h]umans have the responsibility of keeping this equilibrium through the process of respect and relevance of all things.' (Nweke and

Okpaleke 2019, 250), then the white Christian traditions also present in the American South institute a separation between spirituality and the material world which desacralizes the animal and makes it available for literal and ideological exploitation.

The status of Hoodoo as not solely religious but also serving a political function is vital to acknowledge. Claustnizer positions conjure, and other belief systems like it, as ‘facilitating the overthrow of oppressive forces in the lives of countless Hoodoo practitioners who shared this experience of empowerment’, enabling such practitioners to ‘realiz[e] their own agency in such a dehumanizing system’ (2017, 216). Crucially, however, Hoodoo as a force for political resistance and subversion was also a *concealed* force. The necessity of such concealment was theorised by political anthropologist James C. Scott in his notion of the ‘hidden transcript’. To quote Ruppel et al:

<EXT>James C. Scott [. . .] argues that oppressed groups challenge the dominant order by constructing and utilising what he terms a ‘hidden transcript,’ an interlocking series of veiled cultural practices designed to dispute and disrupt the absolute power of the ‘official’ and ‘public’ transcript. Scott draws attention to prosaic, everyday forms of resistance that remain largely invisible to the dominant culture because their meanings are not understood by those in power. (Ruppel et al 2003, 324)<\EXT>

Such ‘disputes’ and ‘disruptions’ are recorded in *Sing*, as Pop remembers his ancestors producing their own hidden transcripts in which the ‘old ways’ are set in contrast to the ‘official stuff’ of white bureaucracy:

<EXT>*his mama and daddy avoided them census takers, never answered their questions right [. . .]. Said them people came sniffing out that information [. . .] to cage them like livestock. So they never did any of that official stuff, held to the old ways.*

Papa taught us some of that before he died: some hunting and tracking, some animal work, some things about balance, about life. (17) <\EXT>

<A>Gris Gris Bags and Protection in Plain Sight

Another of the ‘old ways’ which Pop utilises in order to protect himself and his family from the threats posed by white society is the gris gris bag (Calustnizer 2017, 213). A gris gris bag is a pouch containing ‘an amalgamation of objects, both natural and manufactured, that connect the individual directly with the sacred.’ (Calustnizer 2017, 213). Gris gris bags embody the deeply syncretic nature of spiritual systems like Hoodoo, incorporating elements drawn from Algonquin traditions in addition to those drawn from African contexts. They are also profoundly individualised, as ‘various constructed and natural elements as well as a clear “intention” are utilized to create the ideal “bag” for each individual practitioner’ (Claustnizer 2017, 216). In *Sing* the gris gris bag is almost exclusively invoked in the context of providing protection against racist violence, explicit, structural or otherwise. It is one of the key objects through which the novel posits traditions such as Hoodoo as possible tools for political resistance, particularly given that to survive is a political act in these circumstances. As Loretta J. Ross puts it: ‘[i]t is a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist.’ (Booker 2021, 221).

In Ward’s novel, this individualisation is evident in Jojo’s discovery of the gris gris bag his grandfather has created to protect him on the journey to and from Parchman. Ward not only emphasises the relationship between the maker of the bag and its intended recipient – as Jojo acknowledges ‘I know it’s Pop who wrote the note, Pop who gathered the feather, the tooth, the rock, who sewed the leather pouch’ - she also describes the contents of the bag in minute detail:

<EXT>a white feather smaller than my pinkie finger, tipped with blue and a slash of black. Something that at first looks like a chip of white candy, [. . .] some kind of animal tooth, lined with black in the chewing grooves, sharp like a canine. [. . .] a small grey river rock, a little perfect dome. [. . .] a piece of paper rolled thin as a fingernail. In slanted, shaky script, in blue ink: *Keep this close.* (70-1)<\EXT>

While Ward's description reproduces the traditional construction and contents of such objects within Hoodoo tradition, her use of language here incubates a feeling of fragility. Everything the bag contains is miniscule, the feather 'smaller' than Jojo's little finger, the tooth a 'chip', the rock both 'small' and 'little', the note 'rolled thin as a fingernail'. The image of the fingernail, pared away from the human body combines with the shakiness of Pop's handwriting to pair the cultural accuracy of Ward's depiction of the gris gris bag with an inescapable precarity. This sense is present also in Ward's description of Jojo's discovery of the bag, as he finds: '[a] small bag, so small two could fit in the palm of my hand, secreted in the middle of my bundle of clothes. Like the dot of blood the size of a pin at the centre of the yolk in an egg: life that would have been life but not' (70-1). However, this emphasis on fragility (both in the curation of the bag's contents, and the invocation of the fragility of the human, specifically childhood, state) is paired in the text with an emphasis on secrecy. Jojo attempts to conceal the bag from his mother and her friend Misty in the cramped confines of the car, 'making a small room with [his] body, a screen', and holding his 'palms, a warm open bowl, over the things that Pop has given [him]'. However, for Jojo, there is a need to conceal this protective object not only from Leonie's white friend Misty, but also from his own mother. This concealment ruptures the kinds of communal and familial connections upon which spiritual traditions such as Hoodoo are based, pointing to the parallel representation of Hoodoo in *Sing*, wherein this potentially protective and resistant spiritual practice is insufficient, unavailable or otherwise fails for Ward's characters, in the face of persistent racial violence and its traumatising legacies.

Such failure is writ large when we recognise the overdetermined parallels which exist between Jojo's gris gris bag and the bag of crystal meth which Leonie swallows to conceal it from the white police officer who pulls the family over during a traffic stop. While Jojo has access to a bespoke spiritual object created with the intention of keeping him safe from precisely the kinds of racialised violence he is threatened with, Leonie has no such object to draw on. Instead, the bag of crystal meth – 'scored' and 'jagged' in contrast to the 'smooth' and 'soft' gris gris bag – poses both an internal and external threat to Leonie's life. However, this incident also articulates the precarity of the kinds of protection Hoodoo practice appears to confer on its adherents. When Jojo is asked to leave the car and instinctively reaches for the gris gris bag, the police officer interprets his action as a threat: 'then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me. Kicking me. Yelling at me to get down in the grass. Cuffing me. Asking me, "What you got in your pocket, boy?"' (170). At the end of this terrifying altercation the police officer says dismissively 'Boy had a damn rock in his pocket' (166).

This exchange, where the objects of bag, 'baggie', river rock and 'rock' of crystal meth become dangerously interchangeable and in which the white officer calcifies the 'soft' complexity of the gris gris bag into a 'rock' which justifies the violent restraint and threat with a fire arm of a thirteen-year-old boy, attests to the heterogenous nature of Ward's representation of Hoodoo as generative of politically protective tools and practices, and evidences its potential fragility in the face of white violence, even as its potency is also attested.

<A>The Yard as Space of Resistance

While existing scholarly work on *Sing* and African-based spiritual practice, has focussed on the gris gris bag, within Hoodoo and within Ward's novel, a hitherto unacknowledged facet of Ward's evocation of Hoodoo and its related cultural practices is the status of the yard or garden as a spiritually significant site of resistance. This is perhaps

unsurprising given that these spaces are only recently being recognised in the fields of archaeology and anthropology as playing a part in the practice of spiritual systems such as Hoodoo. To quote Ruppel et al, ‘African spiritual spaces were created in [. . .] gardens in the form of coded landscapes that were often hidden – though in view’ (Ruppel et al 2003, 321). According to Ruppel’s research the gardens of enslaved African and African American subjects ‘contested the public transcript of social death and natal alienation with a diasporic transcript in the same manner as the spirituals, folklore, and quilts of enslaved Africans and African Americans’ (Ruppel et al 2003, 325). Moreover, these spaces also facilitated covert independent economic activity, characterised by secrecy and vigilance, as Ruppel et al describe:

<EXT>these landscapes and gardens also served a more prosaic function: they produced cash crops or side money. Despite the vigilance of the masters, an unregulated internal economy developed, one which allowed those who were enslaved to make crucial decisions about the allocation of time and resources used for family and community. (Ruppel et al 2003, 325)<\EXT>

Certainly Pop’s attitude to his yard is characterised by a desire to keep hidden from view his economic activities and contrasts his organisation of this outside space with JoJo’s overtly racist white grandfather:

<EXT> Pop [. . .] put his pigpen and his goat yard and the chicken coop in small clearings in the trees. [. . .]

“Why you ain’t got more of this cleared out, Pop?”

“Ain’t enough space,” Pop says. “And don’t nobody need to see what I got back here.

[. . .]

“Who you know got all they animals out in the open?” Pop says. [. . .]

“The big Joseph,” I say [. . .] Pop snorts [. . .]

“Well there you go,” Pop says. (2)<\EXT>

The Stone family yard isn’t solely a site of the ‘unregulated internal economy’ which Ruppel speaks of. It is also the space in which the majority of Jojo’s spiritual encounters take place, be that in terms of his ability to understand the communications of animals or in terms of where he most frequently comes into contact with Richie. Ward’s situation of Richie in the yard, its trees ‘hold[ing] him like a baby’ (237), its earth ‘making a cot’ for him (240), acknowledges how for African and African American communities in the American South, gardens were ‘places to find and manage spirits [. . .] . Spirits lived there, came there, were discovered there and could be brought and fed there’ (Gundakar cited in Ruppel et al 2003, 332). In populating the yard in this way, with conventionally unheard non-human voices and the spirits of the unmourned dead, Ward acknowledges how: ‘[l]andscapes throughout the African diaspora were encoded with meaning, [. . .] with signs, or hidden transcripts, that recognised the mystical nature of the world, the immanence of the other world in this one’ (Ruppel 2003, 321).

<A>Root Medicine in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

The final aspect of the practices of Hoodoo and Louisiana Voodoo through which Ward explores the tension between its utility and its accessibility for her younger characters is that of root medicine. This branch of folk medicine emerged from and is underscored by a profoundly political rationale. To quote Middleton: ‘mainstream medicine was for slaves yet another part of the systemic repression that devalued them as mere chattel. Slaves in the antebellum South approached the healing process, therefore, very similarly to Haitian Vodou communities, using self-treatment as the first strategy’ (2016, 161). Such an understanding of the links between medicine, care broadly defined, and political resistance to racial violence and

oppression is also present in the contemporary moment and underpins much of the work done by activists in the Black Lives Matter movement, as discussed by Hebah Farrag with reference to the embedding of practices of traditional and alternative medicine within the movement's activities.⁸ By contrast, in Ward's novel this trifecta of medicine, care and resistance is embodied by the figure of Mam, a care-giver whose practice of medicine is both shaped and necessitated by the oppressive and active legacies of racial violence in the American South.

Ward's novel represents root medicine as both an inherited way of understanding the world, which 'runs in the blood, like silt in the water' (40), and as a practice which requires study and instruction. Mam recalls how the local midwife, Marie Therese, 'trained [her], taught [her] everything she knew' (41) and, significantly, offers her daughter what Leonie dismissively refers to as 'plant lessons'. (48) For Mam particularly, imparting this knowledge to her children is a bulwark against racist violence and oppression. Leonie recalls a conversation her mother has with her:

<EXT>*This is the kind of world, Mama told me [. . .], that makes fools of the living and saints of them once they are dead. And devils them throughout. [. . .].* She thought that if she taught me as much herbal healing as she could, if she gave me a map to the world plotted orderly by divine order, spirit in everything, I could navigate it. (105)<\EXT>

For Leonie, though, the 'plant lessons' she is offered by Mam fail to connect with her, with Leonie narrating how, during these lessons, she would 'roll [her] eyes to the pines, wishing [she] were in front of the tv' (103). The 'map to the world' Mam hoped her teaching would provide likewise proves insufficient. When Kayla becomes ill on the drive to collect Michael from Parchman, Leonie attempts to put some of her mother's root medicine teachings into action. However, far from Mam's promise that 'if [Leonie] look carefully enough, [she] can

find what [she] need in the world' (102), Leonie concludes that '[s]ometimes the world don't give you what you need, no matter how hard you look. Sometimes it withholds.' (104).

Ward connects Leonie's lack of fluency and confidence with root medicine to her position as a young Black woman in contemporary America. During her attempt to gather the wild strawberries which she hopes will cure Kayla, Leonie reflects that '[i]f the world were a right place, a place for the living, where men like Michael didn't end up in jail, I'd be able to find wild strawberries' (104). Leonie's attempts to practice root medicine in this passage are syntactically bound up with Michael's incarceration; Leonie conjectures how she could 'boil the leaves at Michael's lawyer's house, where we're staying before we go pick Michael up in the morning' (104). Relatedly, while the ability to see the dead can form an element of Hoodoo practice, Leonie gains this ability following Given's death but is only able to see her brother. It is significant that it is an act of racist violence which triggers Leonie's ability to see beyond the human world but in a way which cannot take in the rest of 'what the world sings' (42) as Mam puts it. For Leonie racist violence both provokes and delineates her ability to engage with this vision and these practices, almost until the end of the novel. They don't protect her, or provide her with a subversive voice or tool, in the way they do for her children. As a character, Leonie depicts the collision between syncretic belief systems such as Hoodoo, which emerged specifically in the context of slavery-era America, and a contemporary American context, whose racial dynamics, and the violence and oppression they generate, pose challenges which these belief systems may not be able to accommodate.

<A>Conclusion

To conclude, it is essential when undertaking an analysis of the significance of syncretic spiritual practice for *Sing*, to do so with an awareness of a political context in which these practices have increasingly visibly been folded into social justice movements. However, while

such practices are present in these contexts, Ward's treatment of them calls on her readers to acknowledge not only the possible site of protection, resistance and subversion Hoodoo and belief systems like it might offer, but also the heterogeneity of that experience for young African Americans who may not be able or willing to connect with them, or for whom they are not capable of offering the kinds of reparative or protective resource which Jojo experiences, and which many of Farrag's interviewees attest to. As such Ward's representation of these beliefs and practices attests to Claustnizer's position that: "'conjure" culture continually rethinks and reshapes itself to both adapt and develop in opposition to this changing American culture' (Calustnizer 2017, 218) and supports Hazzard-Donald's proposal that African American communities 'still tell of Hoodoo's efficacy [and] the[se] potential believers still seek help from a tradition now forced to the margins of black culture' (Hazzard Donald 2013, 162). *Sing* is a text which refuses to homogenise the practice and representation of these syncretic belief systems, and demonstrates a commitment to articulating its history and potential limitations in the face of contemporary manifestations of racial violence and oppression. Through mapping Ward's dramatization of the paradoxical pain and power of engaging with the cultural and spiritual practices formed in the crucible of slavery, her acknowledgement of the potential impossibility for some subjects of doing so in any meaningful way – the way in which the trauma of racial violence might preclude such engagement in the first place - it becomes clear that *Sing* both unflinchingly attests to 'unrightness' of the world, and asks what strategies one might use not only to survive in it, but to achieve 'something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease' (284).

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¹ I use this term in Eric Santner’s sense, where the creaturely is understood as ‘signify[ing] less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field’ (2006, xix).

² Ina Fandrich helpfully differentiates between the connotations of the various spellings of this term (Vodun, Vodou, Voodoo and Voudoo). In this chapter the spelling ‘Vodou’ will be used owing to the closer resemblance of the spiritual practices depicted in Ward’s novel with the religious system which emerged in Haiti. (2007, 778).

³ A key example of this phenomenon was the ceremony carried out in the Ifá tradition (a Yoruba religious system) in June 2015 in front of the house of Ezell Ford, a young, black, disabled man shot in the back by Los Angeles police officers. Protests held in response to Ford’s death also saw many participants attend ‘dressed all in white, a custom often required in many traditional Ifá ceremonies’ (Farrag 2018, 77).

⁴ Hoodoo, particularly as practiced along the Gulf Coast, was also associated with practices such as conjure and root work, and in some sources these terms are used interchangeably. Likewise, locally specific forms of other syncretised religions, including Louisiana Vodou and Mississippi Voodoo, share some features with Hoodoo while being distinct in other respects. Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Oakland: University of California Press: 2006) offers a detailed account of the development of these traditions, with a particular focus on conjure.

⁵ ‘Loa’ refers to ‘the pantheon of gods and spirits [in Haitian Vodou], effective in healing both spiritual and physical illnesses; these spirits inhabit “rocks, trees, and other inanimate objects” (Tarter 91), and thus represent the holism of the spiritual and the physical.’ (Middleton 2016, 160).

⁶ The prevalence of tree imagery in Ward’s descriptions of her characters resonates with the significance of the tree within Haitian Vodou traditions, where they are understood to be favoured by the loa as places to reside, and with the metaphor frequently used in Afro-American religions of the universe as a cosmic tree, “with its branches above and roots below” (313).’ (Middleton 2016, 160).

⁷ For further analyses of the function of creaturely in Ward’s work see Christopher Lloyd’s ‘Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*’ (2016).

⁸ In her article ‘The Spirit in Black Lives Matter: new spiritual community in black radical organizing’, Farag recounts how ‘many organizers involved in DPN and more broadly BLM, [. . .] have begun to reinterpret African spiritual practices and beliefs, [. . .] along with healing practices such as acupuncture, reiki, therapeutic massage, and plant medicine for a variety of personal and professional functions’ (2018, 78).