

Constructing African American Identity through Oral Traditions in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*

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Abstract

The objective of this research article was to examine the role of oral traditions in constructing the African American identity of the main character, Jojo, in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). This research employed a qualitative methodology to analyze how oral traditions contributed to the formation of African American identity. The findings of this study indicate that the character could shape African American identity by recounting the experiences of slavery. The slave history had been retold, providing an opportunity for the protagonist, who was of African American descent, to reinterpret the experience of slavery. Additionally, it prompted a reevaluation of the historical context of slavery. The protagonist could form their identity by reconciling the cultural differences between their ancestors' culture and the dominant mainstream culture and could live in an American society as an African American descendant.

Keywords: African American Identity, Orality

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Introduction

Throughout American history, African Americans have confronted significant challenges, including oppression, marginalization, racism, and exploitation. Despite the abolition of slavery, the African American community continued to face barriers related to discrimination. Marginalization and prejudice in various aspects of society had played an important role in shaping the identity of African Americans.

Orality has long been valued as a vital method of preserving ancestral history and culture in the African American community. In Africa, orality produced religious belief, social life, and the constant reconstitution of aesthetics, ideology, and society. Ato Quayson (2009) suggests that orality parallels literacy in shaping cultural identity. For instance, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature* highlights that orality shaped Africa's history and existence before the colonial influence of the West became evident (Gunner, 2004, p.1). Thus, orality in an era of globalization has not vanished but has changed as a tool for expressing the hopes and fears of new African generations.

Orality had various connotations. According to Ato Quayson (2009), orality was the collection of conceptual skills that transfer a comparable position as literacy in establishing a sense of cultural identity. In *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature* that orality helped shape Africa's history and existence even before the West's colonial influence became evident (Gunner, 2004, p. 1). In the African environment, orality

was how civilizations of varying degrees of complexity governed their past, present, and, in certain situations, opposition to authority. As a result, orality in Africa wasn't a form of communication; it was woven into their existence. Animal stories, anecdotes, songs, myths, folktales, and proverbs were passed down orally for generations. Through slavery, these traditions were carried to the Americas via slave ships and continue to thrive today. Across civilizations, particularly in Africa, oral tradition remained crucial for passing on knowledge from one generation to the next, showing how orality transforms into the oral tradition.

Because of the horrific history of slavery since the Diaspora, oral traditions had been used to illustrate the way of life of African people in a new land. According to Warner-Lewis (2004), the oral tradition was essential for fostering communication that connects African ancestors with their descendants to ensure cultural preservation. Oral history, on the other hand, was viewed more as a recreation and re-actualization of events in the present than as a meticulous reconstruction of history. Oral literature, then, provided a way for the traditional community to become aware of itself. Such a view of history differs greatly from the Western understanding of "original history" (Quayson, 2009 p. 33). Additionally, Roger Bastide asserted that the oral tradition had persisted for generations on the ancestral continent, giving the relocated Africans a symbolic resource for their new surroundings.

According to the foregoing viewpoint, African oral literature's integration of form and purpose gained significance in any discussion regarding the evolution of African American literature. Oral traditions were valuable as a humanistic resource, according to Quayson (2009). It was noteworthy as an ethnic and historical hinterland of African American literature as well. Of course, the primary cause of the historical differences between the two bodies of literature was the existence of slavery and the enormous displacement it brought about. Recurrences in spirit and articulation style could be identified in the creation of the collective self among black groups in the New World, even in cases where precise linkages are hard to establish.

The African legacy did not take on a new significance or function in public culture until the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s when literacy became the main means of elaboration and expression. African American authors used oral traditions to fight silence and speak out against injustice in all its forms to recover their humanity, history, and culture. African oral tradition had been examined by African historians like Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Théophile Obenga, as well as literary luminaries like Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah, to highlight the identity of Black people in history (Sackey, 1991). African American writers utilized oral traditions as a distinctive kind of cultural expression to challenge slavery and recover African history, and cultural legacy. It was therefore not surprising that modern African American writers frequently drew parallels between their works and the history of slavery through oral traditions.

One of the best-selling African American novels of the 20th century was Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In terms of formal narrative procedure, Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved* integrated the entire realm of consciousness that African oral narrative had always sought to encompass through an imaginative reconstruction that gave the collective experience a moral and symbolic resonance. Morrison thus places her art in the context of mood and image that reached into the African heartland and serves as a supporting framework for African American heritage.

A sort of collective oral tradition about the past was built out of personal memories as stories are passed down amongst Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Denver. Storytelling was one way that memories were perpetuated. The novel examined the importance of storytelling as well as its risk. Storytelling preserved memories, and Sethe's account of her family and her miraculous birth provides Denver with a sense of personal history and heritage. It also allowed former slaves to define themselves and tell their own stories instead of being defined by slave owners like the Schoolteacher, who records information about his slaves for his writings. Additionally, storytelling in *Beloved* triggered unpleasant memories, particularly for Sethe and Paul D. Rehashing old hurts might keep characters from progressing. The novel's conclusion, which reiterated, "It was not a story to pass on," implied that after *Beloved* vanished, people had to move on and forget about her. However, Toni Morrison's book did tell the narrative of *Beloved*, implying that we as a country

should not (and cannot) forget about the history of slavery and that there was still value in learning about this traumatic past.

Subsequent to *Beloved*, the reenactment of memory was predicated on the communal storytelling practice that honored the cultural links of the African diaspora. As a result, Jesmyn Ward's books carried on *Beloved*'s literary heritage while also taking readers to modern America to read tales that were still plagued by pain, death, and suffering while also exposing the atrocities of racism and the widespread suffering since the African diaspora. Influenced by Toni Morrison's work, Ward explored the ties between the African diaspora and slave history, retelling it through their ancestors' perspectives. Ward carries on Morrison's literary tradition and also adds on modern American history that reflects the ongoing struggles of African Americans. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the author shows a clear connection between the effects of African American identity and the historical accounts of slavery. As the main character's family has a long history of enslavement, he keeps the customs of his ancestors while fitting into American society. As a result, the protagonist faces the challenge of blending African and American cultures. Through the storytelling, he must reinterpret his ancestral past to find his unique African American identity.

To investigate the significance of oral traditions of the ancestors in constructing African American identity, the author examined Afrocentric viewpoints to shed light on how storytelling was used in literature to validate the African heritage of African Americans. Oral traditions were employed

in literary works to allude to African American identity to foster a sense of community that encourages progressive and creative pride in identity. It also concentrated on how African storytelling served as a means of preserving African heritage in modern African American fiction. So, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward was selected as a source to study.

For various reasons, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a valuable material when examining the identity-building of African American characters. First, there was a clear connection between the effects of African American identity and the historical accounts of slavery. Reconstructing African Americans' identities as inheritors of Africa in America was a goal shared by the author. Secondly, the protagonist was viewed as a minority in a world ruled by the dominants. He would inevitably have to deal with the differences of African and American cultures. Through the retelling of his ancestor's past by another character, he reimagined his ancestral past to find their African American self-identity.

Set in the 21st century, Jesmyn Ward's novel '*Sing, Unburied, Sing*' portrays the lives of African American families amidst America's drug crisis. Jojo grew up in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, raised by his drug-addicted parents alongside his African grandparents and sister, Kayla. In the book, stories were told via the perspectives of Jojo (the protagonist), Leonie (Jojo's mother), and Richie, a deceased black boy who was killed by Pop, Jojo's maternal grandpa since they were slaves in Parchman prison. Pop (River) and Richie's storytelling of the traumatic past convey the chilling truth of this unfair reenactment of slavery in South America.

Additionally, Ward conveyed the link between African Americans and their ancestral history through the utilization of oral traditions. Despite Jojo suffering from his father's racist white family and his parent's drug addiction, through hearing his ancestors' stories, he could comprehend his African heritage and construct his own identity. The presentation of enslaved people's past in '*Sing, Unburied, Sing*' underscored the intricate process of identity formation. By examining Jojo's journey in the novel, this study aims to reassess how the oral traditions surrounding the history of slavery had contributed to shaping African American identity.

Methods

The methodology of this research was qualitative design. The selected African American novel was *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) by Jesmyn Ward. The selection was based on using oral traditions in constructing African American identity.

In literary narratives, oral storytelling, according to Mahfouf & Al-Shetawi (2019), gives oppressed Black characters a voice and agency, enabling them to become a force capable of resisting the particularism of "Westernity" and undoing the hegemonic record history. This force could subvert attempt by the dominant culture to deny the existence of African identity. The African forefathers used the power of spoken words in their quest for liberation by narrating their stories. Narrating stories from a black perspective guarantees that the characters or storytellers would have the chance to change their lives by recalling their unique pasts and reconstructing the history of their race, enabling them to form their identities.

For Africa, orality was served in various functions. It produced religious belief, social life, and the constant reconstitution of aesthetics, ideology, and society (Gunner, 2004). Liz Gunner also stated that orality should be seen as the means of organizing societies' present and past. We could use orality to reflect the philosophy, declare, and in some cases, contest the power. Africa used orality to make its history and existence before the presence of the imperial and colonial of the West. Orality was something self-constitutive. Therefore, in a time of globalization, orality has not disappeared but rather evolved as a means of communicating the aspirations and anxieties of younger African generations (Gunner, 2004).

However, orality had expanded into several contemporary forms, one of which was literacy. Liz Gunner (2004) claims that although literacy has had a variety of effects on oral communication methods and had resulted in creative hybrid forms, orality had had a significant impact on the book itself in terms of written literature from the continent. It could be argued that the existence of a sizable and well-established body of rhetoric holding deep knowledge, with which writers had frequently felt compelled to engage, even when moving from the African languages in which the poetry or narrative was expressed to writing in English, French, or Portuguese, had greatly influenced the directions taken by contemporary written African literature. So, oral forms were indicated as the way to express imagination. Nevertheless, Lawrence Buell's definition drew attention significantly; he stated that both literature and

oral could be used as literary tools for communication. Graham and Ward (2015) cited in Georges Mounin's *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, argued that the basis of culture was the connotation Language expression must act equally between written literature and oral. In other words, the written and oral were applied in the same norm (Graham & Ward, 2015).

Due to the traditionally limited usage of literacy in African communities, orature genres, topics, styles, and performance techniques had historically served as the main means of communication, enculturation, entertainment, and social approval in most African nations, which led to oral tradition for African people. Gunner (2004) said that among the few but incredibly important items that the enslaved survivors of the transatlantic voyage brought with them to the United States were their verbal traditions. Additionally, studies had demonstrated that the concepts of "oral tradition" and "oral literature" pertain to the same corpus of work. The distinctions were found in the terms used to refer to the same body of material at different points in time and in the range to which each term was applied. For example, Adedeji defined oral tradition as a "complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created as a means of recalling the past" in an article titled *Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria* (1971, p. 2). Oral tradition in this sense was predicated on people's attitudes, sentiments, symbols, beliefs, and presumptions. Adedeji discussed the two primary categories of verbal arts in his typology of the oral tradition.

The literary and historical categories were as follows. According to him, music and poetry used in Odu or Ifa divination, as well as praise and totem chants, fall under the literary category. Proverbs, parables, and incantations are among other kinds. Stories based on myths, stories, and historical played like the epic fell under the historical category (1971, p. 2).

African uniqueness was involved here, encompassing African identity and oral tradition as a source of pride and variety. As mentioned in Trudier Harris's *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1994), one application was the use of oral tradition in fiction. By incorporating oral folktales into her novels, Toni Morrison hoped to create books that readers could both hear and read. Harris explored this aspect of Morrison's novelistic method. In addition, Harris attributed the popularity of her writing to the blending of orality with the written word (1994). Nancy J. Peterson (1998) also discussed *Beloved* that this novel weaves a story on a singular frame: Black cultural and social identity was integrally represented through interpretation.

The retelling of history using oral traditions was one of the alternatives of African writers to preserve cultural memory and the recognition of oneself as African American. In Morrison's works, realizing oneself was incredibly significant to preserving one's culture and identity. Through generations, the African oral tradition has been used as a tool to preserve cultural heritage. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison used the myth of the flying African as an act of opposition of Africans toward White dominants. The significance of the flight implied the yearning

of Africans to return to their heartland, and it was a freedom movement. As well as in *Beloved* (1987), Morrison depicted the enslaved ghost as repeating the slave history, which still haunted African American people as proof of the oppression their ancestors confronted. Kathleen Brogan mentioned that the ghost's appearance in oral traditions was a literary tool to reconstruct and revise the ethnicity of African people. The ghost in retelling slavery was served as a recovery of history (Brogan, 1995, p. 163).

Thus, African American literature's development related to African oral literature's function and form. It was not only about the value of the literature itself but also its essential history and ethnicity of African American literature. The history of slavery and the Black diaspora were the main factors that led to racial discrimination in literature. The combination of oral traditions and African American literature was presented as the reinvention of the self-collective in the New World of Black people.

In conclusion, African American identity was constructed under the oppression of the mainstream culture of whites. The marginalization and discrimination toward the Black group were the factors for the African American novelists to readjust the sense of the value of being African American in their works. The importance of memory from African ancestors and the legacy of slavery, which were part of Africa, was reinterpreted to contribute to forming African American

identity in the stream of the dominant country. All of these were part of preserving African American identity and their ancestor's traditions through the literary device.

Results

The construction of African American identity in African American novels: *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was analyzed by using the role of oral traditions as a framework. The availability of certain articles influencing each stage in the development was also explored to reveal African American identity in the discussion.

1. Oral Traditions in Healing Intergenerational Wounds and Conflicts

Sing, Unburied, Sing explored the significance of memory and its function in promoting familial ties and healing utilizing the traumatic wounds left behind by slavery, which served as an example of the many ways in which collective memory had kept African American communities united. The reenactment of memory in the novels was based on the shared storytelling rituals that honored the cultural tied of the African diaspora. In keeping with their literary heritage, Ward brought tales of pain, death, and suffering to modern America while also bringing to life the atrocities of racism and the widespread suffering of African Americans.

Because of the conflicts and intergenerational wounds, particularly those in the family, Pop's stories healed Jojo in comprehending his origins and his place in society. Because Michael, Jojo's biological father, was incarcerated

and did not try to develop a close relationship with his kid, Pop acted as Jojo's father figure. Storytelling and other methods of cultural information transferred between generations form a major part of Pop and Jojo's bond. In Chapter two, as Jojo narrated

“He tells me stories. Stories about eating cattails after his daddy been out gathering them from the marsh. Stories about how his mam and her people used to collect Spanish moss to stuff their mattresses. Sometimes he'll tell me the same story three, even four times. Hearing him tell them makes me feel like his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever makes me feel like I'll never be able to stand as tall as Pop ...”
(Ward, 2017, p. 18).

The storytelling passed down through the generations let Jojo stayed in touch with Pop, who was taken to America on a slave ship. The power of storytelling was related to what William Bausch stated in his book *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*: “Every people, nation, and community had stories and myths that preserve and prolong the traditions that give them their identity.” We may conclude that narrative was a very fascinating and necessary source of identity. It served to carry on to the next generations the customs and legacy of a community. Therefore, Ward turned to oral tradition to preserve historical memories for future generations as well as to impart the uniqueness of African culture orally.

Moreover, Jojo, an African American youngster growing up in a segregated environment, found solace in Pop's tales of his ancestors, which also aided in his healing process despite his parents' lack of affection for him. Even though Jojo was not alive during the era of slavery, his family was still plagued by the effects of racial discrimination, particularly his mother Leonie. Leonie disregarded her mother's spiritual teachings and her motherhood with her children, Jojo and Kayla, due to the stigmatization of Blackness and the perception that her brother's race justified his murder in the eyes of both peers and the legal system. She was consumed by internalized racism, attracted to and repulsed by the power that comes with being white power that allowed a young, white man to kill her brother and had it declared a hunting accident. Furthermore, Jojo's family's violent anti-Black sentiment—which was what underpins Leonie's dread of Joseph, Michael's father—as well as other extralegal acts of violence against Black people by white people served to reinforce the natal alienation that was common during slavery. Slavery had ended, but something of it lives on, as Avery F. Gordon (1997) wrote in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, in the social geography of where people resided, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we called New World modernity, propelling, as it always had, a something to be done. Haunting was all about such unfinished business. Jojo was deprived of both their mother, who had internalized this anti-Black attitude and their paternal grandparents. For these reasons, Pop served as Jojo's father figure

as his ancestors' tales had helped him to comprehend his roots as an African American citizen.

Intriguingly, Pop found healing in his own stories as much as in Jojo as they came to realize that to recover, they must first confront the unpleasant memories of their past. The one story that Pop was unable to first impart to Jojo fully took place at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. Jojo knew Richie from Pop's stories, but he did not know what happened to him or why he wanted so badly to travel with Jojo's family from Parchman to the coast to see Pop. In Chapter Thirteen, the traumatic past story was conveyed to Jojo, as Pop said that to save Richie from any more agony and terror, Pop decided to take Richie's life, as Pop said:

It's going to be all right, Richie ... We gone get you out of this. We gone get you away from here. I'm going home, Riv? Richie asked, and Pop replied, Yes. Richie. I'm a take you home. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he was still (Ward, 2017 p. 175-176).

Pop meant to murder Richie in a kind of mercy, much as Sethe from *Beloved* killed one of her children to keep her from being sold into slavery. Confessions made by Pop to Jojo in the woods and around the fireplace link this orality acted

to their African heritage. “Orality is one of the keys to unlocking African American literary history,” asserted Harris (1994). Following this line, this related to the idea of the novel *Beloved* that the most obvious way in which memory was incited, formed, and complemented is through stories and storytelling (Tally, 2009). In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, diasporic memory would thus be essential to reconstruct the family’s real tale and set the stage for the ultimate healing process. Ward showed the readers the path to healing by revealing all these heartbreaking memories, the anguish of the Black slaves, as well as the meddling of the ancestors’ spirits and beliefs. Furthermore, this need to admit was triggered by Richie’s ghost’s return and the revelation of the old man’s hidden truths that had prevented him from moving on and accepting his history. Using tropes like the ghost to illustrate how such “elements were created, imagined, and remembered” (72) in the struggle for survival, Saidiya Hartman (2007) examined how the aspects of African cultures endured in the legacy of the diaspora. Pop ultimately shared the story and faced his deed and destiny because of diasporic remembrance. Healing came from hearing from the ancestors as well as from remembering the past of slavery.

To demonstrate that African American history should not be lost, forgotten, or preserved but rather recovered and dealt with the disempowered characters to move forward and reach the sense of home as the healing way from the traumatic past, Ward also presented the collective retelling of personal experiences through the retelling of the past from Richie.

Richie was unquestionably the Beloved figure, the hungry ghost who retold the past to claim a future for himself, even with all his tender guidance and sensitivity in his talks with Jojo. As Richie noted, “Sometimes I think it done changed, and then I sleep and wake up, and it ain’t changed none” (Ward, 2017, p. 171). This might be America or Parchman. Richie, though, was hurt by this lack of progress and took the journey “home” with Jojo to look for the solutions he believed would bring him healing. Richie told Jojo why he wanted to visit Pop, “I got to see him again ... I got to know ... It’s how I get home” (Ward, 2017, p. 181–82). Richie’s intense emotional demanded for parental figures and his quest for information concerning his demise. In the harsh setting of the slavery system, which the twelve-year-old child had to endure, Pop represented his sense of home. He went to the origin of his understanding of home to make amends, a notion he relied on the occasions “when Riv and I slept next to each other and Riv told me stories in the dark” (190). The link between parents and children was created by the storytelling act and these stories. The narratives worked as models of psychological trauma healing, describing horrific events and integrating them into communal memories.

This suggested that Ward wanted to use shared history through oral traditions to heal her people. Even terrible memories might help with healing in the here and now. Our shared memory served as a bridge to unite individuals. As Jojo perceived the stories of his ancestors, he could construct and create his African American identity through the presentation

of a communal memory. Jojo was the character chosen to bridge the gaps in his family history, so via his experiences, collective memory was brought into the present and could be handed on. Jojo used the painful past as a tool of awareness to get by in life and might be found his way around it just in terms of survival. Once more though, there would be suffering involved. Jojo, an African American citizen, had to deal with the fact that his family was still apart. For this goal, Ward employed more than just recollection; instead, it illustrated what transpired to her characters and how they were able to resume normal lives. The characters were able to heal the grief and scars of the past by bringing the memory of this incident back to life via the telling of this narrative. Later, this story was passed down to the next generation as a lesson in appreciating and remembering their roots and ancestors, as well as a lesson in standing together and supporting one another.

2. Empowering the oppressed Through Oral Traditions

Richie's storytelling through the memory of him and Pop in Parchman showed us that black people had unique talents that could even match those of the enslavers. A way of resistance and a way to connect African Americans to their history, identity, and continent was through their heritage and customs. Regarding the resistance issue, Richard Wright (1971) remarked that "Negro Folklore was the Negro writer's most powerful weapon". To preserve their culture, for example, which had been warped by the dominant culture in the United States, African American writers included these elements in their literary works. Related to Wilentz (1989), this idea was that

African American writers offered a different reality to the dominant mythmaking of white, western, Eurocentric society. To preserve their culture, which had been perverted by American dominant culture, they included elements of African American ancestry and customs in their creative works. In Chapter Six Richie believed that Black people found it difficult to possess the same level of talent as White people. Reliving his experiences in Parchman, Richie claimed that he heard the white guys said that the dog caretakers were always older and white. Dangerous white males were hired for this position if they had any talent. Knowing Riv (Pop) would be their hunter made all the white males take offense more. Not that they liked Riv looking after the dogs. There had always been terrible blood dogs and Black people, so it was inappropriate for the white people there to enable the black man to run the dogs, as they said, *“for black man to be trusty, with a gun ... That’s unnatural too, but that’s Parchman”* (Ward, 2017, p. 97).

Pop’s special connection with animals wasn’t presented when he was imprisoned in Parchman, but from his narration to JoJo in Chapter 3, we could infer that it had persisted from the time of his forefathers. Pop claimed that he learned this skill from his great-grandfather through their talk, as he said *“My great-granddaddy taught me that”* ... *“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 that spirit in everything, to have balance. So the crops will grow, the animals breed and get fat for food”* (Ward, 2017, p. 54). According to William Baush

(1999) in his book, he said that “Every people, nation, and community had stories and myths that preserved and prolong the traditions that gave them their identity.” In summary, we could attest that narrative was a fascinating and vital source of identity. It served to transmit to subsequent generations the legacy and customs of a community.

This concept related to Mam’s storytelling to Leonie that some members of their family could see aspects of the world that were invisible to others like Leonie who could see the phantom of Given, or Jojo and Kayla who could see and hear ghosts and animals. The family genealogy that stretched back to their African ancestors had passed down this gift, even though it occasionally missed generations or specific individuals. As Kunzang Choden (1994) put it, “It dawns on me how vital the stories are as a link to my past and identity, and how important they will be to my children.” For them to better understand and appreciate their own life, it would be beneficial for them to connect with their cultural background through the stories. This assertion suggested that there was a strong correlation between identity and storytelling. It also illustrated Ward’s possible intention to uphold the custom for future generations who were struggling to live in this country.

Moreover, the role of African oral traditions appeared significantly through the voodoo amulet in the form of a gris-gris bag which Pop gave to Jojo. Sing, Buried, Sing was an example of how knowledge was passed down across generations to address issues that older generations faced and that still

affected current generations. As the use of “spiritual traditions as a means and model for resisting physical and psychological violence, cultural annihilation and institutional racism in the Americas” was common in history and literature, the gris-gris bag demonstrated this use of storytelling and cultural transmission to deal with social problems with historical roots (Mellis, 2019). Pop offered Jojo a gris-gris bag when Leonie said she’s taking Jojo and Kayla on a road trip to get Michael home from Parchman. While it was said to bring luck and protection from evil, it also linked Jojo’s history and present by uniting him with Pop and the many generations of hoodoo practitioners who precede him. When Jojo confronted the white police officers in Chapter 8, as he described it, they instructed him to sit like a dog. “Sit.” He followed through on it but then felt bad for not fighting and not being Kayla. He then considered Richie, and when he felt Pop’s bag in his shorts, he grabbed for it. It’s possible that he could sense the tooth, feather, and note (written: Keep this close) running toward him if he could feel them (Ward, pp. 117–118). Jojo returned home later, and Pop asks him, “Did it work? It’s a bag of gristle.” Jojo said, “I believe that. We succeeded. nonetheless, I was halted by the cops.” Hence, Jojo’s gris-gris bag saved his life and encouraged his bravery and defiance in the face of a lethal white creature. Furthermore, Pop might send Jojo a small bit with him using the gris-gris bag (221). His spiritual practices, which had an African foundation, were a means of survival, resistance, and protection in a dangerous world—not just analogies.

3. Reconciling with the Past and Constructing the Future Through Ghost and Supernatural Stories

By selecting Richie as one of the narrators in the story, Ward allowed him to share personal accounts of the past. This offered a voice to those who had been silenced and marginalized and empowered Jojo to reconstruct the past and understand his roots. Settling with the past could help Jojo comprehend who he was. Despite the plot being set in the present day, where slavery was no longer practiced, Ward skillfully employed the usage of apparitions throughout the novel to effectively depict aspects of the past. Ghosts had their origins in the African tradition, specifically through the transmission of folk tales and mythology. Khedhir (2020) claimed that the utilization of apparitions for narrative purposes was a longstanding and prevalent literary convention. The ghost, or the manifestation of a deceased individual, held significant importance in the realm of African American cultural and oral history. It was heavily included in ancient folktales, narratives of enslaved individuals, and even in modern African American literature. Brogan (1995) asserted that a significant aspect of African religious ideology that had endured in the syncretic manifestations of New World religious customs and in the folklore of enslaved individuals was the conviction in the existence of ancestral spirits. The manifestation of ancestral apparitions indeed indicated a literary African influence. Gordon (1997) asserted that the importance of ghosts and spirit work in African American culture and literature might be traced back to their revered status in African society. Therefore, by choosing

to use the ghost motif, Ward established a strong connection to African literary customs and emphasized primarily the African aspect of African American cultural identity.

How Richie came back to narrate stories about the past of slavery and sought the real answer about his death with Jojo, Ward made the characters revisit histories to conciliate with them. According to Joseph Roach (1996), the spirit world's revolutionary potential in African diaspora literature and culture from the era of colonialism and slavery through Jim Crow literature suggested a comprehensive potential that had historically been connected to the spiritual practices that frequently accompanied slave uprisings. In other words, historically, these Black ghosts had stood for a form of cultural resistance.

Furthermore, the ghost was another motif that illustrated how the African diaspora retold their own histories because it was entwined with diasporic memory. As Richie meets Jojo for the first time he said,

There's so much Jojo doesn't know. There are so many stories I could tell him. The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased. I could patch those holes. Make the shirt hang new, except for the tails. The end (Ward, 2017, p. 97).

According to this remark, Richie's major goal was to tell Jojo (and the readers) stories about the past to fill in memory gaps and shed light on a history that had been erased or was lacking, in addition to discovering the reasons for his terrible end. In this way, the Richie narrative became a political tool that Ward used to challenge amnesia and forgetfulness while also giving the oppressed power and agency through updated memory and a revised version of history. In other words, to reconcile with the present and create an identity as African Americans, African Americans like Jojo had to go back to history, comprehend it, and face what transpired.

According to the ghost's arrival, the character's narrative shifts from the painful memory of sad occurrences to the act of recounting. It's also noteworthy that the one-story Pop could not initially tell Jojo in full was one that took place at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, popularly known as Parchman Farm as Jojo said in Chapter Thirteen

“Whenever Pop done told me his and Richie’s story, he talked in circles. Telling me the beginning over and over again. Telling me the middle over and over again. Circling the end like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals...” (Ward, 2017, p. 169).

Because of Richie and Pop's painful experiences, this could be seen in Pop's reluctance to share Jojo stories of this time at Parchman. This was the most obvious example of how Parchman tied past and present in Sing, Unburied, Sing,

especially the characters. The reader learnt from the relaying of the events that the real motivation for this deed was mercy killing. It was his suffering—as a human being, regardless of race—to have to kill fellow humans. While it would be unfair to suggest that Ward’s characters need to encounter violence to overcome it, admitting and telling the story of their violent encounters was the first step toward their eventual redemption as Pop said

“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 ... Didn’t nothing come close to easing it until you came along”
(Ward, 2017, p. 175).

Ward breathed new life into the past by recounting the tale of slavery, so healing the past. Harris (1994) asserted that all these events and customs would vanish over time if there were no stories to be passed down from one generation to the next. However, if the stories were kept silent and the memories were sealed away, the past might be avoided. African American identity could be created or renewed by presenting a collective memory. Jojo had to learn this lesson to recognize and honor his heritage and ancestors as one of the younger generations of African Americans living in America.

The phrase Sing, Buried, Sing suggested that the deceased had songs of their own to sing and that to pass on to the next life, they should be shared their tales with the living. According

to Asante Darkwa (1987), songs served as a vehicle for preserving customs, conveying views of the group, offering praise or criticism, and articulating one's ideas and emotions. Like with stories, the elders taught the younger generations through narrative songs the knowledge, skills, behavior patterns, and mannerisms they should possess to fulfill their adult social duties. Through the songs and stories, they were also encouraged to develop a sense of belonging, which was a crucial component of the conventional cultural system, by growing up together, sharing, and doing things together. (1987, p. 132, 135). Thus, singing was one method by which African culture was carried down by enslaved people and their descendants, singing has a significant place in African American history as a symbol of retelling the stories.

There were many events in the novel in which “sing”: recounting the traumatic memories, was illustrated in the sense of home. Richie told Jojo the story of Blue (one of the slaves in Parchman), he said

“He ran so fast. Sometimes I had to follow him by sound. Him talking to hisself the whole time. Not hisself. His mama. Telling her he was coming home. That he wanted her to sing for him. Sing for your son, he said. Sing” (Ward, 2017, p. 252).

Richie talked about hearing Blue talk to his mother out loud while running alongside Blue in this section. This element helped to humanize Blue by serving as a reminder that despite his criminal past, he was still just a regular guy with the same

basic needs—to be with his mother and to hear her sing. Furthermore, in the novel’s last chapter, Ward interpreted the singing of spirits in the same way that the birds did when they perched on the tree, as Jojo described

*“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 in the yard
they came in my cell in the middle of the night and
they hung me they found I could read and they
dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes
before they beat me”* (Ward 2017, p. 279).

All people had an innate desire to return home, but many obstacles in life could prevent them from doing so, such as addiction, jail, and ghostly memories and traumas. The fact that nearly all these ghosts were black people who died violent deaths highlights how the South and America were still plagued by the history of slavery and terrible racial violence. Not only do these atrocities still occur today, but the dead victims’ ghosts viscerally torment the world of the book, begging that living people like Jojo recognized their pain.

Therefore, based on the two incidents, it appeared that the slaves were using their collective voice to express their regret for remaining silent and to retell their horrific history by singing. Telling tales from the past did help preserve the community’s memory across the ages. The only opportunity

they would have to redefine who they were, reclaim their heritage, and preserve their cultural legacy in North America would be through the recovery of their diasporic memory, as Vicent Cucarella-Ramon noted in his work “*Black Ghosts of the Diasporic Memory in Jesmyn Ward’s Sing, Unburied, Sing*” (2020, p. 65). It was possible to discover one’s voice and contribute it to the chorus of previously heard voices by narrating one’s tale or the story of one’s ancestors. Characters in the book were doing precisely that. Despite being written texts, their stories had the feel of being made in front of the reader since they were written in the present tense, which conveyed an immediacy and echoed the oral heritage of the African American community. According to Paul Ricoeur (2004), the idea of narrative identity also demonstrated its usefulness because it could be applied to both an individual and a group. By adopting narratives, individuals and communities form their identities and internalize their true histories. Thus, Ward’s book served as a means of reviving the South, giving voice to a community that had been silent for far too long, and bolstering an identity that had been suppressed for generations. Hearing the tales of his ancestors helps Jojo recognize that this was his home and that he had to live with it, allowing him to identify as African American in a country where the majority population was white.

Discussion

The study debate concludes that African oral traditions have been utilized in the analyzed Ward's novel to shape the African American identity within a multicultural society. Folklore and identity are intricately connected, and novels can play a role in safeguarding culture and legacy. This encompasses the African culture that existed before the era of slavery, as well as the legacy of those civilizations that were established during and after the period of the slave trade. The African influence on African American literature continues to be relevant today.

Compared to previous studies, for example, *Ghosts Tell Stories: Cultural Haunting in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Khedhir, 2020) or *Black Ghosts of the Diasporic Memory in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Cucarella-Ramon, 2020), these works focused on the role of ghost in the story which functioned as a tool to recreate African American culture, identity, and history. However, in this study, the author's objective is to examine the importance of oral traditions that have been transmitted, thereby allowing the protagonist, who is of African American descent, to reinterpret the experience of slavery. For America to begin to heal, the younger generation, which Ward has personified in Jojo and his little sister, must recollect, reexamine, reinterpret, confront, and sing to the ghosts of their communal past.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward uses the oral histories of her characters to discuss historical events and highlight the value of cultural legacy, memory, and shared experience.

Her characters, in particular, the protagonist, do not, however, exhibit acts of resistance; rather, he is attempting to come to terms with being both African and American in this nation. Jojo's ability to see and hear tales of slavery in the past aids in his identification of his ancestry. Hence, the phrase Sing, Unburied, Sing suggests that ghosts have their melodies to sing and that sharing their tales with the living is necessary for them to be able to pass on to the next life. As the book ends, Jojo talks about a sizable group of spirits who are nearly exclusively black folks who died horribly and violently. This suggests that not only is this cruelty still happening today, but that the victims' ghosts haunt the world of the book, begging that living people like Jojo recognize and feel their pain. This research demonstrates that Ward's work does not merely encourage African Americans to become preoccupied with their ancestral history, but rather to embrace and articulate spiritual connections that can transcend geographical bounds.

Conclusions

In *Sing, Buried, Sing* was a tale of historical haunting in which Ward gave voice to the characters and spirits in the novel through oral traditions, honoring those who had been marginalized and silenced by official history and redefining African American identity via trauma, history, and memory. First and foremost, oral traditions served as a means of healing traumatic memories. African American communities had remained cohesive through the presentation of stories as a type of collective memory. The novels' recreation of memory was based on the shared storytelling rituals that celebrate the African diaspora's culturalties, and healing results from both remembering the past of slavery and hearing from the ancestors. Next, the novel's characters employ oral traditions to give the downtrodden people more power. Slavery had demonstrated that, although African people possessed the same abilities and qualities as White people, the system devalued them. Cultural transmission and storytelling were used to address historically rooted socioeconomic issues. Finally, African Americans needed to study history, understand it, and confront the events that occurred to come to terms with the past and forge an identity. African Americans and other African people viewed their history as a shared experience rather than the official record; they considered personal narratives official histories. Thus, African history differed from American history. To establish a connection with one's ancestors, Ward employed storytelling to reinterpret history from the official record to the shared experience. For African Americans living

in America, this was how they could create a home or an identity for themselves. In this context, the idea of “home” conjures up feelings of coziness and repose made possible by ancestors’ wisdom and a sense of belonging. For a group of people who were brought to America in chains, treated as second-class citizens upon their freedom, and had to navigate a society where racism is ingrained in the very institutions that support it, the idea of a secure and tranquil “home” is important for African American people to live or to survive in the American society.

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