Agential Black Body in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Wan Fang [a]
gs60201@student.upm.edu.my
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Mohammad Ewan Awang [b]
ewan@upm.edu.my
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Noritah Omar
nomar@upm.edu.my
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) vividly captures the lived experiences of African Americans in the rural Southern United States amidst the enduring legacies of slavery and the ongoing impact of racial subjugation. This article focuses on the novel's portrayal of its Black characters and articulation of the Black body to demonstrate how the Black body not only bears the scars of systemic, historical-social injustice but also functions as a site of recuperation. Building upon George Yancy's concept of "the agential Black body", the article contends that affirming the Black body requires acknowledging the epistemic violence imposed upon it and recognising the body's potential to transcend such limitations. Yancy's concept of Black affirmation and modalities of Black ontology, including storytelling and musicking, are especially relevant in this article's analysis of Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. These elements illustrate how, in the novel, the Black body—through embodied self-articulation—testifies to moments of violation and uses those moments to re-inscribe itself. Thus, the Black body expands beyond the limited and essentialist (white) configurations, and gestures towards its state of possibilities. The article argues that the novel's narrative techniques and its engagement with African American literary traditions re-visibilise and manifest the resilience of the Black body.

Keywords: agential Black body; Jesmyn Ward; *Sing Unburied Sing*; George Yancy; African American literature

[a] *Main author*
[b] *Corresponding author*

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African Americans continue to endure the legacy of slavery and racism. Recent years have seen the intensification of racial tensions in the United States due to government inaction, media bias, police brutality, and other societal inequalities. Key events such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic killing of George Floyd in 2020 serve as reminders that Black bodies continue to be subjected to systemic injustice, being pathologised as sites of threat, danger, and criminality. The portrayal of the lived and experienced "Black body" as a historically and culturally constructed discourses have long been central to the African American literary imagination, which sought to interrogate how the Black Body is upheld by white imaginary, historically omitted, inferiorised, and surveilled.

Jesmyn Ward, an American novelist, primarily sets her works against this sociopolitical backdrop. In her third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017, henceforth "*Sing*"), Ward delves into pressing issues such as police brutality and judicial injustice that African Americans continue to face. Set in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, *Sing* follows a multi-generational family grappling with the legacies of racism, poverty, and incarceration in rural Mississippi. Central to the narrative is the coming-of-age story of Jojo, a thirteen-year-old boy under the guardianship of his grandfather, Pop. Through personal, familial, and historical ties with characters such as his grandfather Pop, his sister Kayla, and the spectral figure Richie, *Sing* highlights not only Jojo's individual development but also the collective narrative of the African American community that articulates the legacy of racial trauma and injustice. The novel is modelled on Jesmyn Ward's recollections of life in DeLisle, Mississippi, and is inspired by her research into Southern American history. In *Sing*, Ward employs magic realism through the tropes of hallucinations, ghosts, and supernatural elements to create a surreal ambience and flashbacks to eschew a strictly linear narrative structure. Through these narrative techniques, Ward not only enhances the depth and richness of the story but also conveys the complexity of African-American experiences.

Ward (2011) conceives the body as a medium for articulating traumatic experiences, stating that, "(b)ody tells stories" (p. 83). Her fiction reflects the American philosopher George Yancy's conception of the Black body as "a historical project": a body that is not static but has been continuously shaped and reshaped by historical events and socio-political contexts (Yancy, 2017, p.xxxvi). In *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2017), Yancy argues that the Black body has been "historically marked, disciplined, and scripted and materially, psychologically, and morally invested in" (p.17) to uphold white supremacy and maintain the illusion of white superiority. The "discursive and material violence" (Yancy, 2017, p. 106) inflicted upon and experienced by the African American community is etched onto their bodies. Trauma, as "an unrepresentable event" (Balaev, 2014, p. 1) of this violence, accentuates the interplay between historical memory and physical embodiment. Yet, traditional models of trauma, focusing on psychoanalytic aspects like delay and repression (Caruth, 2016), often overlook "the materiality of trauma or its physical visibility" (Genca, 2019, p. 133). This article critiques such models by presenting Black bodies not just as victims but as "sites of social, political, and cultural inscriptions" (Grosz, 1994, p. 23). It challenges the essentialist framing under the white gaze, which often casts Black bodies with immutable negative qualities (hooks, 1995, p. 122), arguing instead for recognising their agency in defining their identity.

bell hooks (1995) argues that Black identity "has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle" (p. 122), while suggesting these experiences are not just historical

endpoints but also bases for envisioning future possibilities. This approach aligns with George Yancy's view that "the body is less of a thing or a being than a shifting or changing historical meaning that is subject to cultural configuration and reconfiguration" (Yancy, 2017, p.xxxvi). Together, hooks and Yancy's perspectives advocate for recognising the "historical plasticity" (Yancy, 2005, p.216) of the Black body, suggesting its malleability and the fluidity of its symbolic and representational meanings across time and space (Moore, 2019). This not only challenges the static, essentialist views but also highlights the transformative potential of acknowledging Black bodies as active sites of cultural and historical (re)inscription and resistance.

In light of the above, this article examines Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing*, situating it within the discourse of "the Black body" and its role in both affirming and resisting the construction of African American identity. While *Sing* has been analysed through various perspectives that uncover systemic injustice against Black identity and address ways to resist it, there remains a dearth of analysis on how the narrative and articulation of the Black body—embodied, lived, and subject to possible (re)configurations—could also provide a way to (re)visibilise and recuperate it from epistemic violence. Thus, this article adopts George Yancy's concept of "the agential Black body" in analysing Ward's *Sing*, arguing that Ward's narrative techniques and aesthetics underscore both the resilience of the Black body and its dynamic process of becoming.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE BLACK BODY, AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND JESMYN WARD'S *SING UNBURIED SING*

The (re)interpretation of the Black body in the African American context, rooted in historical legacies and influenced by various contexts, is a dynamic process and interplay between past perceptions, contemporary discourses, and shifting societal paradigms. The Black body in white supremacy is constituted within a binary logic that fixes whiteness as normative but undergirds racist teleological assumptions that dehumanise and distort Blackness as savage, criminal, scary, and hypersexual (Yancy, 2017). This historico-racial schema, shaped by the white gaze— "a structured way of seeing that interpellates the Black as that which is epistemologically and ontologically 'given'" (Yancy, 2014, p. 51)—renders the Black body invisible (Fanon, 1967). The reverberance of this historical construction of the imperceptible Black body today, through the visual regimes, speed, and virality of the digital economy, turns the "Black horrific" into a banal encounter (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 712).

The phenomenon of "the turn of the body" (Turner, 2013, p. 1) which began in the 1980s, has spurred body studies spanning various academic disciplines, including literary studies. Researchers examining the significance of the Black body explore its complexities across historical, social, and cultural dimensions, along with its intersections with race, gender, and identity. Black bodies can be ideological sites where societal discourses on race and physicality intersect, shaping individuals' identities and self-perceptions, which often leads to internalised oppression (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2001). Yet, as Yancy (2017) argues, instead of negating the body, Black resistance could find potential precisely through affirmation and a "repositioning of the being of Black embodiment as a significant site of discursive (and material) self-possession" (p. 109). This perspective attests to the Black body's capacity for reclaiming visibility amidst the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and ongoing racial inequalities.

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In recent decades, discussions around the Black body in literary narratives have revolved around rethinking its potential for resistance and transformation. Carol E. Henderson (2002) develops a critical paradigm of "body woundedness", arguing that a scar left by the wound would remind Black Americans of "original violation", which supports the use of the wounded body "as a metaphor within the African American literary imagination" (p. 8) in articulating trauma. Focusing mainly on contemporary writings such as by Toni Morrison, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellision, Henderson (2002) argues that writing empowers African American writers to confront the silencing of Black bodies. Writing, according to Henderson (2002) "not only speak[s] to the resilience of African American people but also allow[s] for the reconceptualization of literal and figurative bodies within certain delimiting social structures" (p. 6). Meanwhile, Caroline Brown (2012) demonstrates how female African American writers and visual artists of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries strategically perform their Black body in a "highly tactical and politicized but fluid blackness" (p. 8) through postmodern aesthetics to create political and literary resistance. The fluidity of the Black body is also discussed in the collection *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture* (2019). This collection captures the various ways in conceptualising and envisioning a "transcendental Black subjectivity" (Hill, 2019, p. 12) by engaging with literary narratives that centre on the Black body within a posthuman framework. The collection attempts to reimagine Black subjectivities beyond the constraints imposed by prevailing racial stereotypes and historical narratives.

Another way in which Black subjectivity could be recuperated is through music, a pivotal element in African American culture and literature. Lauri Ramey (2008) argues for recognising spirituals, or "slave songs," as lyric poetry. She references "ethnopoetics," (Ramey, 2008, p. 6), a movement that emphasises the oral and physical aspects of poetry, linking it to non-Western traditions and the embodied expression found therein. Such a view acknowledges the embodied nature of the Black poetic tradition, which includes the blues and various types of jazz in African American music. In literature, Robert H. Cataliotti (1995, 2007) explores music's representation in African American fiction from the mid-19th century to the present. Cataliotti argues, for instance, that Toni Morrison's *Jazz* reflects its fragmented narrative through jazz's rhythmic and improvisational structures, while Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* uses blues to portray personal and collective healing. Indeed, as noted by Andrew Schreiber (2008), blues narratology in African American novels can be traced in the use of repetition, a dream-like quality that departs from the usual realism, and tension which reflects African Americans' aesthetics of healing, solidarity, and resistance against identity erasure.

Jesmyn Ward's literary works can be contextualised within this paradigm as they engage in rendering Black existence visible. Anna Hartnell (2016) identifies a distinctive contribution that Ward's writing makes to the American literary tradition that "evokes the Fall", stating that "[t]he experience of reading Ward is not exactly that of a fall from innocence, but it does usher us into a disenchanted America" (p. 206). The perception of "disenchanted America" is largely shaped by various forms of state neglect, which have "stripped away welfare programs and removed social safety nets" from Black communities (Keeble, 2019, p. 2). Deeply rooted in exploring real-world issues, Ward's narratives expose the realities of systemic injustices, illuminate the disenchantment within the community, and offer an alternative perspective on reclaiming Black history.

Previous studies on Ward's *Sing* have mainly explored the realms of ghost imagery, African-based spiritual traditions, space, and trauma in this novel. Yesmina Khedhir (2020) unravels the cultural dimensions within the narrative by analysing how the ghost Richie serves as

a device to "revise history and re-enliven African-American cultural memory and identity" (p. 17). Recent research on *Sing* also focuses on the importance of characters' engagement with practices of African spiritual traditions and examines how these traditions help shape their lives and offer resistance, empowerment, and a connection to their African identity within the context of a challenging and oppressive societal environment (Mellis, 2019; Azon, 2021; Arnold 2023). These studies offer insight into how African-American protest literature, particularly through the practices of African spiritual traditions, can function as a protection and a locus of resistance to an oppressive society (Mellis, 2019).

Trauma is central to the analysis of Ward's *Sing.* Nicole Dib (2020) examines the road-trip motif in *Sing*, arguing how it serves as a metaphor for confronting injustices tied to the US penal system and for self-discovery and healing from trauma. Cucarella-Ramon (2021) explores how the black characters in the novel address and heal their historical trauma, and confront the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow through the trope of the ghost within African diasporic memory, underscoring the role of oral tradition and storytelling in forming diasporic memory, with ghosts acting as a link to the past and a therapeutic element in their trauma healing journey. Similarly, focusing on the shared aspects of trauma within the Black family, Apryl Lewis (2023) advocates for a more inclusive approach to reading *Sing* by highlighting the overlapping traumatic experiences of the characters. In discussing trauma and racial oppression, some scholars offer unique perspectives through specific imagery in the novel. Michelle Stork (2023) analyses how the novel reconfigures the road novel genre and explores ecological issues through cars and road trips, which symbolise both freedom and confinement. Cydney Phillip (2023) investigates the novel's carceral ecologies, focusing on water's symbolic role in relation to incarceration, the haunting legacy of the Middle Passage at Parchman Farm, and the ecological violence of weaponised water.

Among previous trauma studies on *Sing*, Patrycja Antoszek (2020) accentuates the body as a crucial focal point of investigation in addressing trauma. Employing the theory of affect transmission, Antoszek analyses the interplay between bodily expression and heightened emotional states in *Sing.* Her findings on the correlation between intergenerational trauma and the presence of haunting spectral imagery reflect our reading of spirit communication as the novel's mode of asserting Black's counter-narrative of truth. In relation to this, Charles Tribbett (2019) notes that while *Sing* features no prominent blues performers and only minimal references to the music itself, the novel is nevertheless infused with the ethos and imagery of the blues tradition. This artistic engagement could be read as one of the novel's counter-narrative techniques. As Tribbett argues, "[t]hrough song and singing, people can bear up under abuse, finding a spiritual sustenance in a shared experience of oppression" (37).

The present study situates itself within the existing scholarly discussion on Jesmyn Ward's *Sing* to unpack similar themes and motifs inherent in the novel, such as trauma and the spectral presence of ghosts. However, it enters the conversation by arguing the centrality of the Black body both as a site that attests to its historical inscriptions and its ability to reconfigure itself. Here, the Black body is understood as having the capacity to rewrite itself. George Yancy's call for reading the Black body as "having a perspective, a subjectivity" (Yancy, 2017, p. 109) is crucial as it suggests that the body, through narrative and embodied modes of articulation, could provide a means for engaging the Black body not only as a historical witness but also as having the ability to transcend it.

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METHODOLOGY

GEORGE YANCY'S THE AGENTIAL BLACK BODY

George Yancy is one of the leading African American scholars in the United States on critical philosophy of race. The present study focuses on Yancy's theoretical positioning in *Black Bodies and White Gazes* (2017), in which Yancy dissects automatic responses and learned habits of the body and how these ingrained behaviours, shaped by systemic oppression and racialization, impact Black bodies. Yancy (2017) speaks of white surveillance that has the power to install the inferiority of the Black body as a form of "epistemic violence that fragment[s] and traumatize[s] Black embodiment" (xxxvii). To this, Yancy (2017) also offers the notion of "the agential black body" (p. 105) as a mode of Black resistance. Black resistance, through the body, according to Yancy (2017), is "simultaneously a process of recoding Black embodied existence through processes of opposition and *affirmation*" (p.108). Resistance requires beyond refusal and negation; it involves taking a stand and recognising "the reality and complexity of Black self-determination, self-reflexivity, and interiority" (Yancy, 2017, p. 109). As Yancy (2017) argues:

> [W]hen Black bodies resist, they affirm. Resistance embodies onto existential resources that might be articulated in the following forms: *I am*, *I exist*, I recognize myself as taking a stand against the white racist episteme that has attempted to render void my capacity to imagine other/ alternative possibilities of being … To take this interpretation of resistance even further, I argue that at the moment of resistance there is an instantiation of an axiological moment that grounds the Black body with value— a value that whites have historically denied.
>
> (p.109)

Central to Yancy's articulation above is an assertion of reclaiming the value of the Black body denied by racist ideology. He highlights the multiple valences the body carries, through reimagining and rewriting its narrative. At the same time, Yancy (2017) also rejects any form of Black liberation that slavishly mimics the neoliberal ideology of freedom (p. 110). Yancy proposes the ways in which the Black body affirmation could take place. Firstly, rather than attempting to recover an authentic identity through romanticising origins or historical continuities, Yancy advocates for an understanding of one's existence within the context of lived history. This involves acknowledging "the reality of fissures in collective and individual identity formation" (Yancy, 2017, p. 106). One of the ways in which the Black body could (re)claim its agency is "to re-story one's identity even if that story is fragmented and replete with tensions" (Yancy, 2017, p.110). Yancy argues that the advantage of such a narrative perspective allows "multiple vocabularies regarding Black identity and Black-being-in-the-world…sustained through historical and imaginative Black agency" (Yancy, 2017, p.112).

Secondly, Yancy (2017) discusses "Black ontology" (p. xv), an extension of Frantz Fanon's arguments that locate its power in the "lived experiences of bodies and gazes in the world" (Smith, 2021, p. 205). To disrupt the dominant white gaze, Black ontology rejects predefined "essences" (Yancy, 2017, p. xxxvi). Yancy (2017) describes this as a negotiation between "constituted (sutured) and unconstituted (unsutured) realities" (p. 254). This negotiation is a dynamic process that questions and redefines identity through an active engagement with both the limitations imposed by history and the potential for self-determination. It allows individuals to recognise historically defined characteristics while also challenging and redefining those boundaries. This is exemplified through the fluidity of Blues ontology, a form of Black "musicking" (Yancy, 2017, p. 203), which he defines as a "subjunctive mode of being, speaking to human reality as *Seinkonnen*

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(an ability to be)" (Yancy, 2017, p. 203). Black musicking allows African Americans to maintain their authority over their bodies, voices and geographies (Yancy, 2013). Yancy notes how singing the blues represents not just a reflection on sorrow and pain but also an act of improvisation and resilience—a creative and transformative response to adversity. This is reflected in his analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where he reads Claudia's mother's musicking as empowering, imbuing her with "a sense of infinite possibility" (p. 201) and a "sense of existential hope and indefatigability" (p. 202). Yancy further asserts, "Singing the blues is a way of making a way out of no way" (p. 202), suggesting musicking as a vital resistance tool for African Americans facing adversity, enabling them to express emotions, build community, and discover inner strength in challenging circumstances. Yancy's view on the improvisational structure of Blues ontology illustrates his broader arguments about the agential Black body as a process of "becoming" (Yancy, 2017, p. 203), open to "unending possibility" (p. 203).

As Ward's second novel to win the National Book Award, *Sing* exemplifies the rich tradition of African American literature by intertwining storytelling and music—two fundamental aspects of African American life. *Sing* is replete with instances that conceive the Black body as a dynamic site of becoming. Our analysis will focus on the novel's narrative techniques, which centre on the body and its incorporation of Black "musicking"—illustrated in the novel through chants and singing—as ways of reaffirming the Black body's capacity for self-articulation and transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RENARRATING THE BODY IN *SING*

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing* primarily focuses on the lives and social issues of African Americans in rural Mississippi in the contemporary American South. According to Wilson (2021), the rural South in the past "was a violent world, from hunting in the woods, to fights on town streets, to public executions and spectacle lynchings of African Americans to assert white supremacy" (p.41). In her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), Ward cites her own experiences and invokes the images of black bodies to demonstrate the hostility and hazards of the landscape to local Black residents:

> Men's bodies litter my family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from the beyond, makes them appear as ghosts. In death, they transcend the circumstances of this place that I love and hate all at once and become supernatural.
>
> (p.14)

Ward draws inspiration from the history of the Southern US in her portrayal of Parchman Prison in *Sing*. Parchman, a notorious correctional facility in Mississippi, functioned like a plantation, where primarily African American inmates laboured in cotton fields under conditions akin to slavery. As David Oshinsky (1997) notes, "Parchman Farm is synonymous with punishment and brutality, its story covers the bleak panorama of race and punishment in the darkest corner of the South" (p. 2).

At the centre of *Sing* is Jojo, a young boy having a close bond with his grandfather, Pop. Through Pop, Jojo learns about survival, resilience, and strength, crucial for his growth and reclaiming Black identity in the American South. As his primary caregiver and mentor, Pop teaches him survival skills and connects him to their family history through stories about their land and heritage. Among these stories, those recounting Pop's experiences as a teenager in Parchman

Penitentiary resonate most with Jojo. Pop describes a confrontation between his older brother and a white officer, which leads to his incarceration at Parchman. There, he endures scorching, oppressive, and inhumane conditions. Pop recalls, in corporeal detail:

> From sunup to sundown we was out there in them fields, hoeing and picking and planting and pulling. A man get to a point like that, he can't think. Just feel. Feel like he want to stop moving. Feel his stomach burn and know he want to eat. Feel his head packed full of cotton and know he want to sleep. Feel his throat close and fire run up his arms and legs, his heart beat out his chest, and know he want to run. But wasn't no running. We was gunmen, under the gun of them damn trusty shooters.
>
> (Ward, 2018, pp. 68-69)

Pop's storytelling style, in its repetition, mimics the mechanical and instrument-like exhaustion, devoid of human quality. In discussing the role of the Black body in racial exploitation, Darnell Moore (2009) argues that the Black body has been memorialised "as the vehicle through which the terrorizing, dehumanizing capitalist human enslavement project in America was sustained" (p. 184). This assertion highlights the systemic devaluation and objectification of Black bodies throughout history, as exemplified in the warden's statement in Parchman: "[t]he only thing a nigger knows how to do is slave" (Ward, 2018, p. 139). This degrading remark epitomised the commodification of Black bodies, reducing them to mere instruments of labour and perpetuating the racist ideology that sustains slavery. The epidermal logic of a "niggerized" Black body confines it to an inferior status within society (Yancy, 2017, p. 58). Ward's depiction of the working conditions of Black prisoners in Parchman highlights the white hegemonic gaze upon Black bodies. Pop's repetitive, machine-like language also reflects the disciplining of the Black body through what Yancy (2017) calls "the technology of docility" (p. 130), which began with the slave ships of the Middle Passage. This technology aimed to disrupt Black subjectivity and cultural continuity in order to reduce them to obedient, commodified bodies. Yancy (2017) argues that it creates "a strong workforce" and reinforces "the status of the enslaver as an active force, a driver of animal flesh" (p. 130).

Simultaneously, this storytelling style can be viewed as a form of resistance. Reviving past oppressions' narratives can help arouse "intellectual concerns with time, history, subjectivity, and fragmentation" (Lipstiz, 2001, p. 215). The African American linguistic performativity in Pop's repetitive and unstructured self-articulation can be seen as resisting Euro/Anglo linguistic hegemony and disciplinary practices. His speech reflects the fragmentation and rawness of embodied Black trauma. Furthermore, the stories he shares with his grandson Jojo are not mere tales but are, in fact, an empowering form of transmitting a collective Black memory that carries the weight of their family's and even their community's shared past.

Yancy (2017) argues that "there is a moment of renarrating the self at the moment of resistance which also involves a disruption of the historical force of the white *same*" (p.110). Thus, modes of articulation play a role in this resistance. In *Sing*, Pop's narration—and, to an extent, his confession about Richie, a 12-year-old Black boy whom Pop eventually reveals he killed to spare from a horrifying punishment by dismemberment at Parchman—is presented through a series of disrupted monologues scattered throughout the novel. In recounting his past experiences in Parchman, Pop purposefully evades and sidesteps a particular aspect of his narrative. As Jojo recalls:

> 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, possums or armadillos or wild pigs or hit deer, bloating and turning sour in the Mississippi heat.
>
> (Ward, 2018, p. 248)

While Pop's refusal to complete his narration about Richie could be read as a symptom of his trauma and a coping mechanism, his stream-of-consciousness narrative style—where he either circles around or eventually resumes his story—mirrors the temporal and existential reality of living as a Black person in America, where the past is not merely historical but a continuous part of the present and future. In postponing his narration about Richie, Pop resists providing simple closure to the story of bodily trauma, thus highlighting its extensive violence and challenging both Jojo's insistence and the reader's expectations. This suspension of confession culminates in a cathartic monologue:

> I said: *It's going to be all right, Richie. He said: You going to help me? Riv, which way should I go?* I heeled the dogs. Held out my hands to him, light side out. Moved slow. Soothed him. Said: *We gone get you out of this*. *We gone get you away from here*. Touched his arm: he was burning up. *I'm going home, Riv*? he asked […]*Yes, Richie. I'm a take you home*.
>
> (Ward, 2018, p. 255)

When confiding his secret to Jojo, Pop is overwhelmed by an irrepressible surge of distress: "every piece of him aquiver" (Ward, 2018, p. 255). Pop's avoidance and physical trembling are external manifestations of his trauma, not curing it but temporarily suppressing it. As he reveals his role in Richie's death, Pop frequently smells blood on his hands, a persistent reminder of his guilt: "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" (Ward, 2018, p. 256). This sensory experience aligns with Richard McNally's description of trauma flashbacks, where victims vividly recall sensory experiences (2005, p. 106). Nevertheless, Pop's eventual decision to share his traumatic story with Jojo suggests a gradual healing process that echoes Yancy's concept of "affirming" (2017, p.109) the Black body. The affirmation of Black bodies can be articulated through the act of acknowledging and vocalising the systemic injustices they endure. This process is not necessarily about presenting positive experiences; rather, it is about asserting the presence of Black bodies against forces that aim to negate or silence them.

In *Sing*, the mode of "re-story" encompasses not only the transmission of personal experiences from the elderly to the young but also the stories told by a spectral figure. The ghost Richie, one of the three narrators in the novel, plays a vital role in uncovering history and expressing communal trauma. Through Richie, the novel attests to the historical accounts of many young Black boys who were sent to Parchman prison for minor offenses such as vagrancy and theft. The technique of the ghost's self-narration corroborates, supplements, and enriches the historical account of Parchman prison, along with stories told by Pop. As a ghost, Richie is depicted as fully embodied, a trope critiquing the invisibility of the Black body. Simultaneously, Richie is an example of Yancy's notion of "alternative possibilities of being" (2017, p. 109). His spectrality not only serves to re-visualise the Black body but also to forge connections across generations and spatio-temporal boundaries. Richie plays an important role in refining the Parchman prison stories for Jojo. Recognising Jojo as Pop's grandson, Richie states,

> 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 [Pop] 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 that shirt hang new, except for the tails. The end.
>
> (Ward, 2018, p. 137)

The imagery of a "moth-eaten shirt" conveys the story's incompleteness, with details eroded by time and memory that also echo Pop's evasion of the truth about Richie's death. This metaphor extends to the battered and neglected state of Black bodies, often exposed to systemic oppression and violence with limited protective resources. Richie's assertion that he could "patch those holes" symbolises the reassembling of fragmented memories of the horrors inflicted on Black bodies into a cohesive narrative. Richie recounts a black couple who were brutally slain,

> the mob beat them so bad ... The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too.
>
> (Ward, 2018, p. 140)

In retelling this horror, Richie speaks of the fragmented and depersonalised Black body, reduced to descriptions of mutilated body parts. The couple endured such torture simply because the man accidentally brushed against a white woman on the street. This scene underscores how white surveillance is used to "protect white spaces from the Black body's criminal intrusion, an infringement that could easily be linked to revulsion" (Yancy, 2017, p. 8). In white fantasies, the interpretations of Black bodies as animalistic, infrahuman, and savage, are used to justify and conceal the brutality of white racism (Fanon, 1967; Yancy, 2017). However, as Brogan (1998) notes, "in contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative—or challenge—to 'official,' dominant history" (p. 17). In actively retelling the brutal account, Richie serves as *Sing*'s narrative approach that challenges the tendency to banalise Black death and violence. Ward empowers the ghost Richie to voice the experiences of vanished Black bodies in history. Beyond merely being a haunting figure, Richie stands as an agent of knowledge and a witness to history.

REDEMPTION THROUGH BLACK MUSICKING

According to Yancy (2017), "Black musicking" should be understood as signifying a "nexus of musical pleasure, religious zeal, sensual stimulation, and counter-hegemonic resistance" (p. 203). Citing particularly blues music, Yancy (2017) views Black musicking "as a site of *becoming*, [that] de-paralyzes the spirit" (p. 203). Extending this view, other forms of musicking such as the incorporation of song lyrics, chants, and word games into literary and oral traditions of storytelling can create a collective narrative (Lipsitz, 2001, p.236). In this sense, music can serve as an unconventional type of storytelling, conveying and preserving the embodied experiences of Black Americans and their collective memories. Music offers Black slaves a means to "translate everyday experiences into living sound," "to express the pain and emotional trauma that must have been part and parcel of their lives" (White & White, 2005, p.30). As a transformative medium for the expression of Black life, music provides a platform for acknowledging and reckoning with the enduring impact of historical injustices on Black bodies, allowing them to articulate their suffering and resilience in a tangible form.

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Sing opens with an epigraph of a succinct song that narrates the disappearance of a boy named Equiano from a West African tribe. Despite its brevity, the chant holds a significant place as an oral testament, which has been passed down throughout the course of history. Ward quotes the chant as follows:

> Who are we looking for, who are we looking for?
> It's Equiano we're looking for.
> Has he gone to the stream? Let him come back.
> Has he gone to the farm? Let him return.
> It's Equiano we're looking for.
>
> (Ward, 2018, epigraph)

The epigraph featuring Equiano's name serves as a crucial narrative technique, symbolically invoking the disappearance of an African boy while intertwining with the history of the transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly displaced Africans to the Americas. This reference not only carries significant historical weight, likely alluding to Olaudah Equiano—a slave who became a prominent abolitionist—but also foreshadows Pop's recounting of his family's traumatic past later in the novel. The epigraph permits Pop's account to be situated within a broader, often fragmented narrative of African American history depicted in the novel. Pop's grandmother reveals the tragic fate of her great-grandmother, who was kidnapped, sold, and transported across the ocean. Pop vividly recalls the terror of the Middle Passage: villagers too fearful to leave their homes, white intruders seizing them in daylight, and countless individuals treated like animals, chained, gagged, and often buried at sea (Ward, 2018, p. 69).

The epigraph's emphasis on a collective effort to seek and reclaim lost community members serves as a resistance against the erasure and fragmentation wrought by slavery and colonization. In *Sing*, this quest for collective resistance is also manifested through another form of "musicking", which is singing. Towards the novel's supernatural end, Jojo encounters the ghost Richie and numerous other spirits in a tree. The multitude of spirits symbolises the tragic endings endured by Black Americans, as Jojo's grandmother explained: becoming a ghost happens from a violent, unbearable death— "so awful that even God can't bear to watch" (Ward, 2018, p. 236). In showing the violence inflicted upon against Black bodies in this scene, *Sing* resorts to a similar technique reminiscent of Pop's stream-of-consciousness, reflected through Jojo's perception:

> They speak with their eyes: *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 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.*
>
> (Ward, 2018, pp. 282-283)

Critics have noted how this scene encapsulates the novel's "refusal of historiographical ordering" (Jenkins, 2021, p. 135) and emphasises "the emergency as well as the transhistorical dimensions of pain" (Hartmann, 2023, p. 171). It also reflects Yancy's notion of Black affirmation as an "ontological excess" (2017, p. 110). The lack of punctuation denies the reader any pause or relief from the onslaught of horrors and mimics how the characters themselves are overwhelmed by their experiences. Told in a raw and unmediated style, the scene also reflects the yearning for recognition of Black identity and experiences in a society that fails to fully recognise or accommodate their humanity. Yancy's concept of Black ontological excess can be interpreted in

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this scene as an attempt to visibilise and express Black bodies in literature, where the narrative form itself becomes a method of resistance against traditional, often oppressive storytelling structures. The form disrupts the reader's comfort and challenges conventional narrative expectations. As Sparrow (2021) notes, "[i]f the Black body is a battleground, then the rules of engagement are as much linguistic and imaginative as they are corporeal" (p.82). Jojo's stream of consciousness provides an opportunity to manifest the Black body as the battleground and also catalyses the (re)construction of his identity as he grapples with the collective and (trans)historical body trauma.

Ward captures the impact of music as a transformative force through Kayla, Jojo's young sister. These spirits, reluctant to depart and lingering in their spectral form, find voice and presence in the music sung by Kayla. Jojo notes,

> So Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words ... And the ghosts open their mouths wider and their faces fold at the edges so they look like they're crying, but they can't. And Kayla sings louder ... Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease.
>
> (Ward, 2018, pp. 283-284)

This interaction underscores music's capacity to bridge spatio-temporal and existential gaps. As a dynamic agent of becoming, music participates in the refashioning of African American identities and fosters a communal sense of healing and acknowledgement. The spirits' physical reactions to Kayla's singing illustrate how music, even in its most fragmented form, can re-animate and provide solace to those caught in the liminal space between worlds. Jojo, as both a witness of and a participant in the musicking, feels empowered by Kayla's singing. He now recognises its role in asserting the existence and identity of the Black community. Recalling Yancy's notion of "ontological excess", the interactions between the ghosts and the living, facilitated by music, transcend conventional understandings of existence. The collective response of the spirits to Kayla's singing demonstrates that the Black body and spirit possess depths of experience and resilience that surpass historical victimisation.

Singing in *Sing* is articulated not only by human characters but also by spectral figures such as Richie. Ghosts in African American literary tradition often embody the unresolved traumas of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism, representing the haunting presence of past injustices that continue to affect the present. Ghosts in African American literature can be seen as a key aspect of the African diaspora's cosmology, a concept Toni Morrison describes as how Black people view the world, blending "rootedness in the real world" with elements of the supernatural, superstition, or magic (Morrison, 1984, p. 342). This rootedness, through spectral embodiment, allows African American authors to explore how history lingers in the collective memory of the Black community. As a spectral entity, Richie represents the liminal state between life and death, as well as the possibilities of the future. He exists both within the narrative and beyond the immediate realities of the living characters, thus acting as a potential link between past traumas and the possibilities for transformation.

This is particularly captured in a scene where Richie, depicted as "singing without words" (Ward, 2018, p. 240), introduces readers to a transcendent vision of a utopia. In this lush, vibrant world, natural laws are inverted—rivers flow backwards, and people engage in impossible feats such as flying. Ward describes this world in rich detail: "The air is gold: the gold of sunrise and sunset, perpetually peach" (p.240) and homes of varied architectural styles "flower into the sky" (p.240). Yet, Richie expresses his sense of isolation and disconnection from the utopia he envisions

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as he says "[i]t is the most beautiful song I have ever heard, but I can't understand a word" (Ward, 2018, p. 241). The physical act of Richie clawing at the air, where his hands "rend no doorways to that golden isle" (p. 242), at the end of the vision, illustrates his frustration and corporeal longing for a utopian world that remains out of reach. This gesture highlights the persistent gap between aspiration and tangible reality in the African American experience. Yet, through his singing, Richie exercises a form of spectral agency that extends beyond the confines of his ghostly form. This act of singing becomes a powerful expression of both longing and hopefulness, challenging and even redefining human-centred notions of agency and embodiment. It reflects what Toni Morrison described as "another way of knowing things" (Morrison, 1984, p. 342) inherent in the African diaspora.

The term "Unburied" in the title of Jesmyn Ward's novel could refer to both the living characters, such as Jojo and Kayla, and the spectral figures like Richie. The portrayal of "the unburied" singing revives the bodily experiences of the deceased and shapes the collective memories of today's African Americans. Their singing not only exerts healing power but also serves as a metaphorical act to recall suppressed histories and challenge societal amnesia. Lipsitz (2011) views expressive vernacular practices, including music, as "repositories of collective memory, sources of moral instruction, and mechanisms for transforming places and calling communities into being" (p. 60). This theme is central in *Sing*, where chants and singing offer a transformative opportunity in connecting the past and present experiences of its characters.

CONCLUSION

This article explores Jesmyn Ward's *Sing* as a narrative that counters the denial of racism's impact by focusing on the lived experiences of marginalised Black communities. Against the backdrop of the invisibility of Black existence, *Sing* showcases a narrative mode that simultaneously affirms the conditions of the Black body within history and rejects essentialist and reductive conceptions of its representation. Through *Sing*, Ward seems to suggest that moments when Black bodies testify to the violence inflicted upon them could also be moments where acts of transgression potentially emerge or are revealed. This article contributes to the ongoing literary and critical discourse within African American literature on Black ontological richness and modalities of resistance and transformation. It seeks to re-envision the Black body as a locus of powerful, reimagined possibilities that counter historical narratives which have traditionally silenced Black voices. This perspective encourages further investigation into the creative and critical ways in which African American literature employs Black aesthetics—through embodied resistance and resilience—to capture and recuperate the contemporary Black body's agency against the hegemony of institutional racism, historical injustice, and socio-political inequality.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wan Fang is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He is currently a faculty member at Guangxi Vocational University of Agriculture, China. His research interests include trauma studies and geocriticism.

Mohammad Ewan Awang is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His research interests include geocriticism and space and place in literature.

Noritah Omar is Associate Professor in the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her research interests include gender studies and literary and cultural studies.

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