

PIECING TOGETHER AFRICAN AMERICANS' FUTURE: THE SUBVERSIVE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN AND DEATH AS A SPACE OF
CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL REAPPROPRIATION IN JESMYN WARD'S
SING, UNBURIED, SING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores literary representations of the direct and indirect consequences of the US state of policing on twenty-first-century African American children. Ever since Achille Mbembe's first conceptualization of necropolitics as an ultimate expression of sovereignty in late-modern colonial contexts, the incessant development in the US of increasingly subtle ways to enforce necro citizenship on specific demographic groups have prompted scholars to further reflect on attitudes toward death in contemporary Western societies. In particular, the necessity emerged to restore necropolitics' role as a universal process underlying the establishment of communities' cultural and historical awareness through the practice of collective mourning. By analyzing children characters in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I argue that if, on the one hand, children's inherent ability to represent the future is marred among African Americans by ongoing racial discrimination and injustice, on the other hand, it can also become a powerful means to overturn oppressive necropolitical discourses and practices. While engaging in a long tradition of protest literature and its use of African spirituality to create literary sites of resistance for Black Americans, Ward's novel intersects Sharon P. Holland's theory about the liberating, political power of creative writing on several levels: the most interesting and subversive is Kayla's character. The three-year-old toddler does not only embody the past and present history of African Americans, from the experience of the Middle Passage to a condition of forced silence; more significantly, she challenges received assumptions about childhood and the marginal(ized) position of her people in US society by engaging with death and the dead, thus offering a redemptive and liberating perspective from which to conceive and (re)build African Americans' future.

Keywords: Jesmyn Ward; African American protest literature; Necropolitics; Americans and death; Child characters.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores literary representations of the direct and indirect consequences of the state of policing in the twenty-first-century US by focusing on children characters in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. To begin with, I will present the theoretical framework that informed my reflections on death, race, and childhood in the novel. After that, I will analyze the role young Jojo and Kayla play in the narrative by concentrating especially on the three-year-old girl. I argue that, in addition to challenging received assumptions about childhood and the marginal(ized) position of

African Americans in US society, Kayla also overturns dominant necropolitical discourses and practices, by subversively harnessing the complex interplay between death and the racialized subject. In so doing, she offers a new redemptive and liberating perspective on her community's past, while restoring African Americans' hopes for posterity.

In western cultures, children represent the future. They are their parents' legacy, not only at an individual and family level, but also as citizens of nations for which they represent the most natural and powerful way to safeguard and transmit specific cultural and historical values. Because of their inherent innocence and fragility, they must therefore be protected from all forms of physical and mental harm, so that they can grow up into healthy, successful adults.¹ This also implies shielding them from those aspects of human life which are considered either too complex for them to understand, or too painful to cope with—first and foremost, death. In the US, a nation as historically marked by racial divisions as by a troublesome, disenchanting relationship with death,² the safeguarding of human life holds true only for the dominant, white majority, whereas other ethnic groups—especially African Americans—are still disproportionately exposed to death in their everyday lives compared to the average citizen of a modern, wealthy country. One of the reasons lying behind such an

¹ In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) offers a thought-provoking approach to the conceptualization of childhood in western cultures, which I here partly summarize. (a) The all-Westerner conceptualization of children as future produces delusional visions ("the child as the emblem of parents' (impossible) continuity") and reproductive expectations instrumental to the political exploitation of the "image of the child" as a means to regulate social life, as demonstrated also by the rhetoric that "[p]olitics is only done now in the name of, and for the sake of, 'our children's future'" (13). (b) Since the child is defined in retrospect as "the specter of who we were when there was nothing yet behind us," adults feel compelled to safeguard its innocence, but only insofar as it originates from the feature of weakness signaling the child's compliance to western normative standards. Consequently, the right to protection—and to have a childhood—is a privilege of the white, middle-class child (30-31), which poses questions about the inclusion of other children (primarily of color) in discourses about the future. (c) Stockton urges to replace the idea of vertical, limited growth conveyed by the phrase "growing up" with the lateral extensions and connections allowed by "growing sideways," which suggest alternative forms of relation between children and adults (22).

² In 1918, Max Weber described postwar existence as a "disenchanted" world, in which "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather . . . one can in principle, master all things by calculation" and perceive death as "a meaningless occurrence" (2005, 139-40). Similarly, paraphrasing Jean Baudrillard, Raymond L. M. Lee (2002) explains that "in modernity there is a complete break with people who are dead" and that it is "this lack of ritual continuity . . . that characterize death in modernity as disenchanted" (100).

imbalance is the intricate web of policing measures through which the US state and federal governments have been exercising control since the nation's foundation.

The US state of policing has historically exploited “violence against black children as a means of establishing and maintaining white supremacy . . . [and of] suppressing their present and future attainment of citizenship rights” (Webster 2020). For example, the presence of police officers in public schools is often the cause of physical violence against Black students, rather than a source of protection. In addition, inequality in disciplinary policies and “zero-tolerance” for school rules infractions contribute to the early criminalization of young African Americans through the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline” (American Civil Liberties Union 2021). As argued by Hajela and Whitehurst, “[r]esearch shows Black children are often viewed as being older than they are, and are more likely to be seen as threatening or dangerous. . . . [P]olice [treat] them in ways they wouldn't dream of treating white children” (2021). This includes an unwarranted use of force by law enforcement, adult treatment in court trials, and a six times higher chance to die from police gunfire than white children. Finally, several forms of discrimination continue to limit Black students' access to education, where the achievement gap with white students shows no signs of abating,³ children with disabilities often receive services for emotional disturbances—thus encouraging social stigma—and Black teachers are still largely outnumbered by white colleagues (National School Boards Association 2020).

Set in Bois Sauvage, a fictional version of DeLisle, Mississippi, Jesmyn Ward's novels consistently deal with the multiple challenges that young African Americans have to face in their daily lives, especially in the rural South. *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008) follows twins Joshua and Christophe in their struggle to get a job after graduation, with Christophe turning to drug dealing for lack of a better option. *Salvage the Bones* (2011) tells the story of a pregnant teenager, Esch, and her family as they

³ According to the National School Boards Association website (2020), in 2018, the dropout rate for Black students was 4.2% higher than that for white students, while the number of Black 18- to 24-year-olds who were neither enrolled in school nor working was 14% higher than that of white people in the same age group.

prepare for Hurricane Katrina, denouncing the way thousands of people were completely forgotten by institutions in the midst of this tragic event. But it is in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) that Ward provides her most accurate account of how African Americans' future is put into question by racial discrimination and state-sanctioned violence: its youngest protagonists, Jojo and Kayla, have to cope with absent and addict parents, police abuse, and several encounters with death. At the same time, however, the novel manages to restore hope, by transforming death itself into a means for cultural and historical reappropriation.

NO COUNTRY FOR DEATH

Over the last century, modern, technological societies have in many respects learned to tame death, so that most people living in western countries can be said to enjoy a relatively long part of their lives without having to deal with its most direct and disturbing aspects, particularly during their childhood. This implies, among other things, that in highly developed industrialized nations, the death of a child is not just experienced as an extremely traumatic event for parents, who expect their progeny to naturally outlive them.⁴ Rather, it has also come to stand as an unfathomable mark of failure for governments, as they largely measure the level of prosperity enjoyed by their constituencies through indicators such as extremely low child mortality rates, widespread and long-term access to education, and the quality of family policies. Consequently, the importance of and concern for children's health and wellbeing have

⁴ Russell Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter* provides a telling reflection on the collective, traumatic experience represented by the death of a child in contemporary societies: "People who have lost their children . . . twist themselves into all kinds of weird shapes in order to deny what happened. Not just because of the pain of losing a person they have loved . . . but because what has happened is so wickedly unnatural, so profoundly against the natural order of things, that we cannot accept it. It's almost beyond belief or comprehension that the children should die before the adults. It flies in the face of biology, it contradicts history, it denies cause and effect, it violates basic physics, even. It's the final contrary. A town that loses its children loses its meaning" (1991, 78).

increasingly become the object of state politics, which in turn have shaped the role as well as the cultural significance of childhood in contemporary developed countries.⁵

Against such premises, the US represents an exception, as is often the case. As British Jamaican writer Zadie Smith pointed out in a recent essay, in the twentieth century the US developed a reputation as a nation forgotten by death, the most successful example of the West's effort to prolong life through scientific, technological, and medical progress.⁶ What Americans are missing, however, is not “dead people . . . casualties [or] victims,” but rather “the concept of death itself, death absolute. The kind of death that comes to us all, irrespective of position.” One reason for this is that finitude represents the very antithesis of the American dream, in every possible aspect of individual and social life. Moreover, Americans have “rarely been philosophically inclined to consider existence as a whole, preferring to attack death as a series of discrete problems” which inevitably “[involve] some culpability on the part of the dead” (2020, 12). Such culpability rests on the same racist dynamics that regulate most aspects of American society, as is fittingly confirmed, to the purpose of this paper, by the fact that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the US exceptional estrangement from death has been accompanied by another equally exceptional trend—although in the negative sense of the term—in their national maternal and infant death rates: a 2018 study found that “American kids are 70 percent more likely to die before adulthood than kids in other rich countries” (Kliff 2018). Likewise, maternal mortality increased “nearly 27 percent from 2000 to 2014,” a trend recorded in the US alone among all other wealthy nations. Driving this singular crisis are the high(er) mortality rates recorded among African American women, which research studies account for as a result of the

⁵ Despite Anglo-American cultures' attempts to conceive of the child as a “carefully controlled embodiment of noncomplication (increasingly protected from labor, sex, and painful understanding), the child has gotten thick with complication. Even as idea [which also made it] stranger, more fundamentally foreign, to adults” (Stockton 2009, 5).

⁶ For a chronological and more comprehensive account of the particular relationship between Americans and death, see Charles O. Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” which traces the shift from the domestication and sentimentalization of death in the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century period to the progressive withdrawal of the living from all things related to death which culminated in post-WWII “fun-morality” (1977, 309).

cumulative effects of racism, rather than of biological/genetic differences (Novoa and Taylor 2018).

Among the few scholars who engaged the role of death and its interconnections with race and racism in the formation of the American identity, Sharon P. Holland highlights the necessity to further explore the “space of death” – both social and literal – in the US imaginary, as to discover who inhabits it and why we strive to keep those subjects there (2000, 4). The scholar’s contentions are twofold. First, she argues that, following emancipation, the condition of the enslaved did not disappear, but rather was transferred to the space of imagination, where it became “fodder for both romantic fictions and horrific realities” (14-15). Second, in agreement with Patterson’s theory of social death, she affirms that enslaved Africans were subjected to a double process of genealogical isolation: on the one hand, they were denied any kind of relationship to their living blood relatives through the legal status of chattel; on the other hand, the diaspora deprived them of any means of transforming their past into legacy by implementing the social heritage of their ancestors into their lives (13). As a result, today, African Americans still find themselves in a state of social isolation that makes them closer to the dead than historians and critics have so far articulated (15), since both groups are relegated to the same imaginary space of the invisible.

Significantly, Holland explains that Black people’s invisibility also serves the purpose of “divest[ing] death of any power by submerging it in anonymity,” so that it is not fearful anymore for the non-racially marked subject (2000, 38). This aspect of the interrelation between race and death builds on Russ Castronovo’s conceptualization of necro citizenship, a form of “social death” which emerged in the nineteenth century as an “erotically charged state of eternal freedom” associated with US citizenship and through which white Americans were somehow dispensed from participating in the political life of the nation. This process of abstraction/disembodiment, however, required other hyperembodied identities against which to define the legitimate American citizen. According to Castronovo, African American men, who experienced social death in its ultimate expression under slavery as well as in the form of isolation after emancipation, served the purpose of providing expendable bodies to passively

support the socio-economic system on which the American ideal of democratic freedom relied (Shockley 2002, 683-84). This helps understand Holland's statement about the need for Black death to be invisible: "[w]e have nothing to fear from anonymity. If we cannot recall a face that looks like our own, then we cannot fear our own death in quite the same way. . . . The death of black subjects or the invisibility of blackness . . . [therefore] ward[s] off a nation's collective dread of the inevitable" (38). In a country of disembodied citizens, this implies that the embodied other is also the one who inevitably can—or should—die first.

A government's "power and . . . capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" has been described by Mbembe and Meintjes as necropolitics, a form of biopower in which "[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2003, 11-12). First deployed in late-modern colonial contexts to enforce sovereignty on indigenous populations, over time such policing measures have evolved and ranged from the actual control over biological existence to social death to the exclusion of certain groups from opportunity. Race and racism have been used throughout to create and support fictionalized notions of enmity that helped regulate the distribution of death, and guarantee the survival of state power (16-17). However, in postcolonial societies, where their interpretation "inevitably becomes politicized, as the question of legitimacy, lineage, inheritance, and thus of *power* over the present [and, I would add, the future] comes to the fore" (Ruin 2019, 96; emphasis in the original), necropolitics took on further, special significance. The complexity of the social, political, and cultural dynamics which regulate life and death in such contexts—of which the US represent the most singular instance—have recently urged scholars to rethink necropolitics in relation to the historical, so as to restore their importance as part of the universal process through which cultural and historical awareness is achieved within a community by means of all those practices aimed at creating a sense of identity and belonging by taking care of the dead.

Whereas this perspective casts a more positive light on necropolitical phenomena, it also underlines the fact that sovereignty can be and has historically been enforced not only on the living, but also, and especially, on the dead. The ability to

control the dead, in fact, is of crucial importance to anyone in a position of power, since it allows them to select the voices which partake in a nation's foundational narrative.⁷ From this perspective, necropolitics can be seen as the result of a long evolution in the way of understanding and harnessing the relationship between the living and the dead, one in which repression can be directed toward increasingly well-defined groups which the dominant society wishes to reduce to an invisible other. One of the ways in which literature can exercise its power to denounce and redress the omission, manipulation, and appropriation of mainstream historical records is by challenging literary canons' effort "to master borders (both perceived and unperceived), to discipline people whose imaginations consistently resist and/or subvert attempts to establish recognizable hegemony" (Holland 1994, 334). Such borders include that which separates the living from the dead, which creative writers manage to circumvent by "bringing the subject of death and our national imaginings to the forefront" (Holland 2000, 40).

Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award winner *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a wonderful instance of fictional narrative where the dead play an active and emancipating part in their descendants' lives. While engaging in a long tradition of protest literature⁸ which uses African spirituality to create literary sites of resistance for Black Americans (Mellis 2019, 2), Ward's third novel deploys the liberating, political power of creative writing on several levels, the most interesting and subversive of which can be found in Kayla's character. In particular, the three-year-old offers a fascinating opportunity to further stretch Holland's argumentation about the dead and African Americans' sharing of the same imaginary space both as a prerequisite for and as a result of the nation's state of policing. To include children in discourses about death is not only useful for understanding the ways in which race and necropolitics are used to prevent second-

⁷ "Should [the silenced dead] rise and speak for themselves, the state would lose all right to their borrowed and/or stolen language," thus compromising the very existence of the nation (Holland 2000, 28).

⁸ By "protest literature," Mellis refers to the "long and storied tradition of African-American authors [who use] their work to protest oppression in America," including authors—such as Ward and Colson Whitehead—who "invok[e] African-based spiritual traditions variously: as a literary trope, a tie to originary African identity, and . . . as a means of empowerment for characters to control or punish, or as protection from and resistance to a racially oppressive society" (2019, 2).

class citizens from even imagining a (better) future; it also allows to cast new light on the cultural and political role of literature in resisting and overturning those same oppressing strategies.

REDEEMING DEATH: A LOOPHOLE OF RETREAT

One of the analogies underpinning the use of fiction as a means for reclamation and empowerment is that between human bodies and bodies of literature, in other words between body and text. As the target of persistent policing strategies through which the US have historically defined and imposed conditions of economic and social oppression, the Black body constitutes a “walking text, a fleshy reminder of the paradoxical nature of an American citizenry built around the ideology of difference” (Henderson 2002, 3). For this same reason, following the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have increasingly been portraying their bodies in a way that allows them to “‘speak’ into existence their own humanity but to do so in a way that resists racist or sexist paradigms of subjugated embodiment” (Henderson 2002, 3). In her introduction to *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Carol E. Henderson significantly describes American society as

in a constant state of rewriting the cultural significance of the African American individual through the use of his or her body. Much of the methodological figurings of the systems of oppression consistently silence the voice of the subjugated using the body as their vehicle. . . . African American culture, when taken as a whole, confronts this silencing by creating moments of resistance or “loopholes of retreat” that not only speak to the resilience of African American people but also allow for the reconceptualization of literal and figurative bodies within certain delimiting social structures. It is the gap between the literal and the figurative that allows for the possibility of speaking a counterdiscourse of the black body. (2002, 6; emphasis in the original)

Kayla’s role in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is to create such a “loophole,” where the evident fragility of her body and her limited speech are compensated by the ability to communicate with and raise the voices of the dead. Extremely rich in references to the body—both human and non-human—and to the difficulty for African Americans to

speak up, Ward's novel offers a vivid and touching display of the consequences of growing up in a Black family in one of the poorest rural areas of the US South, which Jojo and Kayla manage to cope with precisely by embracing and repurposing the inevitability of death.

The novel begins with thirteen-year-old Jojo mentally preparing himself to help Pop, his grandfather, to slaughter a goat for his birthday meal. From the very first lines, the boy shows his premature awareness of death, by stating "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (Ward 2017, 6). This is due to a toxic notion of hyper-masculinity (often transmuted to bestiality) which has long been enforced on African American men by white society, resulting in "black males [living or dead] remain[ing] spectral as their frustrated black bodies are endlessly rejected and disembodied" (Choi 2018, 434). Such spectrality is further enhanced by the all-too-frequent physical absence of men in African American families, due to premature death or various forms of racial discrimination which make them the primary victims of mass incarceration. In Ward's novel, if Jojo's future seems forever doomed by the pervasive and almost ubiquitous presence of Parchman State Penitentiary in his family history, the boy is also offered an alternative model of masculinity by her grandmother Philomène. Mam shows him the importance of mourning as a form of healing and creates "a diachronic space of remembrance as opposed to the annihilating space of Parchman. Her oceanic space breaks out the vicious cycle of the black experience and invites the unburied and the living to the space of black collectivity. . . . [The] distorted understanding of manliness [represented by Parchman] is replaced with therapeutic encounter with death" (446).

While I agree with Choi's statement above, it seems to me that what actually saves Jojo from an assumed destiny of invisibility and annihilation is the encounter not—or at least not only—with death at large, but rather with its consequences: the dead, their ghosts, and their untold or forgotten stories. This becomes more evident by focusing on Kayla, the ultimate repository of both her family's and her community's history of trauma. In fact, despite Jojo being the character around which the novel is constructed (Biedenharn 2017), I argue that the boy is not enough for Ward's message

to become universal: it is Kayla who performs the song mentioned in the title, which eventually appeases the spirits of the unburied “generations of black Southerners undone by racism and history, lynched, raped, enslaved, shot, and imprisoned” (Quin 2017). The most vulnerable of the novel’s protagonists by virtue of her young age, Kayla is also the one who most effectively challenges and resists the multiple systems of control enforced on her community, as shown by her crucial contribution to her family’s literal and spiritual survival in several points of the narrative.⁹ Nevertheless, the reader has to rely on Jojo and Leonie in order to learn about her: while she is constantly quoted, described, paraphrased, and interpreted by her brother and mother, Kayla has no narrating voice of her own, both because she is clearly too young to be up to the task¹⁰ and, I believe, because she embodies the condition of Americans of African descent as a whole. A careful look at the physical and mental description of her character is, therefore, fundamental to understand the most profound meaning of Ward’s story.

The cumulative effect of Kayla’s national and family (hi)story of racism and poverty are almost inscribed on her minute body.¹¹ Whereas Jojo received some attention from his mother as a child, Kayla never knew Leonie “when there was more good than bad” (Ward 2017, 10). Despite her grandparents’ best efforts to provide for her and make up for her uncaring parents, she is described as “a short three-year-old, so

⁹ In addition to providing Jojo with a crucial source of emotional comfort whenever Pop is not around, Kayla is also the only family member who occasionally manages to stir Leonie’s faint sense of responsibility and desire to reinstate a healthy relationship with her children. When the whole family is threatened by a police officer on their way back from Parchman, Kayla both actively tries to physically protect Jojo and provides a way out of that dreadful situation. Also, she is the first to detect Richie’s presence in Mam’s bedroom, thus allowing Leonie to intervene, and the one who eventually manages to deliver her family from the boy’s haunting influence.

¹⁰ In this respect, Ward distances herself from her major literary source of inspiration: whereas in *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner entrusts his story to seven different narrators, including young, cryptic Vardaman, Ward allows only the three characters who are more connected with one another by the family’s history of trauma to speak in first person: Richie, whose death marked the origin of River’s sense of guilt and impotence; Leonie, whose instability is the direct product of the traumatic heritage engendered by both Richie’s and Given’s death; and Jojo, who has to contend with all this. Moreover, Ward’s characters talk as they would do in real life. Their grammar is not corrected to proper English, nor is the language of children stylistically revised to convey a more mature, and therefore inconsistent, level of introspection.

¹¹ It is important to remember that class and specific, local socio-economic conditions play an equally important role in the novel, alongside race. Despite being white, Jojo and Kayla’s father falls victim to the same dynamics which systematically destroy African American individuals and families. Similarly, the aggressive child whom the party encounters on their way to All’s is further proof that in Mississippi drug addiction and poverty issues seriously affect white families, too.

when she curls into [Jojo], her feet don't even hang over [his] lap." Her stride is unsteady and when she is not toddling around, she inevitably asks Jojo to scoop her up and cuddle her. Since birth, she has learned to depend primarily on her brother for love and support: "she got so used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle. So I sleep on the floor next to Leonie's bed, and most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's mostly gone," says Jojo (20). Moreover, Leonie never breast-fed Kayla, which led the girl to take up compensating habits to comfort herself, such as reaching out for one of her brother's ear lobes to knead it (25). Less unusual for her age, but certainly contributing to the sense of disarming cuteness and vulnerability conveyed by her character, is Kayla's smell which, for better or for worse, unequivocally evokes the earliest stages of childhood: "warm milk, . . . baby powder" (20), and coconut hair lotion are replaced by the harsh stench of sweat and throw-up (89) during her car trip to Parchman, when the two siblings have to fend for themselves in a long series of dire situations. Siblings' mutual support is an essential element of resilience for African American youth (Keeble 2020, 46) and one of the reasons why Leonie is so jealous of her children: she is aware of her poor parenting skills, but what really angers and hurts her about the way Jojo and Kayla "turn to each other like plants following the sun across the sky" is the thought that she was deprived of the same kind of affection when her brother Given was murdered. While she watches her children sleep, she confesses to herself: "I think Given must have held me like that once, that once we breathed mouth to mouth and inhaled the same air" (Ward 2017, 120).

Ward's characters as a whole assume quite a mythical status with reference to contemporary African Americans, in that they have all survived a number of traumatic events that forever affected their ability to create sound emotional bonds. On the extremely poor Mississippi Gulf Coast, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow built up over the centuries and is now taking its toll on Leonie and Michael. A multiethnic couple,¹²

¹² The term multiethnic is here preferred to multiracial, in order to highlight the controversial nature of the concept of race itself and its connection to social constructs and ideologies which serve oppressive and discriminatory purposes.

one “the color of unskimmed coffee” (Ward 2017, 47), the other so ghostly white that his skin “eats up the light from the growing day” (121), they are both equally crushed by the weight of their family histories and seek refuge in drugs as well as in the intoxicating love that they have for each other. Their inability to cope with pain and loss has obvious repercussions on their two children and is rooted in the social background and living conditions of many multiethnic and Black families. Leonie’s brother, Given, was shot by Michael’s cousin for winning a hunting game when he was just a senior. Protected by the color of his skin, the killer got away with it by declaring that it was an accident. Nevertheless, when Leonie and Michael started dating and soon had their first child, the uncomfortable truth about Given’s tragic death didn’t unite the two families in common grief. Instead, it separated them even further, leaving Leonie, Michael, and their children in a sort of interracial limbo.

When read together, these events help infer the reasons underlying the young couple’s poor parenting abilities. As a teenager, Leonie found herself alone to cope with her parents’ grief. Unable to partake in their mourning, she developed a sort of inferiority complex toward both her late brother and her mother, which resulted in the conviction of being an unwanted, surviving child, incapable of fulfilling her parents’ expectations.¹³ Feeling lost and alone, only her consuming love for Michael (all the more precious because reciprocated in a racist society) could relieve her pain and sense of guilt. On the other side of the color line, Michael was an outcast, too, a teenager struggling to deal with the implications of loving a person that his father still called and considered a “nigger” (Ward 2017, 47). He used to work on an oil rig, but was dismissed following a serious environmental accident in which several of his colleagues died. The shock and remorse caused by this event combined with his inability to find another job in one of the poorest regions of the US. The couple, then, moved back in with Leonie’s parents and Michael sought refuge from his trauma in methamphetamines. Sentenced

¹³This is most evident from Leonie’s recollection of the moment when she discussed her first pregnancy with her mother: Mam, transfigured into the Medusa by a flash of lightning, appeared to her as the image of perfection, thus forcing Leonie to accept maternity against her own will (Ward 2017, 125-26)

to three years of imprisonment for drug dealing, he went through the same painful experience of incarceration as his father-in-law. River, in fact, had been a convict at Parchman State Penitentiary at the age of fifteen and has been haunted ever since by the memory of Richie, the youngest of his prison mates, whom he mercifully killed.

While obviously affecting Jojo as well, Leonie and Michael's troublesome story, both as individuals and as a multiethnic couple, took its most dramatic turn around the time of Kayla's birth, thus compromising her life since the very beginning. Besides her physical growth, her speech abilities, too, are underdeveloped for a three-year-old. However, if in the average white American family this would alert parents and prompt them to consult a speech therapist, the circumstances in which Kayla lives betray, on the one hand, the frequency of such developmental issues and, on the other hand, the existence of far worse scenarios among African Americans than the one painted by Ward. Furthermore, I believe that silencing Kayla is one of the key strategies through which the writer appointed her as the major representative of her demographic group at large in the novel, as clearly shown by her relationship with the dead.

SOMETHING "ALL HER. KAYLA."

Kayla's character allows Ward to tackle necropolitical issues around voice, language, and silencing from the most powerful and effective perspective of all: that of a toddler, who overturns every possible expectation connected to her age by actively engaging with the dead in order to claim back her (community's) right to have a future. In fact, being partly African American, Kayla is not entitled to any kind of childhood-related form of protection in US society and is as invisible as any colored adult. From the liminal space that she shares with the dead, she is nevertheless able to exercise a subversive force against two major socio-cultural constructs. On the one hand, she exposes "the problem of the child as a general idea" described by Stockton: "The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy, making us wonder: Given that we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves, should we stop talking of children altogether?" (2009, 5). To see the child as a ghostly, romantic idea adds yet another feature to those

of race and gender which, according to white socio-cultural standards, mark Kayla as dead, that is, as intrinsically invisible.

On the other hand, though, as a non-verbal character, Kayla both instantiates and overturns the silencing practices historically enforced on African Americans. As highlighted by Chevalier, Black deaths are “visually communicated, not spoken” (2020, 229) by the multitude of ghosts perched on the trees at the end of Ward’s novel. This prominence of image over words further stresses the role of silencing in racial oppression and highlights the failure of language to fully and effectively rehabilitate the voice and the legacy of the dead. Similarly, to finally know his own story is not enough for Richie to cross over: “I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could . . . become something else. Maybe I could. Become. The song,” he explains to Jojo (Ward 2017, 223). But the song for the dead, the one which eventually restores memory and peace among the spirits of unmourned African Americans, doesn’t sound like regular language; rather, it is “a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that [even Jojo] can understand. Only the melody, which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of the trees, that cuts their whispering but twines with it at the same time” (226). Silenced, like her people, by the racialized history and politics of the South, only Kayla knows how to (re)create the conditions for listening to the voices of her ancestors, and evoke the universal melody which resonates in all living beings, past and present, human and non-human, thus reinstating the possibility of proper mourning and narrative memory among African Americans.¹⁴

¹⁴ Chevalier stresses the importance of mourning as a means to guarantee a safe transition of the spirit to the other world and into another form – a story, a voice, a song. This becomes evident in “Richie’s failure to cross over [which] is attenuated to the violence of his death at River’s hands. The failure to transition is the silence attenuated to his death, specifically in the lack of grieving, or mourning. . . . Richie is *not grieved*.” Apart from creating ghosts, “[t]he lack of grieving black, violent death . . . ‘traumatizes the survivors into silence’” (2020, 228; emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, Ward compensates for all this violence by making Richie one of the story’s narrators: as highlighted by Khedhir (2020), by allowing him “to tell first-hand stories about the past, Ward gives voice to the voiceless and the oppressed and endows him with the agency to re-create the past, shifting the focus from traumatic memory to narrative memory” (2020, 20). Khedhir’s narrative memory builds upon Brogan’s concept of “Cultural Haunting,” according to which “ghosts are used in American literature of different ethnic backgrounds as a memory tool to show how the past interacts with the present . . . to restore lost cultural identities, to re-create an ethnic identity by recalling a collective history, and to disrupt historical chronology by introducing a meta-narrative and inserting fragmented or absent discourse” (18).

However, Ward's message can be further extended. Even after Kayla performs the song, the ghosts don't fly away. Their storytelling is urgently needed to help the living overcome the collective trauma caused by slavery and oppression, similarly to Pop once he eventually manages to tell the end of Richie's story to Jojo. But the dead cannot leave this world, because as invisible and threatening as they may be, they are an indispensable part of it. In the song, they find their liminal, yet peaceful and empowering home: the "historical, social, and ontological dimension that humans share with 'those *having been*'" that Ruin, quoting Heidegger, calls "being with the dead" (2019, 5; emphasis in the original), and that Chevalier describes as "the multiplicity of this world" (229). Kayla's interaction with the dead in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is neither a mere literary trope nor a way to suggest an originary African identity as an alternative to a hyphenated American one. Its function is political and aimed at resistance and emancipation. It highlights the importance of a form of spirituality in which both the living and the dead participate as a key tool for ethnic minority groups to cope with, resist, and fight back the oppressive racial and class ideologies that govern US society.¹⁵ By restoring a positive, active role of death in African American lives, necropolitical discourses pivoting around their invisibility are overturned and new hopes emerge for the preservation of the individual and collective identities that lay the basis for cultural and historical awareness. According to Marco Petrelli, to conjure a protected site of collective healing allows for "what Judith Butler defines as a 'successful' mourning [to take place, a process which] contemplates not only the pain of losing, but also how loss brings about recognition on a cultural and social level" (2020, 286).

To resume my analysis of Kayla, silence is not the only feature through which the toddler embodies the past and present condition of her people in Ward's narrative. As highlighted by Choi, throughout the novel, African Americans' resistance to

¹⁵ Petrelli remarks that African American literary ghosts are fundamental "catalysts, conjuring that crossroad upon which the relationship between subject, place, and history is negotiated through narrative." This type of narration which "proceeds from an experience of place rooted in spiritualism" (2020, 279) also resonates with Chevalier's and Khedhir's argumentations above about the role of mourning and narrative memory in the creation of literary sites of resistance.

“psychologically digest” their collective history of trauma is demonstrated by the frequent episodes of vomiting (2018, 433-34). The most specific metaphor created by Ward in this sense is Kayla’s carsickness on her way to Parchman: a metaphor for slavery, the state penitentiary is a sort of netherworld which haunts each and every member of Pop’s family. Accordingly, Kayla’s discomfort throughout the car trip to collect Michael comes to evoke the seasickness of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage (442), reinforcing the girl’s symbolic role in the narrative. The correlation between vomiting and the necessity for African Americans to fight back is even more evident from an episode that literally takes place on the road, which Nicole Dib describes as one of the historically “contested space[s] where black bodies are policed” (2020, 135). On their way home, the group is pulled over by a patrol officer, who promptly reacts to the information that they are returning from Parchman by handcuffing Leonie, Michael, and finally Jojo. Seized by fear, the boy tries to reach his pocket for his grandfather’s gris-gris bag, his only source of protection, but the police officer doesn’t hesitate to put a gun to his head. The moments that follow are dominated by a tense feeling of imminent death, made all the more dreadful by Leonie’s words, underlining the innocence and fragility of her son’s body:

It’s easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It’s easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he’s grown. But he’s just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain’t nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can’t. . . . I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. (Ward 2017, 130)

Of all the people involved, the only one who reacts is Kayla, who kicks off the officer, wrestles to escape Misty’s (Leonie’s white friend) grip, and bravely struggles to protect her brother. Jojo narrates: “Kayla moves so fast, small and fierce, to jump on my back. I should soothe Kayla, should tell her to run back to Misty, to get down and let me go, but I can’t speak. . . . *What if he shoot her?* I think. *What if he shoot both of us?*” Distracted just for one second by Richie’s ghost—almost a looming reminder of what could happen when an African American driver is stopped by the police—the boy “can’t

help but return to this: Kayla's brown arms and that gun, black as rot, as pregnant with dread" (Ward 2017, 135; emphasis in the original). Eventually, the episode ends with Kayla throwing up on the officer's uniform, apparently at the suggestion of her uncle Given's ghost.

The atemporality engendered by the presence of ghosts in African American literature inevitably raises questions about the future of Black and Brown people in the US, and acquires a specific significance in Ward's novel, whose central characters—one ghost included—are children. In a society where not even extremely young people can escape the consequences of racism and the state of policing which relegates non-white Americans to the marginal space of the dead, what are the chances that racial injustice will eventually disappear? Once again, Ward conveys her thoughts through Kayla. Whereas Jojo took more after Pop, Kayla is a perfect mix of inherited traits, each evoking one of her family members: "Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulders Pop's, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (Ward 2017, 225). It is precisely this ability to summarize and embody her family's past while, at the same time, adding a new, powerful element to it that allows Kayla to reclaim her ability as a child to represent the future despite the color of her skin.

CONCLUSION

When Richie attempts on Mam's life hoping that he will finally be able to move on, Leonie explicitly shares her concern about what tomorrow will bring to her and her daughter: Kayla feels the presence of the boy's ghost and runs to the door of her grandmother's bedroom to try to open it. Her words—"He want Mam!"—alarm Leonie, who suddenly realizes that her daughter, too, could have supernatural gifts. At the simple thought of what this might imply, fear seizes her, "spilling through my chest, scalding-hot grits. I wonder at my short, round toddler with her toes grazing the door, *at the future and what it will demand of me. Of her*" (209; emphasis mine). But her fear is due to the awareness that she is the one who is "not prepared to see" (209) what is

happening in Mam's room—nor is she prepared to face the future in a broader sense. However, Leonie needs not to worry, because despite being a baby, Kayla is fully aware of her ability to hear the voices of any living and dead being around her, as well as to see and communicate with spirits. Her “golden, clinging toddler, the tilt of her head and those clear eyes direct and merciless as an adult's” (Ward 2017, 163), is not in the least scared by it¹⁶—or by any demonstration of racism, such as the abusive behavior of the police, or the prejudices of her paternal grandparents.

What makes her special is the fact that her fearless attitude in the face of death and the supernatural is neither the result of a sort of training in using her gifts (which her extremely young age totally precludes), nor of any critical ability which might be acquired over time through lived experience or standard education. The ease and self-assurance with which she deals with Richie's ghost and the other spirits that she meets in the wood at the end of the novel are and can only be the product of what Holland describes as a full and unreserved embrace of one's own “crossblood identity:” contrary to “mixed blood African-American[s] . . . who have the *knowledge* of some European and/or Native ancestry,” Kayla “*identify[s]* as such, [which allows her] to consistently cross the borders of ideological containment” (1994, 335; emphasis in the original)—including the one which separates the living from the dead. From this perspective, Kayla finds an antecedent in decolonial literature in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.¹⁷ Oscar's niece, the newborn Isis, is the only one who may live to see the centuries-long *fuku* curse which afflicts her family (and symbolically the entire Dominican American community) run its course and lose its force. Yet, in order to

¹⁶ Jojo comments when he realizes that Kayla can read thoughts, too: “I look back at Kayla and she has her two middle fingers in her mouth, and I know then by the way she's studying me, her little eyes round as marbles, calm in her seat, . . . that she has it. Like me. That she can understand like I can, but even better, because she know how to do it now. Because she can look at me and know what I'm thinking, . . . , and she smiles around her wet fingers, her little teeth perfect and even as uncooked rice, and I know she hears me” (Ward 2017 140).

¹⁷ Ward shares with Díaz an approach to literature as a powerful, productive force, capable of overthrowing oppression and marginalization both in reality and on the level of imagination. This suggests that her work fit better within a decolonial rather than postcolonial critical framework, although it is important to remember that African Americans never actually were a colonized people.

succeed, she must embrace—that is, identify with—her Dominican roots (Gonzalez 2015, 76).

Similarly, Kayla weaves the past, present, and future of her family into a single thread, by simultaneously restoring a positive relationship with her mixed ancestry and hope for posterity. As argued by Petrelli, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* “echoes James Baldwin’s admonition . . . that African Americans cannot have a future unless they accept their past” (2020, 285). To this purpose, Ward suggests that stories and literature be understood and exploited as an affirmative political act, prompting African Americans to resume agency in the remembrance of their past as well as in the construction of tomorrow. Kayla responds to this call to action by turning her limited ability to speak into an occasion for denouncing and overturning all the performative social constructs which are normally used to oppress and marginalize African Americans and other minority groups—from gender to race to the innocence of childhood. Her chunked sentences, made up of verbs at the imperative form, are not simply a regular feature of the intermediate stage of children’s speech development, but utterances that are, or are part of, “the doing of an action” (Austin 1962, 5-6). At the end of the novel, Kayla’s short commands, addressed first to Pop and Jojo—“Down,” “Down, Pop. Please,” “Yes”—then to the multitude of shuddering ghosts—“Go home”—(Ward 2017, 225), make way for a song, a positive, redemptive performance in which all African Americans, living and dead, can finally regain their individual and collective identity.

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