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### Reframing as Reclamation: Trauma Theory, African Spiritualism, and Ecocriticism in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Reframing as Reclamation: Trauma Theory, African Spiritualism, and Ecocriticism in Jesmyn

*Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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MA Thesis – English Literature  
The City College of New York

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Abstract:

This thesis explores how ecocriticism and trauma theory intersect within Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) to tackle the complex act of collective healing. Trauma, and its subset transgenerational trauma, have often been a focal point for critical analysis of other African American texts that engage with ghosts and hauntings, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Often, these ghosts are symbolic of transgenerational trauma in fictional works. While this association is apparent in Ward's novel, this thesis applies the aforementioned modes of scholarship alongside African-based spiritualism to investigate further the inclusion of ghosts. To accomplish this approach, this thesis separates the analysis into two distinctly gendered sections: the first section unpacks the relationship between African-based spiritualism and female-centric conjure work in the family line, whereas the second section analyzes how trauma shapes black masculinity and how repression perpetuates transgenerational trauma. These two sections work together to prove how Ward's novel engages with the transfer of trauma across generational lines and how she then offers a way to mend it at both an individual and collective level. As part of the discussion, I will be including critical work from scholars such as Kathleen Brogan, who clarifies between traumatic memory and narrative memory, as well as Gabriele Schwab, who observes transgenerational effects in both survivors and perpetrators of trauma. In the concluding section, I identify the way Ward navigates these interwoven parts in a world that continues to blend and create intersectional cultural identities.

Thesis:

“Rejecting the definitive and declarative stance of the traditional American novel, the African American novel by the contemporary woman is one of inquiry...So, one leaves with more questions. The purpose of the journey or the quest, according to contemporary African American women writers, is to probe, to scrutinize that which has made the journey or the quest necessary” (83-4), states Dana A. Williams. Authors such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Maya Angelou are black contemporary women writers who enact this inquiry, which is an act of inspired investigation. They do not write with the goal of preserving the form or content of stories that came before them. Nor do they take on the burden of emotional—or, in this case, creative—labor to cater to a mainstream audience. Instead, they challenge readers to examine the familiar and unfamiliar and to educate themselves further.

One more recent writer has begun to fall within the ranks of these other highly acclaimed women: Jesmyn Ward. Many critics have claimed that her latest novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is “in fellowship with...Zora Neale Hurston” (*The New Yorker*) and a “new...modern *Beloved*.” Ward herself is even “heralded as Faulkner’s heir” (NBC News), one of the most prominent Southern writers, albeit male. *The Dallas Morning News* proclaimed, “If William Faulkner mined the South for gothic, stream-of-consciousness tragedy, and Toni Morrison conjured magical realism from the corroding power of the region’s race hatred, then Ward is a worthy heir to both.” In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, we find a journey both literal and spiritual that has deep ties to the extensive trauma seeping through America’s unconsciousness.

In its form, the novel could be categorized within literary genres such as the Gothic or modes such as magical realism. Regarding magical realism, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris write that it is “a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the

boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (5). These elements are apparent in the blurring of boundaries between the physical and spiritual world both in setting and in narration of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. This liminality is also present in African-based spiritual fiction, which English Professor James Mellis explains as “African-American realist fiction with African-based spiritual and religious elements (particularly Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork) incorporated into the universe of the work.” This integration of these influences creates a text, though rooted in the spiritual, is in fact more tangible than it may seem at first glance. Despite the many critics’ understandable focus on Ward’s work in the magical realism space, this essay will look more closely at its elements of African-based spirituality, with an understanding that the two are not necessarily distinct.

Much of the limited scholarship written on Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* has focused on these Voodoo, hoodoo, conjuring, and rootwork elements as an agency for resistance from an oppressive white world or as a means for physical healing. Other analyses have dissected the symbolism of ghosts and hauntings within the novel as a direct representation of transgenerational trauma within both the African American community as well as all of America. Yet, healing is discussed primarily in terms of the physical or for familial bonds, and the ghosts are more so a literary device and symbolic agent for this trauma than anything else. I intend to combine these areas of thought to discuss an assertion that may be just as, if not more, radical than resistance: Ward invokes Afro-American focused healing and the social sharing of untold stories as a way to heal trauma in America’s collective consciousness. The contemporary novel of the early 2000s no longer needs to prove the existence of transgenerational trauma or introduce the double consciousness of an African American with historical ties to slavery. It

does, however, engage in scrutinizing that which has continued to allow the trauma to persist and offer a space for renewal. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a blueprint for this regeneration, and using African-based spiritualism and supernaturalism within the narrative, along with an Afro-centric approach to healing, is one of the main ways that Ward's novel becomes a reclamation of identity for black and brown people and their voices in the United States. The novel establishes this space through the intersection of female-centric conjuring, spiritual hauntings, and the reframing of black narratives. I will invoke two specific modes of discourse to guide this discussion: ecocriticism and trauma theory.

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*Sing, Unburied, Sing* follows the road trip of Leonie, an African American woman, her son Jojo, her daughter Kayla, and her white friend Misty through Mississippi from the fictional town Bois Sauvage to pick up Michael, her white boyfriend and father to her children, from Parchman, the infamous penitentiary of the state. In the first section of the novel, we learn some pertinent information about this already complex dynamic: Leonie is addicted to cocaine (and is a user of other drugs) and Michael is in jail for cooking crystal meth. Misty is also a drug addict and works with Leonie. Michael's parents are severely racist and not only disapprove of Leonie but reject their grandchildren and refer to Leonie and her family through racial slurs. Jojo and Kayla are primarily taken care of by Leonie's parents, Pop (River) and Mam (Philomene). Pop was once an inmate at Parchman when he was a teenager, and Mam is currently dying from cancer. Finally, the merging of these two families began after Given, Leonie's brother, was murdered by Michael's cousin during a deer hunting competition between teammates, and later on Leonie and Michael met. The relationships within the novel begin as interwoven and

convoluted as the history of this country and merely set the stage for the hauntings and narratives that follow suit.

These family dynamics within the social structure and spiritual structure of the novel stand as a symbol for the collective consciousness of African Americans in the United States and the transgenerational trauma that permeates both black and white communities. The need for “expansion of individual memory into communal history” (Byerman 28) is evident in this novel so that healing does not just happen on one end of the spectrum, but happens on both. It is also important to note that this collective consciousness, or rather memory, must also not be one singular way of remembering history. Gabriele Schwab, professor of English at the University of California and author, points out that for that to consider the collective, we must also acknowledge the variation in consciousness and the memory it invokes:

The term ‘collective memory’ [to be] ...meaningful, it cannot be in the sense of a common identical memory in the service of identity politics. Collective memory rather emerges as an evolving and internally diverse process that unfolds when histories intersect and different participants or agents read them in conflicting ways, especially when they come from different sides of the divide between victims and perpetrators. (29)

This interplay between victims and perpetrators is in essence one of the most complex parts of the collective consciousness. Much of American history has been told and shaped by the perpetrators, the oppressors who have also silenced the narratives of victims, which ultimately leads to a compounded silencing. Despite the accounts told of slavery, “a number of slave narratives...tended to represent the brutality of slavery in abstract or anonymous terms by describing the instruments of torture or by portraying the suffering of individuals who have no other connection to the narrator” (Byerman 28); these narratives lacked agency and were at times

too vague to truly communicate the horrors enacted upon them. Though Ward primarily highlights the effects of transgenerational trauma on the African American community, the ways in which its dynamics perpetuate both sides of this violent history are evident through the topographical space and mirroring of generations.

The relationship of African Americans with nature is a complicated one. So often nature was used against African Americans in this nation's history as a form of torture or as a space for oppression. Slave Masters used bullwhips made from cowhide to beat slaves, they drowned them in water, and burned them with fire. They hung them in trees. American historian David M. Oshinsky recounts a specific lynch mob which "placed [the victim] on a funeral pyre doused with gasoline. He was beaten and stabbed, and his ears cut off for souvenirs. When the burning began, Shepherd's nose and mouth were filled with dirt in order to prevent his inhaling gas fumes—and instant death" (142). Even the dirt from the ground was used to inflict pain upon black people. In Ward's novel, this antagonistic relationship with nature intensifies when in conjunction with white characters or western influence. The death of Given—or the inciting modern-day trauma for the family—takes place in the forest. A white man murders him while in the woods, which later on aids the court ruling as a "*hunting accident*" (Ward 50) and a lack of justice for Given. A white man has been protected by the cover of trees whereas a black man has found his demise. Pop even warns Given against the trip to the woods, which is a trope seen elsewhere, such as Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out*, where the protagonist, a black man, goes to a mountain home secluded in and by these woods with a white woman and her white family, only to just barely make it out alive.

This association continues even after Given's death, latching onto the interactions between the aforementioned white family and Leonie. When Leonie approaches Michael's

parents' house and land in the hopes of communicating his release with them, she sees his father, Big Joseph. Immediately, the natural elements around her begin to embody something ominous, a breeding ground set up for her death: "The way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence" (Ward 56). The tree, in particular, is a magnificent and imposing one. The limbs of a Spanish oak are naturally overarching and have a trapping quality as if it is in cahoots with Big Joseph. The black branches echo the charred limbs of black people who would be burned alive and hung from those very boughs if caught.

During this meeting, Big Joseph attempts to shoot Leonie, despite her being the mother of his grandchildren. She states: "He is taking something off the seat of the mower, a rifle that was strapped there, something he keeps for wild pigs that root in the forest, but not for them now. For me" (Ward 56). Beyond just the physical landscape, the use of animals also continually differentiates the humanity in the novel. Leonie's recognition of his actions showcases the way in which Big Joseph views her as equivalent to livestock and how she internalizes it. The collective effect of these associations and their transgenerational effects are highlighted as Ward mirrors this moment during their drive to Parchman. The travelers stop at Misty's friend's house to pick up drugs, and upon arrival, they are greeted by a young white boy in the yard who mimics the actions of Big Joseph. He "waves his stick in the air, and then grabs it with both hands, pointing it like a rifle" (Ward 79). Jojo then explains, "He is shooting at us" (Ward 79), later referring to him as the "shooting boy" (Ward 81). Then, Jojo notices that the boy "looks at Kayla like she's his dog, and Kayla hops closer" (Ward 82). Ironically, this shooting boy "makes a sound halfway between a cry and a growl in his throat, something gurgling and whiny" (Ward

86) like that of an animal when his video game dies. The language describing Kayla is more affectionate and innocent whereas the description of the boy is more feral and menacing.

This young boy shows how perpetrators learn to transmit harm, causing a continued rift in a culture's collective consciousness. Schwab details how "one of the most common deformations is the internalization and hence internal repetition of patterns of violence in the perpetrator culture" (83). In the white characters of this book, there is a lack of accountability and recognition of the "violent histories" (Schwab 72) that exist in America. Through this avoidance, the scenarios along racial lines continue to repeat at a cultural, rather than just familial, level as shown by the mirroring of Big Joseph and this young white boy, to which he has no relation. In their actions, it is clear racist tendencies and overt actions "can also occur with perpetrators who cannot face their own violence, guilt, or shame" (Schwab 84). Furthermore, the boy is self-destructive and expresses his anger by destroying the television. Afterward, his father beats him, which shows how this boy is a part of a cycle of violence that he then projects onto others. As a part of the culture, particularly in Mississippi, Ward points to Parchman as the physical hub of this stunted growth, as well as a housing ground for trapped spirits.

The jail itself is slavery embodied, continued into modern day. It is "a sprawling 20,000-acre plantation in the rich cotton land of the Yazoo Delta" (Oshinsky 1) that is named as "the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War... [and resides in] the darkest corner of the South" (Oshinsky 2). Ward invokes language during the travelers' drive that mirrors this naming. Jojo explains how as they continue north, the trees are burned away, symbolizing the mass death, and that they continue "into the heart of Mississippi" (Ward 78) as they approach Parchman. Through this association, the penitentiary becomes the ghost land of the whole state, pumping polluted blood throughout the rest of its body of land. This connotation is also an ongoing one

expressed by those of varying perspectives, even further emphasizing its negative impact on the collective whole. Pop recalls Parchman as a place where humans would be “cage[ed]...like livestock” (Ward 18) and that he personally knew what it felt like to be “made a animal” (Ward 69), just like Leonie. Similarly, Michael states, “This ain’t no place for no man. Black or White. Don’t make no difference. This a place for the dead” (Ward 96). The veil between the living and dead is so incredibly thin at this place of continual torture that Kayla claims she sees birds, which are in fact spirits, upon first arrival. Despite being two different races and of two different generations, Pop and Michael’s similar assessment communicates one thing: ongoing repetition of violent histories. Nothing has grown or changed for Parchman; instead the violence has only spread, especially since so many stories are lost there. Ward additionally points out that this modern-day slavery is bad not just for blacks but whites as well, and both kin to victims and perpetrators suffer, leaving the land as an incarnation of the collective consciousness’s trauma.

Transgenerational trauma is one of the most complex and deep-rooted wounds that exists not just in the United States but across cultures that have suffered macro-level oppression, violence, and more. One major study focuses on the DNA of Holocaust survivors and the ways in which subsequent generations were impacted on an emotional and mental level as well as a cellular, physical level (Steele-Nicholson 10). These studies have been helpful in understanding other communities who have experienced such large-scale trauma—notably, African Americans. Professor and author Keith Byerman states that “the number of Africans directly affected by... [the Atlantic slave trade] has been variously estimated by historians from fifteen to a hundred million” (27). While the “Holocaust is the most thoroughly documented example of the ravages of dehumanization” (Smith 16), this case is not true for African Americans. Not for lack of existence but for lack of documentation, as previously mentioned by Toni Morrison.

Documentation, in and of itself, is a form of recording, of accountability, and of storytelling. It allows for what has happened to be passed down and acknowledged by past generations. However, many African American stories were silenced or edited, ultimately interrupting any possibility to truly heal.

Ward views the sharing of untold stories as entities that must be released from the collective consciousness; more specifically, the stories from black and brown Americans that have not had the privilege to be shared openly and in stark detail. Trauma studies state that one way to heal trauma is through the act of conscious storytelling. Storytelling in this context is not fictitious or for entertainment. Rather, it is a means for reframing narratives and bringing experiences of trauma into a social space rather than an isolated, stagnant one (Brogan 80). Associate Professor of English at Wellesley College Kathleen Brogan explains the work of Pierre Janet, a French psychologist who focused on traumatic memory research. In her presentation of his studies, Brogan distinguishes two forms of memory: traumatic memory and narrative memory. While “traumatic memory can be defined as the reexperiencing of an event too overwhelming to be integrated into understanding” (Brogan 73), narrative memory “reshapes and gives meaning to past experience by adapting it to present circumstances” (Brogan 79). This traumatic memory is a part of someone’s life that is almost severed from all other experiences, which leads to a form of dissociation in a trauma survivor, and in this case, the survivor’s kin. The repetition of the inciting trauma and ongoing present-day trauma compounds over time, causing the effects to be even worse.

Brogan continues to unpack narrative memory, explaining Janet’s studies and emphasizing the powerful shift that can happen once a survivor adapts a narrative approach to traumatic events and their personal act of remembering. She explains how Janet believes that

“true memory...is essentially ‘*the action of telling a story*’... [and is an] active recollection [that] requires a fairly elaborate mental adjustment to the event remembered” (Brogan 79). The key phrase is “mental adjustment” as opposed to the continued feelings and thoughts associated with the traumatic moment, embedded into the unconscious and the body itself, much like the land itself. The retelling becomes a social act where the survivor has control and ownership over the narrative, as well as the ability to make mental adjustments to the retelling of the traumatic moment depending on the current situation. Ultimately, the survivor gains more agency over the event rather than allowing the event to breed its own narrative for and of the survivor. The shift leads to a radical movement forward, especially in the case of Ward’s novel.

Many of her characters are stuck in the cycle of traumatic memory, vacillating between avoidance and repression as a means of coping. The generational passing, though interconnected across all avenues, is also distinctly gendered; in turn, this generational passing down is a function of intersectional traumatic repetition. To understand these transgenerational bonds, I will primarily focus on the relationship between Mam and Leonie, followed by Pop and Jojo. In each of these relationships, the influence of spirituality is an ongoing one that ties in the transgenerational trauma and roles of each character as well as highlights how engaging or rejecting Afro-centric connection and spaces can either aid or hinder healing.

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As stated in the intro, Ward includes the presence of ghosts and spirits as both symbolic of this transgenerational trauma and as real entities that exist among us. This dual creation establishes the Afro-American spiritualism and supernatural belief that house the space of healing and act as protection. Often in African supernaturalism, the dead and the living are interconnected, existing on the same plane, rather than separated by death:

In the transplanted African community, among the most important traditions was slaves' strong conviction that the spirit world was an integral part of the life force. In African traditions regarding the supernatural, the living and dead are intimately connected, this relationship often taking the form of ancestor worship...In fact, deceased family members are considered part of the present family unit. (Smith-Wright 144)

In Ward's novel, the family mourns and grapples with Given's death and despite him being deceased, his presence is strong throughout the entirety of the novel. He appears as a ghost to Leonie, but Mam is the one who most actively seeks him out. She believes Given is tangible through the spirit world, often hoping that she will see him (Ward 50) and be able to communicate with him. Each year on the anniversary of his death, she plants a tree in her own form of worship and expression of ongoing love despite him being dead for fifteen years (Ward 34). Mam states "*I live long enough, going to be a forest here...a whispering forest*" (Ward 51). Her devotion to Given and eagerness for continued connection and communication is evident in her actions. The planting of trees also counteracts the negative associations first imbued in nature with Leonie and the Spanish oak, which begins to reshape the narrative of nature as violent to nature as rebirth and healing. The "whispering" suggests that through this connection to nature, Mam is still able to keep Given a part of the present and it speaks to the possibility of communing with spirits after death—an action done by conjure women.

Much of the African spiritualism in the book is through Mam, who descends from a line of conjure women. Ward "in an interview in *Nylon*...[explains,] 'I did a lot of reading about voodoo and hoodoo, and I did a lot of reading about that spiritual tradition because that's what Mam practices'" (Mellis). Her reference to "spiritual tradition" also informs Mam's rootwork and presents the elements of African-based spiritual fiction as driving forces of the narrative; the

spiritual aspects, including ghosts, are a part of this world rather than a separate entity or one only of the fantastic. The novel as a reframing of this conversation is its own work of healing and recognition of the stories and lived experience that come from the African American community. The inclusion of rootwork, too, is a direct connection to conjure women from West Africa, a history that predates slavery. Conjure women create strong feminine power in the individual and the community, one that is passed down through generations:

For in Afro-America what are traditionally defined as *gifts of the spirit*—discernment, prophecy, and healing—are frequently functions of work that transmits *spirit* in an efficacious manner. Such transmission preserves the spirit’s gifts alive through continual circulation...[Marcel] Mauss [states] that gifts remain powerfully gifts only as long as they are kept in passage, for passage forestalls the promotion of any single “possessor” ...to a hierarchical inequality. Gift passage, like Afro-American spirit work, assures the benefits of spirit only to a *community*. (Baker, Jr. 76)

Mam and Leonie’s conversations around spirit, though singular to their experience, are representative of a history beyond their own immediate family. Leonie recalls, “she [Mam] told me I had the seed of a gift” (Ward 39), using similar language as Baker, Jr. does to describe the generational workings of spirit. Seeing spirits, therefore, is not something to be viewed as “crazy” or fear-inducing. It is in fact one instilled with a collective power and importance. The conjure woman is a central figure in the preservation of African history within the African-American community and is done so through the passing down of knowledge. It is also something, like the DNA of transgenerational trauma, said to be passed down through the body as well as the mind. Leonie recalls Mam expressing “I think it runs in the blood, like silt in river water. Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees...Rises up over the water in generations”

(Ward 40). The natural elements are closely bonded with the transfer of this “gift” and also align blackness with something natural and a part of the earth. The great influence of conjure on the family is a reclamation of land, as well as identity and relationship with the natural world.

There is both resistance to western culture and also that continued space for black individuals to heal through connecting to these ancestral roots. As with Hurston’s work in the black feminist and contemporary woman writer space, Ward creates one where “*conjure* is a function of the importance conjure has historically possessed for an African diasporic community. Writing in opposition to one traditional, white historical thesis that claims enslaved blacks had no significant others to look to but members of the master class” (Baker, Jr. 79). Baker, Jr. captures this reclamation of identity. There is radical reframing of traumatic memory that exists on a large scale when individuals begin to look back at the historical space in their mind of what impacts the beliefs and identities of their ancestors. The way that Ward crafts conjure in the novel is reminiscent of this “writing in opposition” and a rejection of the “white historical thesis” that has shaped the narrative of slaves rather than allowing them to shape their own narrative history.

Conjure, a practice that connects to Voodoo and hoodoo, has had differing beliefs of origin, depending on which part of the culture speaks of it. There seems to be a “white” memory of these practices that contradicts the true history of conjure. Its origin has been attributed to the European association with voodoo by many white people uninformed of alternate meanings who “view it [conjure] as a scene of primitivism...[or] aberration of certain orthodox and heretical practices of European Catholicism” (Baker, Jr. 80); in these associations, the word *voodoo* is believed to be derived from the French word “*vaudois* meaning ‘witch’” (Baker, Jr. 80). In Ward’s novel, Leonie recounts how “kids taunted...[her] about how...Mama was a witch” (37)

making further suggestions of Mam as a conjure woman in their part of town and also establishing the racist association with conjure from white onlookers. Furthermore, this European association breeds this racist discourse of black belief systems as “primitive” and “dangerous,” which Ward alludes to in the way the neighbors speak about Mam.

However, the more “accurate” (Baker Jr. 80) origin has direct ties to West African culture. Houston A. Baker Jr., an American scholar who specializes in African American literature, explains the “religious practices of the Yoruba People of the West Coast of Africa... [and how the] name *voodoo* derives from Vodun, the name of the principal deity of these Yoruba rites” (Baker Jr. 80). Yet, the origins of Vodun actually extend beyond the Yoruba people and truly originate from the Fon people in the West African country of Benin. The “Yoruba peoples... have been present in Fon locales for centuries and have made an enduring impression... [which has been] possible only because of Vodun’s ongoing readiness to welcome, embrace, and celebrate the new” (Rush 65). This interconnectedness has created some crossover in the Vodun belief system and the existing deities, despite their still very distinct cultures.

Vodun “or *esprit* (spirit)” (Rush 52) includes Mawu, “the priestess... [as] the central figure [or divine Creator]—the person who is oracle to the spirit of Vodun carried in the sacred serpent” (Baker Jr. 80). The snake is a recurring image in Vodun, along with other natural elements: “the Vodun of Ouidah [a city in southern Benin] could be divided into three main areas: snake, trees, and the sea” (Rush 46). This sacred serpent may refer to “Aido-Hwedo [the cosmic serpent and] a creative force that is primal, existing before Mawu-Lisa, the power that enabled that creator god to shape the universe” (Scheub). Mawu-Lisa is an androgynous figure in Vodun that represents both the moon and the sun and who has Aido-Hwedo as a servant. Together, they ensure and restore balance (Scheub). In Ward’s novel, the image of the serpent

arrives when Richie—the ghost boy, and the third narrator—whom River was in jail with when they were both young teens, begins to tell his story. He explains, “I saw a white snake, thick and long as my arm, slither out of the shadows beneath the trees, I knelt before It” (Ward 134).

Through a Christian lens, this snake reads as an allusion to the devil. But, the snake does not do him harm. Instead, it converses with him and helps him begin to remember his identity and his past. The snake, more likely, is that of “the sacred serpent” and of “Aido-Hwedo,” especially as shown through the capitalization of “it,” a typical way to refer to a deity with respect. The snake is the one who spiritually guides Richie, perhaps to release him from purgatory.

In connecting to this greater entity and leading with the Afro-centric spiritual beliefs, characters are able to find healing. They begin to own the retelling of their history and this “voodoo, or conjure, has been an affective presence among blacks from that time until the present” (Baker Jr. 80). Leonie, on the other hand, is weary of these practices and often resents them, especially since her mother is dying from cancer despite having applied her expertise in rootwork. Leonie refuses to see the good in conjure because she puts the blame for her trauma onto it and thereby onto African culture:

She thought that if she taught me as much herbal healing as she could, if she gave me a map to the world as she knew it, a world plotted orderly by divine order, spirit in everything, I could navigate it. But I resented her when I was young, resented her for the lessons and the misplaced hope. And later, for still believing in good in a world that cursed her with cancer, that twisted her limp as an old dry rag and left her to disintegrate. (Ward 105)

Rather than acknowledging the pitfalls that exist of western medicine, she refocuses the negative energy onto rootwork or the cosmic world. Her negative talk about her cultural history is ultimately a form of negative self-talk as she is born of that history.

This negative self-talk emerges again during the drive to Parchman when Kayla is sick and continually throws up. Leonie stops at a store in the hopes of finding Pepto-Bismol, but the store has run out of the medicine. When western medicine is no longer an option, only then does Leonie try to call upon her memory of her mother's rootwork teachings. When her memory falters, she determines once more that the world has failed her: "This is the kind of world it is. The kind of world that gives you a blackberry plant, a doughy memory, and a child that can't keep nothing down" (Ward 105). She does not, however, take accountability for her lack of trying to learn. Smith-Wright writes: "the strength of Black in America depends on an intimate connection with and reverence for the ancestral past. In addition, the continuity of the extended Black family must never be sacrificed to personal greed or benign neglect through the failure of memory" (163). Without this connection and respect for her past, Leonie fumbles and is unable to help her child.

As expressed in the history of conjure, memory is essential for there to be a continuation of the spiritual practice and in Leonie's case, her rejection has begun to halt that transfer. Her disinterest and ultimate resentment exist in her mind as a space of repression. Among that space she also places more blame on her ancestry for not living up to what it had promised. Her inability to navigate her trauma has led her to a place of blame instead of one where she takes ownership and an active approach to healing, seeking the positive in her ancestral past. This skepticism has rebranded her own view of African history as one akin to that of the oppressor. It only intensifies her isolation and the double consciousness created, where the traumatic moments

remain stagnant and she prefers to numb the pain rather than deal with it head on. Ward begins to capture the necessity of ownership in reclaiming your narrative and recognizing that a part of healing is doing the difficult work of inserting yourself into the equation, one in which Leonie runs from and represses.

Leonie's rejection of this conjure practice informs her rejection of her black identity as a means of repressing the trauma of losing her brother to a race crime. Out of all of the black characters in the book, Leonie surrounds herself more with the white characters and distances herself from her black community. The white characters are the ones who influence her drug addiction and keep her from her children and family rather than guiding her towards healing. She is friends with Misty but also resents her for being white: "her freckles, her thin pink lips, her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her?" (Ward 91). Ward speaks into the validity of this resentment. There is a generational weight that Misty does not have to bear but that Leonie does simply because of her blackness. Yet, this resentment has led Leonie to manage it by rejecting the part of herself that society has told her to hate—her black identity. Her own traumatic experiences related to blackness (losing her brother to a hate crime and her perceived losing of her mother through a failing of conjure) combined with this transgenerational element buries her deeper into repression.

Despite this avoidance, Leonie cannot shake the image of her brother when she is high on either cocaine or methamphetamine. Drugs, like cocaine, which are "stimulants exert their effects by disrupting or modifying the normal communication that occurs among brain neurons and brain circuits" ("How Stimulants"). It is also said that "...while the traumatized may cut off from consciousness 'large realms of experience' and aspects of personality, these 'failures of

recall can paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of the traumatic events” (Brogan 73). Throughout the entirety of the novel, Leonie almost exclusively sees Given while on drugs, but never while completely sober. Given’s ghost is this repetitive image that consistently reminds her of his murder even as she, while sober, attempts to repress the traumatic thought. While high, she is unable to fully repress it, and he forces her to look at it. The first time she sees his ghost, whom she refers to as, “Given-not-Given” (Ward 34), she is high on cocaine with Michael and some people who were present during Given’s death. She is horrified: “Given looked at me like he did when we were little and I broke the new fishing pole Pop got him: murderous...Given climbed in next to me, sat in the passenger seat, and turned and looked at me with a face of stone” (Ward 52). She perceives his look as judgment, and while it may be, he is silent so she cannot be completely sure. The perception is enough, though, and highlights her own feelings of guilt.

In present day, she sees Given-not-Given when she gets high with Misty and attempts to ignore him, still hoping he is some sort of hallucination. Misty assures her cocaine would not do that—only acid or meth (Ward 37). Smith-Wright identifies, too, how “Ghosts are not strange beings from the netherworld, a fact recalling African views of the supernatural. They hover just outside of documentable experience... [and] are never far from the periphery of daytime reality” (155). They create a “virtually claustrophobic space between the natural and supernatural worlds that locks into focus the tragic void informing the main characters’ incomplete lives” (Smith-Wright 155). Though Leonie wishes to pin the ghost of Given into the surreal space, even her own ancestral history knows this association to not be true. She has rejected the African belief system but that does not keep her spiritual roots from finding her. While in one part the ghost of

her brother is her trauma presenting itself, it is also the very real presence of Given and the reality that he is still a part of the moving and changing world.

Given continually comes back whenever Leonie resists or disengages with her family, seeks comfort outside of them, and refuses to deal with her emotions head on. The repression only intensifies the trauma. When she does have the opportunity to connect with her mother over the ghost of Given, she withholds that information: “When I saw Given-not-Given for the first time, I didn’t tell my mama nothing” (Ward 52). She severs the connection that her mother hopes for and continues to repress what could maybe be healed if she leaned into the spiritual belief. Ironically, upon her mother’s death bed, Leonie is able to successfully perform a ritual. Upon Mam’s request, she invokes Maman Brigitte, “the last *mystère*...the mother of the dead” (Ward 215), and allows her mother’s spirit to pass on, along with Given’s. Ward shows that African spiritualism is not something that casts one out; instead, it is tangible when believed in and if Leonie were to return to her roots and “see the importance of African diasporic traditions in the western world” (Williams 77), it would be there for her and guide her in healing.

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While conjure practice exists largely in the feminine space, the connectivity to nature, African spiritualism, and the Vodun religion is also evident in Pop’s generational and familial stories. This association with nature and spirituality is strengthened in the masculine space through River’s storytelling and his passing down beliefs to Jojo as he recalls how his great-grandfather taught him about life and spirit:

“Said there’s spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. Said the sun is most important, gave it a name: Aba. But you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance. So the crops will grow, the animals breed and get fat

for food... You need a balance of spirit. A body, he told me, is the same way... [I take] But never more than I could handle. The boar share so much, and I take so much. No waste. Waste rots. Too much either way breaks the balance.” (Ward 73-4).

Through Pop, Ward establishes a key theme for the book: a broken balance in America and how this rift is a signifier of the continuation of trauma and lack of healing. This imbalance is in the biology of the country, as expressed by Parchman as one major hub of waste that permeates the land; it alludes to the abuse of power and how little growth there has been in race relations. The spiritualism also reshapes a different type of world order, one that counteracts the one previously set forth by the oppressors and one that for so long has been off-balance: “within the human category, there has historically been a hierarchy. In the 18th century, white Europeans — the architects of the theory — ‘modestly placed themselves at the very pinnacle.’ The lower edges of the category merged with the apes, according to their thinking” (“Less Than”). Like other natural forms, animals have been used to punish black people or associations with animals have been used to demean them. This dehumanization has been a major contributor to the trauma that slaves and the generations after them—Pop in this case—have experienced. With only hearing the narrative set forth by the oppressor, these associations remain stagnant, but with Pop’s sharing of cultural stories, he is able to pass down a different way of viewing the world to Jojo. He offers up a world order with connections to the African diaspora, the one that existed before the identities of black people were stripped of rights and had their voices suppressed.

This imbalance intersects and appears viscerally with trauma in Pop’s life and subsequently in Jojo’s due to their intergenerational bond. Most often when Jojo narrates, he is a medium for Pop’s stories to come through directly to the reader. He remembers them as if Pop is there speaking to him, and these stories within stories communicate how narratives are passed

down and how they become integral parts of the generational experience. The anecdotes center around Pop's time at Parchman and juxtapose the present with the past. In one of Pop's opening stories, he sets the tone for a definition of manhood, pointing out the difference between him and Richie: "*It's hard enough for a man of fifteen, but for a boy? A boy of twelve?*" (Ward 23). At the start of the novel, Jojo turns thirteen and cognitively knows he is on the precipice of being a man, feeling that he must prove his manhood to his grandfather. Despite Pop's distinction, in reality both he and Richie were kids, yet Pop had to become a man at an early age because of the situation he was in. Jojo, upon hearing these stories, exists in this liminal space of striving to be a man like Pop while still being a child.

During the first half of the novel, we learn through Jojo's recollection that Pop is stuck in a circular form of storytelling: always retelling the same parts, the same structure, and never telling the part he has chosen to avoid. He explains Pop "telling me the last bit of the story he is willing to share about this place [Parchman]" (Ward 126) before shutting back down. Jojo's memory also emphasizes the number of times he has heard the same stories; he is able to access these memories easily due to the repetitiousness of Pop's telling. Brogan explains how "...repetition directly relates to the central role past traumatic experience plays in organizing the characters' present lives" (73). Pop's storytelling is a literal embodiment of this traumatic repetition. It appears that he is stuck in the same circle of telling but has not set free the most important part of the story. The repetition keeps him from accessing and healing from the memory that he most needs to heal from.

This unconscious repetition also manifests in experiences that follow the initial traumatic event. This reaction can occur with or without repression. For Pop, the inception of his personal trauma began in the woods—not with Given but with Richie. Pop finally reveals he was the one

who killed Richie to save the boy from being mutilated by a lynch mob, and though it was a mercy killing, Pop remains guilty and has avoided this part of the story until Jojo presses him about it while Richie's ghost is present:

I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out. Hold my hands up to my face, I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it when the warden and sergeant came up on us, the dogs yipping and licking blood from they muzzles. They'd torn his throat out, hamstringed him. Smelled it when the warden told me I'd done good. Smelled it the day they let me out on account I'd led the dogs that caught and killed Richie. Smelled it when I finally found his mama after weeks of searching, just so I could tell her Richie was dead and she could look at me with a stone face and shut the door on me. Smelled it when I made it home in the middle of the night, smelled it over the sour smell of the bayou and the salt smell of the sea, smelled it years later when I climbed into bed with Philomene, put my nose in your grandmother's neck, and breathed her in like the scent of her could wash the other away. But it didn't. When Given died, I thought I'd drown in it. Drove me blind, made me so crazy I couldn't speak. Didn't nothing come close to easing it until you came along. (Ward 256-7)

The blood is not just blood in this case, but is a representation of his guilt. Through the repetition of "smelled it," Ward also pinpoints the great impact of this traumatic moment on Pop, his inability to move forward, and how a part of him still remains that fifteen-year-old. Brogan explains that traumatic memory is "Often taking the form of flashbacks and behavioral reenactments, the pathology of trauma is marked by the intrusive, unwanted return of an indelibly fixed, painful memory; it is also strongly connected to unfinished mourning" (73). The blood is reminiscent of flashbacks and his behavioral reenactments are shown through his

repetitive storytelling and his later associations with the inciting traumatic moment. Given's death is impactful two-fold: Pop has lost his son and he has also lost him in what seems to be a modern reoccurrence of Richie's death. Pop only chose to kill Richie because a lynch mob was after him in the forest and there was no way to get out. The setting has not changed for Given: he is killed in the woods while out there with only white people. While they are not a lynch mob, there is an embodiment of the modern-day effects of the perpetrator's history on the present. It is as if history has repeated itself, and Pop still feels powerless in its recurrence.

To Pop, he has once again failed to save the young black boy that he tried so hard to protect. In the history of black manhood, this pressure to resist and stand up to the oppressor has been one that has intensified traumatic shame. Byerman explains that "what constitutes black manhood is something more; it is a self-respect that enables one to stand up to the threats of racism even if that requires facing harm. Passivity and submission in the face of humiliation and danger is unmanly" (40). While one may look at Pop's decision to kill Richie as merciful, Pop still carries shame around it and about his role at the jail. Richie points out "it was something about a colored man running the dogs; that was wrong. There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries--slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them" (Ward 138). Pop expresses that he had a good rapport with the dogs, which is ironic since dogs, as Richie explains, were often used to hunt down black people. Pop then allows the dogs to ravish Richie's body, which seems like a betrayal to whom he had protected. To Pop, his own "survival becomes a personal flaw in this context, one that is itself overwhelming. [Therefore, it is] better to repress the experience" (Byerman 28) and so until this final moment he has never shared this part of the story.

However, through a reframing of that narrative, Pop would be able to see that by allowing the dogs to eat Richie, he at least protected himself so all three of them did not die. Racism is what ultimately caused Richie to die, not Pop, for if Pop did not kill Richie upon finding him, he would have been punished just as well. There was no way to escape. A different retelling would also highlight his action as humane, which is in stark contrast to that of the lynch mob. Their actions, on the other hand, are reminiscent of Big Joseph and the young white boy. They view black people as subhuman and yet they are the ones who revert to savagery. This inversion is evident in how the lynch mob kills Blue, the other inmate who rapes a white woman during his attempted escape from Parchman. Ward continues to point out on a macro level how individual experiences inform the greater exacerbation of this nation-wide wound. In contrast, Pop not only treats humans with respect, he also treats animals with more respect than these white people do black people. His approach to killing is more in line with his African spiritualism and the belief of spirit in everything.

Ward mirrors the killing of Blue with Pop's killing of a goat. In the opening scene of the novel, Pop kills a goat swiftly, leaving little time for a struggle or any type of torture. Once the goat has been stabbed in the neck, it dies, and then Pop begins to skin the animal, "peel[ing the skin] off like a banana" (Ward 5). There is a swiftness and ease in the peeling of a banana, showing Pop's expertise and also his focus on efficiency. He is merely a hunter and provider, using the animal for sustenance and not reveling in its pain. On the other hand, when Pop recalls the death of Blue and the actions of the lynch mob, this humane treatment is nowhere to be found. Pop describes, "'One of the trusties told me later they was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him'" (Ward 254). The white people choose to skin the human alive. Rather than try his crimes in a court of law as a man, they treat

Blue worse than an animal, as expressed by Pop: ““they kill animals better than that”” (Ward 255). Ward highlights Pop’s humanity and the white peoples’ bestiality and offers an alternate narrative that Pop may still be unable to see in his traumatic memory.

Prior to this reveal, Pop’s actions and internalized trauma is something Jojo picks up on unconsciously. The start of the novel establishes this unspoken connection between manhood and traumatic memory in the way that Jojo speaks about his grandfather. Jojo expresses, “I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today’s my birthday” (Ward 1), and “I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I’ve earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I’m ready to pull what needs to be pulled” (Ward 1). Jojo is preoccupied with his grandfather thinking he is man enough to handle the slaughtering of an animal and that he can get blood on his hands. From an early age, Jojo feels pressure to be able to handle small moments of death and be able to look at death directly in the eyes. After the killing of the goat, Jojo continues to worry, “I don’t want him to read my slowness as fear, as weakness, as me not being old enough to look at death like a man should, so I grip and yank” (5). Ward showcases early on this ongoing tension between manhood and boyhood and the ability to deal with gruesome things.

Pop, on the other hand, seems more concerned with mechanically working through the slaughtering of the goat. As described by Jojo, he is “already snapping the skin off the end of the goat’s foot” (Ward 5) while Jojo is preoccupied with worry. Though Pop “wrestles the goat like it’s a man” (Ward 5), there is no glory in the defeat. It is what has to be done. He “slits” (Ward 5) its neck and continues on with the process of skinning it and preparing it for a future meal. It is survival, much like the slitting of Richie’s throat was. Afterward, Jojo goes back out to Pop and then “follow[s] the trail of tender organ blood Pop has left in the dirt, a trail that signals love as clearly as the bread crumbs Hansel spread in the wood” (Ward 11). In this moment, Ward

aligns this act of violence with an act of love, differentiating Pop's actions from that of just a sport hunter or the white men. Ward also suggests an innocence present within Pop despite the very "adult" action that he has taken. Even still, this masculine expectation put onto black men is one that continually suppresses Pop's ability to revel in the pain of his past trauma and forgive his younger self.

Ward suggests that the effects of these gendered double consciousness and perpetuation of trauma is unhelpful to the younger generation. Pop's refusal to tell out loud that portion of his story in fact creates more confusion for the younger generation. Jojo unconsciously picks up on Pop's inability to reconcile his past actions even without Pop directly telling him. He is haunted by Pop's actions regardless, unprotected by the silencing of the difficult part of the story. Jojo experiences the trauma with less clarity and must navigate Richie's ghost by himself, seeing what Pop represses and does not see. Schwab explains how the "second generation thus receives violent histories not only through the actual memories or stories of parents (postmemory) but also through the traces of affect, particularly affect that remains unintegrated and inassimilable" (Schwab 14). Jojo feels the repression but does not understand it. Schwab further identifies how "the psychic core of violent histories includes what has been repressed or buried in unreachable psychic recesses" (1). Though Pop never overtly tells him to be a man, Jojo observes what he believes Pop is communicating through Pop's action with the goat or his ever-constant careful telling of his story, one that keeps the traumatic moment unassimilated.

Ironically, this mass focus on manhood and black hypermasculinity purported by slavery only perpetuates the inability to heal. Whereas, focusing on sharing, reframing narratives, and thinking back to the spiritual belief of balance would guide Pop toward healing. When Pop finally breaks his storytelling pattern and allows for the most traumatic moment to become

assimilated into his personal narrative, he returns to that childlike state, helps release its hold upon him, and opens pathways for a mental adjustment. Jojo “hold[s] Pop like...[he] hold[s] Kayla” (Ward 257), which ultimately switches their roles. Jojo now embodies the adulthood he so desired in the beginning, and Pop is finally able to release the trauma he has been holding since childhood. Directly after he shares, the animals sing “*Thank you thank you*” (Ward 257), suggesting some approval and appreciation for the release of the traumatic story as if his sharing has begun to shift the balance of nature back toward equilibrium. When Leonie narrates next, she notes that “Pop seems to be sinking, Jojo holding him up” (Ward 260-1) and “Pop and Jojo are curled in two” (Ward 261). The taking away of innocence does not necessarily mean adulthood. It can, in some ways, mean stagnation of the child self within the adult body and the rest of the adult mind. Thus, the image of Pop and Jojo merging into one becomes a powerful symbol for the close connection between generations and that these generations must support each other and have an open discussion.

This repression effects the supernatural beings as well, showing how this release is essential across ancestral lines. Richie, like Pop, is stuck in a repetition of his own, having experienced such a traumatic death in conjunction with what he endured while alive at Parchman. The difference is, he is so rooted in the repression that he cannot remember any information about how he died. Only through the guidance of Vodun does he even recall his identity and where he is: “The bird dropped to the ground, dug its beak into the black earth, and I remembered my name: Richie. I remembered the place: Parchman prison. And I remembered the man’s name: River Red” (Ward 136). Richie fixates constantly on “home” as a means of escape. At the end of the story where Pop would normally stop, his last words are about Richie saying “I’m going home” (Ward 126); then when Jojo first sees Richie’s ghost, Richie says, “I’m going

home” (131). Time is continuous yet Richie has also been stuck in a repetition of his twelve-year-old self and for so long his association of home was tainted. Richie himself muses: “I wonder if the reason I couldn’t leave Parchman before Jojo came was because it was a sort of home to me: terrible and formative as the iron leash that chains dogs” (Ward 191). When Jojo arrives, it is as if part of the traumatic memory is sparked, inspiring some remembering, and his definition begins to shift.

Pop’s story, though, cannot free Richie as he so hoped. Ward is not offering a simple fix for the violent history in which Richie and all African American people have endured. A singular person cannot heal the pain and trauma of every other story. But, he can be an example for breaking the cycle. When we first meet Richie, he has no memory of how he died, but when Pop engages in social retelling, it allows for Richie to feel the full pain of his past rather than remaining in a repressive state. Jojo explains, as he watches Richie, “At first I think he is singing again, but then 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” (Ward 256). The revelation is not a joyous one nor the one that Richie anticipated. But, to “achieve this freeing from the past requires one first to awaken the dead and to revisit the trauma... [in the process] we commonly call mourning” (Schwab 79). He expected that the story would release him and instead the story awakens him to the horrific truth and he feels the full pain. It also enters him into an important part of the healing process: being cognizant of what has happened to initiate a mental adjustment.

Eventually, this singular moment of mourning leads to the start of a collective “culture of memory” (Schwab 79), where both trauma of victims and perpetrators coincide. Jojo and Kayla, the mixed-race younger generation, are the ones who finally see and encourage the terrible stories of victims to be shared. All throughout the novel, they gravitate toward their African

ancestral past, which helps guide them to this moment—even in the reminiscent healing space of the tree as proposed by Mam. The tree’s “branches are full...with ghosts” (Ward 282) and is the culmination of all the recurrent tree imagery throughout the novel. The tree does not just relate back to Mam’s conjure work but also symbolizes the composite Vodun beliefs that Ward has interspersed throughout this novel and the ways in which she has transformed these beliefs to aid healing in an intersectional space.

In Ouidah, there is a “Slave Route...[that] follows the footsteps of the hundreds of thousands of African captives who walked the three miles to the beach and then onto ships destined for the Americas” (Rush 142) and which includes different forms of Vodun artwork. On National Vodun Day in this city, there is a “reenactment of the slave march to the beach” (Rush 143) that is both for remembrance and for the people of Benin to reframe their own narrative history. Along this walk there are a few different images of trees that represent parts of the story. In particular, there is the Tree of Forgetting and the Tree of Return. The legend of the Tree of Forgetting states that “all enslaved women marched around a tree seven times, and all enslaved men nine times, on their way to the Ouidah beach...to make them forget their origins and cultural identities” (Rush 144). Together with this forgetting is this idea that these enslaved peoples now became the “living dead” (Rush 144), though that belief stems more specifically from Haitian Vodou rather than Vodun in Benin (Rush 144). This Tree of Forgetting not only mirrors the erasure of black history and experience in the current collective consciousness, it also mirrors that tension between the African American community and nature.

While the Tree of Forgetting suggests that Ward’s inclusion of this final image of a ghost-filled tree is one of the negative, there is also the Tree of Return, which complicates this association. The Tree of Return is a part of the Slave Route because “enslaved Africans

[were]...said to have walked around the tree three times to ensure that their spirits, if not their bodies, would return to their native land” (Rush 147). Yet, Ward’s tree is filled with spirits, ones that do not leave but instead remain rooted in America. It is one that reconciles this new form of identity, one that is both African but also American and at times mixed in terms of racial identity, such as with the grandchildren in the novel.

Jojo and Kayla embrace their black histories and reject the racist side of their lives—as shown by their self-identifying. They are each named after a white family member: Joseph after Big Joseph and Michaela after Michael. But, they both shorten these names to give themselves their own identities. They both see and hear ghosts and have not rejected this ability like Leonie. Rather, they use it to aid the ghosts whose stories have been silenced in the past and have been forced into forgetfulness. The ghosts communicate with Jojo, lamenting: “*he raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her...*” (Ward 282). The violent stories continue on, each ghost “speaks the unspeakable” (Rigney 134), and the “women and men and boys and girls...black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white” (Ward 282) are finally able to begin the mourning process. They reverse the effects of the Tree of Forgetfulness while at the same time do not fulfill the expectation of the Tree of Return ritual.

Instead, Kayla, the mixed-race toddler, is the new age conjure, “measuring the tree, all Mam” (Ward 284) yet all herself at the same time when she begins to sing to the ghosts. The singing happens alongside the earth’s transition from light to dark. Jojo explains, “I stand until there is no sun...I stand until the moon rises” (Ward 283) soon after Richie also “ascends the tree like the white snake” (Ward 282). Once more the image of Mawu-Lisa and the cosmic serpent connect, and these influence of Vodun tradition suggest a movement toward balance once these

stories are shared. As Kayla entreats them to sing out, the ghosts “smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease” (Ward 284). Now, nature has transformed into a place that houses these stories and provides community rather than reinforcing the silencing of black people and their lived experiences.

Even though Jojo and Kayla reject a part of their white ancestry, Ward proposes they must embrace that which is their whole selves; when the white ancestry allows space for the stories of their African past to be heard in full, true healing begins. In fact, the cohabitation of both sides is what shapes the end of the novel into a more positive, encouraging space. Ward grasps that “only if both sides work through the legacies of these histories can the vicious cycle of repetition be disrupted” (Ward 82) as shown by the powerful effect of the grandchildren and children of both sides of slavery. Storytelling is an active and necessary part of the healing process, but it will not erase the horrors of the past or immediately alleviate pain and trauma. It will, however, begin to change the narrative and offer an avenue for such healing. One where nature is a place of recluse and rebirth, where ghosts are of this world, and where black peoples’ stories are reclaimed in their own voices.

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