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"Now You Know. Death.": The Ethics of Nonhuman Beings in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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When Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) are read alongside each other, her profound attachment to nonhuman beings, primarily animals and ghosts, becomes apparent. Set in Bois Sauvage, a fictional rural coastal community in Mississippi, these two National Book Award-winning novels commence and conclude with depictions of such entities. *Salvage the Bones* opens with a porcelain-white pit bull named China delivering her babies, and African American kids intently observe the scene. The novel ends with the children waiting in the woods for China's return after she was swallowed up in a flood during Hurricane Katrina. The protagonist, Esch, remarks, "*China*. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her."[1] Similarly, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* begins with the thirteen-year-old protagonist Joseph ("Jojo" for short) watching his grandfather slaughter a goat. The animal's brutal death has a significant impact on Jojo, as the narrative opens with the boy's impressive statement about death: "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight."[2] The novel reaches its climax in the final scene, where Jojo and his baby sister Kayla watch numerous ghosts of African Americans in a tree, soothingly singing to them: "[The ghosts] smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease."[3] These scenes demonstrate how animals and ghosts function as significant mediums through which the children witness the dynamics of life and death in Ward's bildungsroman novels.

Although varied in their types and roles, the nonhumans in Ward's novels are more than mere one-time characters or part of the narrative background; they provide readers with an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Indeed, critics have acknowledged the significance of nonhumans in Ward's works, claiming that they are inspirational figures providing the characters with energy and power for survival. Christopher W. Clark points

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1. Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 258.
2. Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017), 1.
3. Ward, *Sing*, 284.

out that, in *Salvage the Bones*, China is used as a gendered metaphor for motherhood, arguing that the pit bull enlightens Esch, a pregnant teenage girl, about the power and cruelty of a mother in the absence of her own. Clark states that "if we read China as a figure of fierce femininity, it is striking that she is washed away while Esch survives. Leaving behind a ghostly vacuum, China provides a feminine space that Esch is now ready to inhabit, occupied previously by both China and Esch's mother."[4] With regard to the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Vanesa Lado-Pazos posits that they function as "a tool of agency and resistance,"[5] connecting the characters to the racial history of African Americans. The conspicuous presence of animals allows us to situate Ward's novels within the recent trend of animal studies in African American literature. Samantha Pergadia describes this trend as a critical response to the rise of posthumanism, which tends to focus on our relationship with technological advancement and, consequently, overlook the history of racism and dehumanization of non-White populations. Therefore, scholars in this field "investigate the relationship between antiblackness and the anthropocentric dominion over nonhuman animals."[6]

In this article, I further explore the correlation between humans and nonhumans in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In Ward's two novels, nonhumans enable her characters to envision their lives positively in the midst of negativities, including wounds/disease, ruptures of human relationships, and death. As I demonstrate below, both animals and ghosts are figures that are frequently utilized in American racial imagery and literature. Although a racist culture often compares African Americans to nonhumans and emphasizes their status as second-class citizens, these nonhuman figures are also used to express their racial identity and history in African American fiction. I examine *Sing, Unburied, Sing* because the novel considers both the negative and positive aspects of nonhuman characters and presents them in more depth and multidimensionality than *Salvage the Bones*. Additionally, nonhumans in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* echo the animals and ghosts discussed in Jacques Derrida's works, such as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) and *Specters of Marx* (1994). Although I do not claim that Ward's and

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[4] Christopher W. Clark, "What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies, and Community in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 68, no. 3–4 (2015): 356. China's role has been analyzed by other critics as well. For further discussions, see, for instance, Annie Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day': Narrative Ruthlessness and Environmental and Reproductive Injustice in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," *MELUS* 44, no. 3 (2019): 21–40; William Cunningham, "Silent Spaces in Jesmyn Ward and Natasha Trethewey," *CLA Journal* 63, no. 1 (2020): 50–67; and Alvin Henry, "Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina Black Feminism: Memory and Myth through Salvaging," *English Language Notes* 57, no. 2 (2019): 71–85.

[5] Vanesa Lado-Pazos, "Haunting Back: A Study of Spectrality in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Southern Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2021): 129.

[6] Samantha Pergadia, "Toward Black Animality Studies," *Contemporary Literature* 61, no. 3 (2020): 413.

Derrida's views are identical, both writers nevertheless describe nonhuman figures in a similar manner, critically considering the privileged position of humans in our thinking. Derrida states that nonhumans have been situated in a lower status than humans in Western philosophy, owing to their (supposed) lack of rationality and language. Ward destabilizes the binary opposition between humans and nonhumans by depicting animals and ghosts as intelligent and communicative entities. Moreover, she navigates the multiple oppositions between the present and the past, Whites and Blacks, and life and death, refusing to treat them as oppositions or indicators of implying one's superiority over the other. Rather, Ward presents both components of these oppositions as equally significant, depicting how nonhumans allow her characters to confront African American history and view their lives through death(s).

I: The Ambivalence of Animals in African American Literature

Critics have noted that in many African American works, animals are plentiful but assume ambivalent roles as both negative and positive figures. Animals carry negative connotations since they have been metonymically and pejoratively compared to African Americans throughout the history of the United States. Eve Dunbar notes that "[d]eeply rooted racial logics of Western culture have long used animal metaphors and affiliations as a method for negatively coding the species permeability between black people and nonhuman animals."[7] As Frantz Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad," succinctly expressing the dehumanized status of Blacks in a White supremacist environment.[8] Other writers have responded to this history of racial oppression, which casts African Americans and animals as lower-order organisms in society, by indicating their physical proximity. One prominent example in African American literature is the large black rat killed by Bigger Thomas, depicted in the opening scene of Richard Wright's classic *Native Son* (1940). Although the rat is an unwelcome intruder in Bigger's family and is thus immediately disposed of by him, Joshua Bennett examines the symbolic role of the creature in the novel. Bennett states that Bigger's killing of the rat is "a symbolic gesture toward the disposability of animal life, as well as the poor conditions in which city-dwelling black families of his era were forced to live."[9] According to Bennett, "[Bigger] is animalized in *Native Son* [...] not through the figure of the pest, per se, but in relation to it."[10] Wright expresses the marginalized status of African Americans in urban Chicago by depicting their lives as physically close to that of rats. Therefore, Bigger's act of killing the rat can be interpreted as his violent response to his economically impoverished status. Through the killing, he shows his disgust with the rat and attempts to differentiate himself from the animal at the bottom of the social strata.

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[7] Eve Dunbar, "Loving Gorillas: Segregation Literature, Animality, and Black Liberation," *American Literature* 92, no. 1 (2020): 123.

[8] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 86.

[9] Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 32.

However, animals are also portrayed positively by African American writers in an attempt to embrace the history of racial violence as part of their identity and to destabilize the Western logic of "the human." Many writers do not reject or ignore the abominable racial stereotype that animalizes African Americans but deliberately choose to use it as a literary and cultural expression. Bennett points out that, "rather than triumphalist rhetoric that would eschew the nonhuman altogether, what we often find instead are authors who envision the Animal as a source of unfettered possibility, or [...] the Animal as a *promise*."[11] In a similar vein, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, in examining twentieth-century African American literature and culture, observes a tendency in many African American-authored narratives to "neither rely on animal abjection to define being (human) nor reestablish 'human recognition' within liberal humanism as an antidote to racialization."[12] Rather, she believes that animals are deployed in these narratives to "alternately expose, alter, or reject not only the racialization of the human-animal distinction found in Western science and philosophy but also challenge the epistemic and material terms under which the specter of animal life acquires its authority."[13] Reviewing the motif of animals discussed by these scholars, Pergadia highlights that animals in African American literature serve "to imagine a humanity built upon a ground that does not expunge 'the animal.'" Her comment allows us to consider the relationship between animals and African Americans in a positive light, countering the negative presence of animals in writings about and by African Americans.[14]

The visibility of animals in Ward's novels is based precisely on this long and complex tradition. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* refers to animals and regards the negatively animalized status of African Americans on numerous occasions, departing from *Salvage the Bones*, which depicts China positively and simply as a powerful, inspirational, and goddess-like figure. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the

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10. Ibid., 32–33. For additional discussions about the role of animals in the works of Wright, see also Eve Dunbar, "Loving Gorillas," 123–49; and Matthew Lambert, "'That sonofabitch could cut your throat': Bigger and the Black Rat in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 49, no. 1 (2016): 75–92.

11. Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*, 3.

12. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York UP, 2020), 1.

13. Ibid., 2.

14. Pergadia, "Toward Black Animality Studies," 420.

negative aspect of the parallel between African Americans and animals is often informed by River, Jojo's grandfather, who is referred to as "Pop" by Jojo in the long absence of his White father, Michael. In the opening chapter, at Jojo's request, River recollects the years he spent in the Mississippi State Penitentiary (aka the "Parchman Farm"), a notorious prison known for its abusive treatment of inmates.[15] Arrested for harboring his brother, who was involved in a conflict with a group of Whites, River narrates his prison years and illustrates how African Americans were treated akin to animals. Referring to a strict prison guard in Parchman, River states, "You don't know the sergeant come from a long line of men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog."[16] He then details their forced labor in the fields of the prison, which is, in Ward's rendition, an extension of chattel slavery in the antebellum South. When River describes the labor as "Never sunup to sundown in no cotton field,"[17] he illustrates the grueling nature of the work.[18] Thus, River informs Jojo of the exploitation and control of African American bodies in the prison while continuously referring to the proximity between African Americans and animals. Furthermore, River emphasizes that this control and manipulation continued not just in prison but throughout U.S. history, when he describes one of his ancestors, who was "made into an animal"[19] as a slave from Africa. River also recalls how, in his childhood, he saw White census takers collect information about the African American population "to control them, to cage them like livestock."[20]

While pejoratively treating African Americans and animals as similar or comparable, in that they are usable and exploitable, racist culture forbade African Americans from possessing animals, making them antagonistic to each other. In the history of racial oppression, African Americans were not allowed to possess dogs because the ownership indicated to White racists that African Americans were equal to Whites. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jojo hears a story from Richie, a boy who befriended River and died at the prison decades ago, about his bitter memories of dogs in Parchman. He appears in front of Jojo as a ghost in the narrative present (I will discuss his role later in this article). Richie states that from the perspective of White racists, "it was something about a colored man running the dogs; that was wrong. There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries—slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them."[21] In short, as Richie states by using the abominable anti-Black racial epithet, "It ain't natural for a colored man to master dogs [...] The only thing a nigger knows how to do is slave."[22] In the novel, reflecting on the antagonistic relationship between African Americans and dogs, River immediately rejects Jojo's idea of buying a dog as a pet: "When he was in Parchman, Pop said, once he started working with the hounds the prison used to track escapees, all he could smell, when he was eating or waking or falling asleep, was dog shit."[23] River's rejection alludes to the fact that African Americans were placed on the lower rungs of U.S. society alongside, or even lower than, dogs, given that these animals were used when capturing fugitive slaves, as recollected by River.

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[15] In a 2017 interview, Ward describes the institution as "the epidemic of lynching in the American South." "Interview: Jesmyn Ward by Louis Elliot," *Bomb*, November 10, 2017, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2017/11/10/ghosts-of-history-an-interview-with-jesmyn-ward/.

[16] Ward, *Sing*, 22.

[17] Ibid., 22.

[18] As critics have observed, the experiences of River and other African Americans in Parchman can be seen as an extension of slavery due to the fact that a vast majority of the inmates were African Americans and were forced to work in the fields, as depicted in the novel. For further details, see, for instance, Victoria Alicia Chevalier, "'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *The Langston Hughes Review* 27, no. 2 (2021): 175–76; and Sara Stephens Loomis, "The Sound of All Water: Petro-Culture and Black Modernity in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Contemporary Literature* 62, no. 2 (2021): 188–89.

[19] Ward, *Sing*, 69.

[20] Ibid., 18.

Ward further underscores how the parallel between African Americans and animals continues to exist in the contemporary period, in an even more violent manner. In the novel, a few of Jojo's family members are killed or almost killed because racists keep animalizing African Americans and refuse to consider them as humans. River's son, Given, is fatally shot at by a White with a rifle while deer hunting; this murder is unfairly treated as an accident due to the structural racism in the U.S. legal system.[24] Although River shows his respect for or deep understanding of animals and the natural world in other scenes, it is evident that he despises the animalized status of African Americans in the episodes of Parchman and Given's death. This status is also experienced by River's daughter and Jojo's mother, Leonie. After Given's death, Leonie marries her White schoolmate, Michael; although Michael himself is not a racist, his father, Big Joseph, is one and antagonizes African Americans, including his son's wife. Thus, when Leonie visits Big Joseph's home to deliver a message about Michael's upcoming release from prison, Big Joseph reacts to her violently, pointing a rifle that "he keeps for wild pigs that root in the forest, but not for them now. For [Leonie]."[25] These episodes depict how African Americans are treated as the substitutes for animals and targets of gun violence, demonstrating the continuity of anti-Black sentiment and the fixed parallel between them and animals from slavery to the contemporary era.

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[21] Ibid., 138.

[22] Ibid., 139. Bénédicte Boisseron highlights that the conflict between African Americans and animals originates in "the slavery era measurement of subordinate existence in an equation of life where the black and the animal have to battle in order not to be last" in the American social hierarchy. See Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xv. This rivalry is clearly shown in the photo used as her book cover, which illustrates a police dog biting an African American man's clothes during the Civil Rights movement.

[23] Ward, *Sing*, 119.

[24] Ibid., 50.

II: Disrupting the Human-Animal Hierarchy

The presence of animals and their complex role in relation to the history of African Americans in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* allows us to place the novel in parallel with Derrida's discourse on nonhumans. In his posthumously published collection of essays, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), Derrida criticizes the privileged position of humans in Western philosophy since the Enlightenment period, as illustrated by Descartes's well-known dictum, *cogito, ergo sum*, or "I think; therefore I am." In his early project, Derrida observes the potential problems of binary thinking because in his view, when making a binary opposition, we presuppose that "one of the two terms governs the other," placing the opposition in "a violent hierarchy."[26] In a similar but extended mode, Derrida challenges the binary opposition between humans and animals in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Critically examining the marginalized role of animals from the perspective of major Western philosophers and thinkers ("from Aristotle to Descartes, from Kant to Hegel, to Heidegger, Levinas, or Lacan"),[27] Derrida calls for an ethical reconsideration of the relationship between humans and animals. In his view, Western philosophers have taken it for granted that animals are incapable of having powers, experiences, and abilities, rendering them as "others" to humans. Derrida compiles an extensive list of the supposedly human possessions, including speech, reason, and experience of death, claiming that "the most powerful philosophical tradition in which we live has refused the 'animal' *all that*."[28] He then inquires "whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the *pure, rigorous, indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribution."[29] Derrida considers our tendency to view people or things as binary oppositions such as "us" and "them," arguing that this could potentially lead to creating a world of exclusion and violence, as in the Holocaust.[30] He critically approaches binary thinking and its implications, reconsidering how animals as objects are known, possessed, and consumed by/for humans. Rather than defeating animals through power, Derrida urges us to resist the inclination to overly trust the power of human reason, and envision a world of inclusion and sympathy.

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[25] Ibid., 56.

[26] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.

[27] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 59.

[28] Ibid., 135.

[29] Ibid.

Although Ward presents the negative aspects of the history of African Americans and animals, she also portrays animals as positive figures in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, echoing Derrida's perspective. The opening chapter of the novel depicts River and Jojo's killing of a goat and the young protagonist communicating with animals, both of which illustrate how animals facilitate Jojo's understanding of his family and the outside world. On his thirteenth birthday, Jojo and his grandfather slaughter the goat to celebrate. The opening passage impressively depicts an initiation-like scene of the boy growing into an adult. He states, "I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled, separate innards from muscle, organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody."[31] However, Jojo does not succeed in assisting his grandfather in disposing of the goat, since he eventually vomits due to "the smell of death"[32] and temporarily leaves the scene. This opening scene can be seen as Ward's nod to Wright's *Native Son*, in that both novels open with a scene of an African American man murdering an animal. They emphasize the physical proximity between African Americans and animals as well as the presence of violence in their daily lives. However, while Bigger's killing of a rat in *Native Son* expresses his masculinity and brutality, which foreshadow his murder of two women, as depicted subsequently in the novel, the opening scene of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* foregrounds Jojo's liminality between boy and man, as demonstrated by his vomiting. Additionally, the animals in Ward's novel are presented as Jojo's semi-friends because they are able to communicate with him. Echoing Derrida's discussion of animals, Jojo considers them as intelligent in that they know death when he states, "I think the goats understand each other [...] I think they know what that loose rope tied around the goat's neck means."[33]

The novel depicts not only scenes where animals communicate with each other but also those where Jojo communicates with them. Watching livestock animals, such as pigs, goats, and chickens, he writes, "I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once."[34] This scene also illustrates how Jojo renders the

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30. Ibid., 26.
31. Ward, *Sing*, 1.
32. Ibid., 6.
33. Ibid., 2–3.
34. Ibid., 15.

nonhumans not as others but positively, as verbally communicative creatures; Ward depicts such communication among humans, animals, and ghosts throughout the novel. Jojo, Kayla, and Leonie have the magical powers to see, hear, and/or understand nonhumans, both animals and ghosts alike, albeit to varying degrees. Due to the family's maternally inherited magical power, as explained by his grandmother,[35] Jojo possesses the ability to understand what animals (and ghosts) speak. He derives a sense of comfort from animals, which alleviates his solitude in the midst of his family's troubles, including his grandmother's cancer, Leonie's neglect of her kids, and Michael's arrest and subsequent imprisonment in Parchman due to drug trafficking. Despite the absence of his parents and grandparents, Jojo watches animals in the family's property and says, "I didn't feel so small or alone. I squatted in the grass, watching them, thinking I could almost hear them talk to me, that I could hear them communicate."[36] His ability to communicate with animals sharply contrasts with his feelings of anxiety about his family, foregrounding the positive role of animals that eases his loneliness.

Furthermore, animals function as a medium when Jojo attempts to better understand his family's circumstances, transforming the "unknowable" to the "knowable." The opening chapter of the novel concludes with a conversation between Leonie and Michael over the phone. Toward the end of the chapter, Leonie comes home from work with a baby shower cake rather than a birthday cake for Jojo, an unsuitable present for a boy who wants to become a man, as illustrated by his disappointment: "I laugh but don't feel nothing warm, no joy in me when I do it."[37] Leonie continues to display her neglectful attitude toward the family when she abruptly leaves the dinner table to answer a call from Michael. However, while listening to their conversation, Jojo notably states, "Michael is an animal on the other end of the telephone behind a fortress of concrete and bars, his voice traveling over miles of wire and listing, sun-bleached power poles. I know what he is saying, like the birds I hear honking and flying south in the winter, like any other animal. *I'm coming home*."[38] Analyzing this scene, Nicole Dib observes a sense of distance between Leonie and Michael by stating, "Even in moments when two living beings communicate, there is a sense of distance that stages the communication as though it were between two people on separate planes of existence."[39] However, the seemingly enigmatic phrase, "Michael is an animal," can also be interpreted from Jojo's perspective. Considering the harmonious scene depicting Jojo and animals in the same chapter, his statement does not suggest that he cannot understand his father or an animal, as we may conceive, but contrarily, that he can understand his father, just as he can the animals.

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[35] Ibid., 40–41.

[36] Ibid., 14.

[37] Ibid., 27.

[38] Ibid., 30.

[39] Nicole Dib, "Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *MELUS* 45, no. 2 (2020): 137.

Throughout the novel, the relationship between Jojo and Michael is nuanced for multiple reasons, including their racial difference and Michael's three-year absence due to imprisonment. Moreover, the family is placed in a complex, if not dysfunctional, situation, concerning the issues of poverty, disease, and drugs. These issues negatively impact Jojo's perception of a family, as partially demonstrated by him calling his grandparents "Pop" and "Mom" and his parents by their first names, Michael and Leonie. Despite this, when Jojo states, "Michael is an animal" and "I know what he is saying," the protagonist seems to render his relationship with Michael as closer rather than distant. The relationship with his parents and that with animals is ironically contrasting for Jojo; while he considers his parents (humans) absent or distant and unknowable, he views animals (nonhumans) as present or close and easy to understand. However, River's bitter memories of his animalized status in Parchman are narrated early in the first chapter, allowing Jojo to empathize with Michael's hardships in the same prison.[40] Consequently, through the comparison between Michael and an animal, Jojo appears to be slightly empathetic and expectant regarding Michael's homecoming. Subsequently, Jojo appears to be unwilling to accompany his mother on a road trip to pick up Michael from prison,[41] and the protagonist continues to distance himself from his parents. However, animals function as a cognitive medium that facilitates Jojo's understanding of his father and, if only temporarily, makes the father less unknowable to the protagonist. Evocative of Derrida's discussion, Ward presents the relationship between humans and animals not as a binary opposition but illuminates how animals can impact our way of knowing.

III: The Ubiquitous Presence of Ghosts

In addition to the human-animal relationship, I would like to consider another type of nonhuman in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, namely ghosts, and the related binary opposition between life and death. As mentioned previously, the novel's opening sentences, "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight,"[42] can be understood, in part, as Jojo's willingness to become a man by assisting his grandfather in killing a goat. However, this statement can also be situated in a broader context since the novel deals with the theme of death by depicting multiple ghosts as racialized creatures, as is the case with animals. In the narrative, Given and Richie appear as ghosts because of their premature and violent deaths. In addition to Given (who was murdered by a White person during deer hunting, as mentioned earlier), Richie was killed by River at Parchman. As an act of mercy, River cut Richie's throat with a knife to save him the agony of lynching and torture by Whites, following his failed attempt to escape the prison. The presence of these ghosts is explained by his grandmother, who claims that humans transform into ghosts "when the dying's bad. Violent."[43] In addition, on multiple occasions, Kayla refers to ghosts as animals, specifically birds,[44] presumably due to their shared ability to fly in the air or soar in the sky. Kayla's (mis) recognition of ghosts as birds suggests that these two types of nonhumans, the focus of my discussion here, are comparable in Ward's novel.

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[40] Michael's hardships in Parchman are partially explained subsequently in the novel, as he writes in a letter to Leonie, "This ain't no place for no man" (*Sing*, 96).

[41] Ibid., 60.

[42] Ibid., 1.

The figure of ghosts in African American literature is not novel, as exemplified by Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved* (1987), which depicts the ghost of the eponymous baby that appears in front of her mother and murderer, Sethe. Numerous African American authors have continued to express their trauma related to the history of racial and colonial violence by utilizing ghosts.[45] Lado-Pazos writes, "Specters and the living-dead were part of the diverse African religions that the captives carried with them through the Middle Passage and into the African diaspora in the Americas."[46] Joanne Chassot examines Morrison's novel and observes, "The ghost's presence aptly evokes the symptoms of trauma, in its uncontrollable and repetitive occurrence and its disruptive effect on temporality and chronology, as it collapses the past in which the traumatic event occurred and the present in which the traumatized subject lives."[47] An unhealed trauma is depicted in Ward's novel as well, as Leonie continues to see her brother Given's ghost, which she calls "Given-not-Given." Although a neglectful mother, Leoni is not villainized because several chapters depict her expressing her love for her dead brother and suffering through the trauma inflicted by his tragic death. Similarly, Richie articulates his unhealed trauma by telling Jojo, "How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go?"[48] Although decades

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43. Ibid., 236.

44. Ibid., 125, 127, 131, 262.

45. A sizable body of scholarship examining the figures of ghosts and the theme of haunting in African American literature exists. For recent discussions, see, for instance, Kinitra D. Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2018); and Portia Owusu, *Spectres from the Past: Slavery and the Politics of "History" in West African and African-American Literature* (London: Routledge, 2019).

46. Lado-Pazos, "Haunting Back," 114.

47. Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, 24.

48. Ward, *Sing*, 186.

have passed since his death, Richie becomes a ghost and is forced to remain somewhere between Parchman and the sky, wanting to know exactly how he died. Similar to animals, these ghosts are presented as communicative creatures and more akin to humans than nonhumans. The ghosts urge the living characters to know or remember the past of African Americans, and continue to haunt the present to prevent their death from being erased or forgotten.[49]

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida develops his theory of "hauntology," a portmanteau that combines "haunting" and "ontology." *Specters of Marx* is a sociopolitical book that responds to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the late twentieth century. Although Derrida's primary purpose is to renew our understanding of Marxism, which was considered a thing of the past due to the American victory in the Cold War, his discussion of specters can be meaningfully employed to analyze the role of ghosts in Ward's novel. This is because Derrida effectively utilizes the figure of a ghost when considering the relationship between life and death, not in a hierarchal manner but rather in equal terms, similar to his discussion of the human-animal opposition. In *Specters of Marx*, he writes, "If it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost."[50] Derrida observes the significance of the ghostly presence when one attempts to ethically "learn to live"; he considers the ghost not as a temporary or impermanent figure but as a haunting presence, symbolizing the unavoidable future of death in our lives. Quoting Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, in which the eponymous prince of Denmark encounters the ghost of his murdered father, Derrida states, "A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: 'now,' future present) [...] Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: 'Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost' (*Hamlet*)."[51]

Readers of Morrison's *Beloved* would be familiar with Derrida's discussion of ghosts because the dead baby in the novel is often read as representing a repercussion of the traumatized history of slavery. However, Morrison's treatment of ghosts is different from that of Ward's because Ward presents ghosts as omnipresent or never-disappearing in the narrative, echoing Derrida's theorization in *Specters of Marx*. While the ghost of the dead girl in *Beloved* is eventually exorcised and expelled toward the end of the narrative, Richie's ghost in Ward's novel *reenters* the narrative stage. Although Richie temporarily disappears after hearing from River about the way in which he died, he casually says to Jojo, "Hey,"[52] and explains his failed attempt to go inside his home and rest in peace. Examining the role of Richie, Sara Stephens Loomis posits that Richie occupies "a liminal placelessness"[53] where he is "both moving and immobilized, leaving home and heading to the unknown." Toward the end of the novel, Richie brings along with him a number of ghosts who suffered a violent death and tells Jojo, "Now you understand life. Now you know. Death."[54] Jojo and Kayla observe the countless ghosts in a tree in their family property: "They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me."[55] When Kayla notices that the ghosts do not leave, she sings a song to them, and the ghosts respond with a nod and by "[smiling] with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease."[56] Thus, the novel concludes with a harmonious interaction between humans and ghosts. Concerning this final scene, Joanna Davis-McElligatt observes a sense of spiritual healing, stating, "Healing here results from the collapsing of distinctions between [...] human beings and 'any living thing'—rather than operating as singular isolates functioning alone, individual bodies are instead understood to be communal entities 'singing' in a 'multitude of voices.'"[57]

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[49] As Avery F. Gordon states, "Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about"; quoted in Megan Ashley Swartzfager, "'Ain't no more stories for you here': Vengeful Hauntings and Traumatized Community in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2020): 326.

[50] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), xvii.

[51] Ibid., xix.

The collapse of the distinction between humans and nonhumans illustrates the manner in which Ward challenges their traditional and hierarchal relationship. I argue that this process of healing in the novel's ending passage is mutual rather than one-sided because the novel's final passage illustrates that the ghosts are healed by Kayla's singing, and the children's interaction with the ghosts provides a positive note to the narrative's ending. This positivity is significant because even at the end, Jojo and Kayla's life circumstances have not greatly improved. Although they drive to Parchman along with Leonie and her White friend and successfully reunite with Michael and manage to return home, Leonie continues to feel depressed about her dead brother and remains addicted to drugs. Moreover, she and Michael frequently leave home and are neglectful of their kids. However, in their absence, the interaction with the ghosts provides Jojo and Kayla with comfort, since the ghosts seemingly play the role of their guardians. As shown in the final passage, the ghosts are part of the natural environment of Mississippi. This positively affirms that Jojo and Kayla are in their rightful place, as demonstrated by the ghosts' concise singing voice when the novel concludes: "*Home*, they say. *Home*."[58] According to Rachel Ewing, the novel's ending illustrates "a complex act of mourning that maps the contours of an unbearable vanishing point as well as possible path forward."[59] Thus, a cathartic effect can be observed in the scene because the ghosts "smile" as if responding to Kayla's singing, and the feelings of relief and harmony permeate the scene. Evocative of the Derridean dynamics of life and death, Ward highlights a balanced and equal relationship between life and death by presenting the mutually healing interaction between Jojo/Kayla and the ghosts.

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[52] Ward, *Sing*, 280.

[53] Loomis, "The Sound of All Water," 189.

[54] Ward, *Sing*, 282.

[55] Ibid., 282.

[56] Ibid., 284.

[57] Joanna Davis-McElligatt, "'And Now She Sings It': Conjure as Abolitionist Alternative in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2021): 109.

In addition to the affinity between Ward and Derrida, I underscore that Ward's treatment of ghosts differs from that of Derrida (and Morrison) because Ward depicts numerous ghosts instead of a single ghost. In other words, while Derrida and Morrison each present a single death (Marx and Beloved), Ward depicts the ghosts and their histories when Richie takes these ghosts with himself as someone who "[pulls] all the weight of history behind him."[60] Ward depicts violence against African Americans as one that frequently occurs in U.S. history. She articulates the ghosts' voices that begin to speak simultaneously, similar to an avalanche:

> 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 still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe.[61]

These polyphonic, non-punctuated voices do not distinguish one voice from another (or one death from another), collectively representing the *many deaths* of African Americans, which "cannot be contained within a single idea of trauma."[62]

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[58] Ward, *Sing*, 285.

[59] Rachel Ewing, "Mapping the Lost Home: Psalm 137 and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2022): 145.

[60] Ibid., 265.

[61] Ibid., 282–83.

[62] Ibid., 151.

I especially consider the phrase, "I couldn't breathe," significant because the phrase and its present tense form are repeated on multiple occasions in the novel.[63] Evidently, Ward utilizes the socially significant phrase as a response to police violence against African Americans. The phrase became a slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of Eric Garner in 2014, and remained so throughout the movement subsequent to George Floyd's death in 2020.[64] Although the phrase is spoken by different characters in different situations in the novel, it unmistakably exemplifies Ward's awareness of African Americans' brutal deaths. In this context, the ghosts are presented as a medium that lead Jojo and Kayla to confront the collective history of African Americans. Although it is not certain whether Jojo and Kayla immediately understand the meaning of their encounters with the ghosts, the narrative urges us to situate it both temporarily and geographically beyond the regional community of contemporary Mississippi. The collectivity and historicity of African American suffering embodied by Richie, Given, and the other ghosts add a sense of persuasiveness to Richie's aforementioned statement to Jojo, "Now you understand life. Now you know. Death." Despite the brutality of violence and trauma voiced by the multitude of ghosts, they fill the absence of the children's parents and the space of the Mississippi woods, serving as a means for Jojo and Kayla to temporarily but magically bend or mitigate the grim evidence of depressive realism in their trouble-ridden lives.

Conclusion

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward employs animals and ghosts as racialized figures to address the dehumanized status of African Americans and their history of slavery and racialization in the U.S. Ward frequently refers to these nonhuman figures throughout the novel to illustrate how African Americans were metonymically compared to such nonhumans and how this legacy persists in the contemporary era. Authors such as Wright and Morrison have depicted such nonhumans primarily as negative figures as embodying the legacy of African American history, and Ward's novel can be situated within this tradition. However, she differs from earlier writers in that her nonhuman figures in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are also positive or productive figures that help critically expose this history and disrupt the binary opposition between African Americans and

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[63] Ward, *Sing*, 65, 97, 126, 128, 161, 265, 274.

[64] Laura Bieger briefly observes the action of breathing in Ward's novel in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement and African American literature. See Laura Bieger, "Committed Writing as Common Ground: Jesmyn Ward's Poetics of Breathing While Black," *Amerikanstudien / American Studies* 66, no. 1 (2021): 74.

Whites.[65] In the novel, Ward presents animals and ghosts as communicative and intellectual beings, thereby rejecting the treatment of nonhumans as mere nonhumans when her characters such as Jojo and Kayla speak to and understand them. Echoing Derrida's philosophy on animals and ghosts, Ward destabilizes the Western-centric definition of (non) humans, or the hierarchy between humans and nonhumans. Her characters gain knowledge from their interactions with nonhumans and the presence of animals and ghosts help the child characters overcome negativities such as solitude and death that surround their lives. Thus, Ward's treatment of nonhumans is informed by a history that has treated African Americans in an anti-humanistic manner, and she counters this history by depicting nonhumans as humans or human-like. Ward utilizes nonhumans as a medium that allows her to navigate the multiple binary oppositions concerning race, history, and life, all of which are intricately interwoven in her fiction.

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65. Ward continues to depict nonhuman figures in her works. In her latest novel *Let Us Descend* (2023), the slave woman named Annis interacts with ghosts or "spirits," and they help her escape her enslaved status. Their role also demonstrates how nonhumans play a significant role when Ward negotiates African American history in her novels.