

FROM SLAVERY TO PRISON: HOME AND BONDAGE IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

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The African American writer Jesmyn Ward has been very successful in recent years, both in terms of critical reception and audience interest. Her most recent novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), manages to reconcile past and present while focusing on a family that is closely associated with Parchman prison. The following examination focuses on the search for home in a state of confinement through the experiences of two characters, River and Richie, more specifically on the beginning of their captivity, participation in the trustee system and life outside the penitentiary. The aim of the examination is to see to what extent prison can adopt the function of an ‘undesired’ home.

Key words: belonging, slavery, prison system, Jesmyn Ward, generational trauma

Jesmyn Ward has established herself as one of the most distinctive voices of the South and more specifically of the Gulf area – similar to William Faulkner, she has populated a fictional town, Bois Sauvage in rural Mississippi, with a set of characters that struggle through tragedy and love. She has been awarded the National Book Award for Fiction twice – first in 2011 for her second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (a novel that presents one of the most comprehensive and profound explorations of the events surrounding the tragedy of hurricane Katrina), and then in 2017 for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. She has apparently managed to tap into problems modern readers and critics have found significant and relevant to the complex nature of the present for the African American community, while still following in the footsteps of the long tradition of writing produced by African American women writers. Similar to the other members of the younger generation, she would in most cases try to subvert this tradition in her study of modern anxieties.

Her latest novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, was widely popular among readers and critics – the *New York Times* and Barack Obama included it in

their list of best books in 2017; sales also reflected its resonance. It relates the story of a family comprising several generations that is haunted by memories and ghosts. The main plotline concerns Leonie's journey to Parchman prison to meet her husband, Michael, who is to be released after serving out his sentence. In the process, we learn that their marriage is interracial (it has caused a lot of tension) and that they have two children, Jojo and Kayla, who are, for the most part, emotionally and psychologically detached from them and share a deeper bond with their grandparents, Pop and Mom. The narrative is composed of threads that lead back to the period of slavery; many of the things the characters go through can be considered direct, unalterable effects of the long-lasting institution. The most prominent symbol of the prison that pervades most of the book (half of the main characters have an experience of it, some are threatened with it and the rest experience its impact indirectly) is in many ways linked to slavery: from the way the actual building and surrounding area look (in this case similar to a plantation), through the work the prisoners are required to fulfill and the relationships between the races, to the frequent lynchings. The main aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the portrayal of this specific penitentiary – how it is organized, who usually ends up there and what roles people are required to play within its walls – to evaluate its potential as an undesired home. The specific focus of the examination shall be placed on Richie's and River's (also known as Pop) experience and connections to Parchman Farm.

Jesmyn Ward was inspired to write about this particular prison by actual history: in one of her interviews, she reveals that she has done extensive research of Parchman Farm, and the specific methods of operating these kinds of establishments during the time of Jim Crow. What impressed her the most was the fact that children as young as 13 or 14 would be sent to that place for minor and insignificant "crimes" like loitering or vagrancy. In turn, their bodies would not only be used for hard labor on prison ground but also be "rented out to regional, like, industrial barons" (Ward 2017a: n.p.). Consequently, she incorporates a plotline dealing with child labor in the novel. River is taken into prison because his brother, Stag, injured a white man during a bar brawl and then returned home. The official charge is "harboring a fugitive". River describes it as follows: "*When all them White men came to get Stag, they tied both of us and took us up the road. You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is*

going to Parchman¹” (Ward 2017b: 19). It becomes evident that River has not committed any crime, but is still captured and imprisoned to a large extent due to the color of his skin. By tying young black adolescents, the white men physically and psychologically impose bondage on them. It is telling that rather than imprison them as a way to reform and redeem them, they take them to Parchman with the very specific purpose of making them work for free. Parallels with slavery persist on a variety of levels: the lack of a trial or jury, the way they are bound and the fact that their physical abilities and race have a decisive role in the unravelling of their fate.

The justice system was not treating African Americans in an unbiased way in that historical period, because it was presupposed that black men and women were biologically and by temperament more predisposed to crime and promiscuity. In other words, one can expect them to commit atrocities, to be sexually promiscuous and to be in a constant state of moral degradation. There were many cases where nobody judged them formally or informally if a certain crime happened within the limits of the community – if a black man killed another black man, he most probably would not have been persecuted. Only when white people were involved did the matter become more serious, and the law was used as a tool of captivity. As David Oshinsky suggests, “The Negro [...] lived largely outside the law. He played no role in making it, enforcing it, or judging those who broke it. The law did not protect him from white oppressors or from black criminals” (Oshinsky 1996: 131). By extension, prison as a limiting conceptual place for African American was not that strongly linked to law or justice. As it happens in River’s case, you can find yourself there without having actually committed a crime. His was not an isolated case: many spent large portions of their life at Parchman Farm due to fabricated allegations, and according to statistics, most of them were African American.

Another young character that finds himself in prison is Richie, a twelve-year-old boy River attempts to protect and guide during their time of imprisonment. “*He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat. Lot of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn’t get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it*” (Ward 2017b: 21). Richie enters the institution for a different reason: hunger and lack of opportunities for his community. He has actually committed a crime, out of necessity and a desire to survive. The first mention of his

¹ River’s memories of Parchman Farm appear in italics in the novel.

transgression, excerpted above, is narrated by River. River's explanation of what happened in Parchman, and specifically how all of the main characters ended up there, is restrained in terms of emotion and its main purpose seems to be one of objectivity and not sentiment. Richie, on the other hand, when his point of view is presented, is more explicit and fueled by strong feelings. About his crime, he narrates: "I stole." He shrugged. "*I was good at it. I been stealing since I was eight. I got nine little brothers and sisters always crying for food. And crying sick. Say they backs hurt; say they mouths sore. Got red rashes all over they hands and they feet. So thick on they face you can't hardly see they skin*" (Ward 2017b: 24). The detailed account of what it means to starve produces a more pronounced effect on the reader – it describes the way the body decays little by little when there is nothing to nourish it. Thus, again we are reminded of the grueling time of slavery when the African American body suffered physically and psychologically. Further, it turns Richie into a character that readers could sympathize with and understand in a better way. While River's perspective is detached, Richie's is more personal and biased.

Last but not least, the nature of Richie's felony suggests that socio-economic conditions lead to a rise in crimes rates, the proliferation of juvenile delinquents and the prison industrial complex – a process that has come to be expected nowadays. Angela Davis suggests that "rather than seriously address the problems with which so many communities are afflicted – poverty, homelessness, lack of healthcare, lack of education – our system throws people who suffer from these problems into prison" (Davis 2005: 113). Davis, a long-time supporter of the abolition of prisons in general, points out that social-economic problems do not find a solution through the utilization of the prison system. Instead, such establishments entrap certain individuals who after their stay there are more likely to continue with the same actions because the original issue still affects the community. If Richie was to be released, then he would still face nine hungry, ill children. In both cases of imprisonment discussed here, the institution does not attempt to redeem the individual by offering an isolated space (a version of a home) where they can ponder over their past doings. On the contrary, it cages innocent and in some cases immature young men to utilize their bodies as tools for free.

Life within the "walls" of Parchman Farm turns out to be particularly gruesome and exhausting. The trustee system that was in effect in the early days of Parchman Farm makes sentences even harder to serve out, so much so that modern scholars see it as more dehumanizing than previous institutions such as convict leasing (Gaither 127). The

trustee system was a new arrangement, according to which prisoners who in most cases had life sentences took the role of correctional guards and had to monitor the activity of the rest of the inmates. These trustees were predominantly white, with few exceptions. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* this system is reflected most clearly through the characters that successively take control of the dogs that pursue runaways – Kinnie Wagner, Hogjaw and Riv himself.

Kinnie was the inmate caretaker for the dogs. He was a legend, even then. I knew about Kinnie. All of us did. They sang songs about him in the hill country of Tennessee, down through the Delta, all the way to the coast. He bootlegged and brawled and stole and killed.

(Ward 2017b: 75)

Kinnie's persona reaches mythical proportions – all inmates have stories to share about him that spread over the vast southern area. He resembles frontier men who live outside the law of civilized society. The fact that Ward mentions songs specifically likens him more to a roguish character from folk tales than to a fully-fledged person. "*Poor White people all through the South loved him for it, loved him for spitting in the eye of the law. For blinding it. For being lawless in the lawless South, worse than the frontier, for standing like David in an Old Testament place*" (Ward 2017b: 75-76). It seems as though his crimes are perceived as one great triumph of the ordinary white man. This suggests that the law is no friendlier to poor white people than it is to African Americans. While Ward examines white on black violence, she still leaves space for ambiguity and does not completely denigrate one race or another. She rather attempts to assess the complexity that arises out of different and sometimes shared struggles.

The person who is later tasked with the same job, Hogjaw, shares some similarities with Wagner – both are ruthless when it comes to shooting escapees or sending the dogs after fresh meat. However, Hogjaw seems to present a darker side of humanity. "He was a killer. Everybody knew. He had escaped Parchman once, but then he committed another violent crime, shooting or stabbing someone, and he was sent back. That's what a White man had to do to return to Parchman, even if he was free because he had escaped; a White man had to murder" (Ward 2017b: 139). Emphasis is placed on the fact that only the worst of crimes would lead to a white man entering the confines of the prison. A person with such disposition would not think twice before killing again, but this time he would be endowed with the permission of the law system.

Hogjaw's characterization unveils one more flaw of the prison system – the well-established practice of sexual abuse. He takes a liking to Richie and eventually finds an opportunity to get him alone. In Richie's words, "Hogjaw put his hand on my back, gently. He grabbed my shoulders all the time, hands hard as trotters; he usually squeezed so tight I felt my back curving to bend, to kneel" (Ward 2017b: 140). While the textual representation of this major issue seems incomplete, it does reveal more through its silences rather than through overt descriptions. Simple cues that suggest physical domination reveal Hogjaw's intentions that can quickly transform into actions considering the position he is in. Trustees were freer to pursue inhumane practices as African Americans were not considered worthy of protection once they entered the establishment. In a broader context, Joy James suggests another aspect to the explication of sexual abuse:

Speaking out about incest or sexual abuse threatens to expose the less-than-ideal family or state; ironically, telling the truth about family violence is viewed as destabilizing the family just as vocalizing state violence and human-rights abuses is portrayed as destabilizing the state.

(James 1996: 151)

In other words, on a personal and public level stories about sexual abuse, in our case within the boundaries of a prison, appear to be inconvenient for the state. As a result, experiences similar to Richie's or other such cases of human-rights abuse that lead to a worse turn of events were mostly absent from official records or histories, especially when it came to men, but were still well-known in the community. Writing about such silenced issues has long been a feature of African American women's literature. What Ward subverts here is the gender of the people who are subjected to violence – she presents the event from a male point of view to show that suffering operates on different levels and it is not limited to the female members of society². Richie is ultimately saved by River, who decides to send him far away from Hogjaw. This is just one of his attempts to protect Richie from the atrocities of confinement, including the trustee system. River, though only three years older than him, assumes the role of a father figure. At every step he endeavors to make Richie's life easier or at least bearable. It can be argued then that with the lack of other alternatives, people become the symbol of home in the penitentiary system.

² Jesmyn Ward is not unique in presenting a male point of view; a more popular example would be Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). However, sexual violence aimed at men is not really typical for African American female writing.

By guarding the young boy, River provides him with the only available home in a state of bondage. It is similar to the way slaves survived throughout the decades and centuries – by relying on each other to form a disjointed and restricted community³. Home, then, may be the people that care for you and are ready to put their life on the line in a hostile environment.

River may be the most controversial, but also the most interesting choice for a dog keeper. Following Kinnie's escape, he is tasked with taking care of the creatures due to his inborn predilection for them. Animals, including dogs, are instinctively drawn to him. "The dogs loved Riv. They turned floppy and silly when he came around" (Ward 2017b: 138). This capacity of his is hinted at numerous times throughout the story, especially in the scenes where he teaches Jojo how to care for them and later convert them into food. Animal imagery and the identification of humans with animals, in general, are very pronounced in this novel and Ward's other works – goats, pigs, horses and dogs serve to emphasize certain ideas and to provide characters with different experiences of hardship, blood or violence. In the opening section, Jojo witnesses River killing a goat; the shoeing and training of horses works as a metaphor in several scenes; and dogs are a primary symbol of the prison system as beings that occupy a liminal state between savagery and domesticity. Regardless of River's natural ability to guide the dogs, his acquiring of the position is seen by many as undeserved and abnormal.

It's different, they said, for the Black man to be a trusty, with a gun. Said: That's unnatural, too, but that's Parchman. But it was something about a colored man running the dogs; that was wrong. There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries: slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them.

(Ward 2017b: 137-8)

The first thing that irritates and scares some of the inmates and the guards is that a black man would be permitted to hold and use a weapon as well as receive a certain level of authority in the hierarchy ladder of the prison. The essence of penitentiaries like Parchman, though, seems to lessen the importance of such negative opinions. Since the prison itself is ruled by

³ This is not the only historical instance of people mutually supporting each other to survive a certain hardship. A famous literary example would be John Steinbeck's take on the experience of the Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). What makes the African American community different is the length of the time they needed to endure their imposed burden.

lawlessness and wanton practices, giving power to a person of color would not be the biggest offence. What the others find more problematic is the fact that there is rapport between black men and dogs – two types of creatures that should be in a constant chase. After all, the main purpose of these staples of the prison is to catch escaped convicts, presumed in almost all cases to be African American. Last but not least, there are certain expectations when it comes to what kind and method of labor black people are supposed to be involved in. Matthew Mancini suggests that there is a conviction inherited from the time of slavery that they should work in gangs, under surveillance and discipline (Mancini 1996: 25). In a superior position, River is spared constant supervision and the experience of the lash. He, then, is an anomaly in all senses of the word – a boy who has managed not only to survive, but in a way prosper in this constrictive environment. That may be the reason why readers frequently forget that he is not much older than Richie and experiences a similar difficult coming of age.

Parchman, no doubt, affects and shapes River's early life. It transforms into an undesired home that he cannot escape from. The numerous stories he relates to Jojo prove his deep connection with this place. About his time as a dog trustee, we read the following: "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. All he could hear was the dogs, yipping and howling and baying, raring to tear" (Ward 2017b: 119). River's existence is overtaken by the dogs; they overpower his perception of the world around him. It is apparent that he did not enjoy his allotted position physically and psychologically. In the present, the way he attempts to escape this traumatic past (he is unable to care for a dog) is through storytelling – he relives the events a number of times in the process of narrating and uses them to connect with another person, who is made partial to his experience. The author herself is very much preoccupied by the past. She confesses, "One of the most important [questions] is about how history bears in the present. How does the past bear fruit? And why are we often so blind to it?" (Ward and Taylor 2016: 267). She focuses her works on the unravelling of the complex juxtaposition present-past. River is *salvaging*⁴ his memories – rearranging and repurposing them – on the one hand to prepare the next generation for

⁴ Alvin Henry has found a correlation between Jesmyn Ward's use of the word 'salvage' and Toni Morrison's idea of 'rememory'. See: Henry, Alvin. Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina. *Black Feminism: Memory and Myth through Salvaging*. // *English Language Notes*, 2019, № 57: 2, 71 – 85.

the uncertain and dangerous future ahead, and on the other – to come to terms with his own unresolved issues; in this sense the one who listens transforms into a safe haven. The effect of this interaction on the younger participant can be seen when Jojo participates in the life-threatening run-in with the police; his will is strengthened by his grandfather's invisible presence manifested through stories and lessons. Besides, as Megan Swartzfager notes: "The intergenerational transmission of stories and of conjure serve the purpose of connecting Jojo with Mam and Pop as well as with more distant ancestors, such as a relative of Pop who was brought to America on a slave ship" (Swartzfager 2020: 318). In other words, this passing on of stories has a secondary aim: to stretch itself back into the past and establish threads for posterity. The younger generation would not feel burdened by the inherited past, but empowered by it.

River's final release from the mental captivity Parchman has imposed on him happens when he decides to finish his story and tell Jojo how he had to kill Richie, so he would not be maimed, lynched and dismantled piece by piece. "Yes, Richie. I'm a take you home, I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child." (Ward 2017b: 255). Richie attempts to escape Parchman, but his plan fails monumentally and he is about to be captured and punished in the most severe way. In his search of a path leading him home, he finds a way to eternity. Death is suggested as one of the manifestations of home several times in the novel; it is the only possible freedom for many slaves and prisoners alike. It seems as though death does not provide Richie with the home he was looking for. He appears in the novel not only as a memory, but also later as a ghost. He haunts Jojo and River's house, searching for a final resting place. "While confined in Parchman after death, Richie can both see and hear "home," or what one might call his final resting place beyond the veil" (Davis-McElligatt 2021: 118). However, being able to tell that it exists does not provide him with the ability to enter it. Rest is found only when he hears River ending his Parchman story and experience.

The current paper was an attempt to examine the conceptual space of Parchman prison in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and to find its complicated association with the ideas of home and slavery. Some of the main points of interest were the young men's path to the prison, the trustee system prevalent during the time of Jim Crow and interpersonal relationships. Parchman left a mark on all the people who entered it and on their families – River cannot let go of his past, while Richie as a ghost

haunts places and individuals. Home remains very close by, but characters are unable to reach it. As a result, they rely on the next best thing – each other; their communion creates a temporary space of belonging even inside the confines of the penitentiary.

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