



At the Crossroads of Race, Gender, and Class: Intersectionality and Black Womanhood in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Abstract: Black women in American literature carry what critics have long separated — race, gender, class — as though these were distinct wounds. They are not. This paper examines Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, unburied, sing* (2017) through Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality and Bell Hooks's politics of domination, arguing that Ward's Leonie is the woman both feminist and racial criticism keep missing — a black mother ground down not by one system of oppression but by several, working together, all at once. Ward's Mississippi is not merely a setting; it is a structure of violence that refuses to pass. The novel's ghosts make this literal. Haunting here is not atmosphere — it is argument. Drawing on Hooks's understanding of domination as simultaneously racial, gendered, and economic, this paper contends that Leonie's destruction is neither personal failure nor racial allegory alone, but the lived consequence of intersecting oppressions that American culture persistently misreads as separate. Ward's fiction insists otherwise. In 1962, Malcolm X observed that the black woman is the most disrespected, most unprotected, and most neglected person in America. Ward's novel proves this remains unfinished business — and that literature, at its most uncompromising, can make visible what criticism has long preferred to keep apart.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Black Womanhood, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Bell Hooks, Jesmyn Ward, African American Literature.

I. Introduction

"The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." Malcolm X delivered these words in 1962 at the Templar Hall in Los Angeles. More than six decades later, Jesmyn Ward's fiction suggests the diagnosis still holds. American literature has never been short of black female characters. What it has been short of is a criticism willing to look at them whole — to resist the habit of pulling race from gender, gender from class, as though these were separable threads rather than a single, suffocating knot. The result has been decades of readings that explain part of a black woman's experience while quietly abandoning the rest.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, published in 2017 and winner of the national book award, arrives into this critical failure with something close to impatience. Set in contemporary Mississippi, the novel follows a fractured family — Jojo, his mother Leonie, his grandparents River and Philomena — across a landscape where the past is not memory but presence, where the dead do not leave, and where being a black woman means carrying burdens that no single theory of oppression has yet learned to weigh correctly. Ward does not write thesis fiction, but her novel thinks — rigorously, angrily, tenderly — about what it costs to be Leonie: black, female, poor, addicted, and loved imperfectly by almost everyone around her.

This paper argues that Leonie represents precisely the figure that mainstream feminist and racial criticism cannot see clearly — a woman whose suffering is not categorical but compounded. Reading the novel through Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality and Bell Hooks's politics of domination, this paper contends that Ward's fiction does what

theory has struggled to do: it holds race, gender, and class together without collapsing them into each other. Furthermore, the paper argues that Ward's deployment of haunting — literal, ancestral, and political — is not a gothic flourish but a feminist argument about the refusal of historical violence to conclude.

II. Theoretical Framework

The critical vocabulary this paper employs begins with Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark essay "mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color" (1991), which demonstrated that black women occupy a position in American society that single-axis frameworks — whether antiracist or feminist — structurally cannot address. Crenshaw's argument was not merely additive; she was not suggesting that one simply add race to gender and arrive at a complete picture. Her point was more unsettling: that the intersection itself produces a distinct experience of oppression, one that neither framework was designed to see. As Crenshaw writes, "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). This is the diagnostic Leonie requires.

Bell Hooks sharpens Crenshaw's diagnosis into something more structural. In *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women And Feminism* (1981), hooks traced the historical erasure of black women from both the feminist movement and racial liberation movements, arguing that this erasure was not oversight but the predictable consequence of what she would later call, in *killing rage* (1995), the "politics of domination" — a system in which race, gender, and class function not as parallel hierarchies but as interlocking ones, each reinforcing the others. Domination, for hooks, is not accidental. It is

maintained precisely because it operates on multiple axes simultaneously, making resistance along any single axis insufficient. Hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin To Center* (1984) that "black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group" (70). Ward's novel, this paper argues, is a fictional inhabitation of that position.

To these two frameworks this paper adds Avery Gordon's concept of haunting from *ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination* (1997). Gordon argues that haunting is not a supernatural curiosity but a social phenomenon — the way in which what a society has done but refuses to acknowledge returns, insistently, in the lives of those it has harmed. "haunting," Gordon writes, "is one of the modalities in which historical violence makes itself known" (18). Ward's ghosts, this paper argues, operate precisely in this register.

Existing scholarship on Ward has addressed her use of the southern gothic, her engagement with black masculinity, and her place in the tradition of African American nature writing. What has received less sustained attention is the specifically intersectional logic of her female characterization — the way Leonie in particular embodies a critique of single-axis critical frameworks. This paper enters the conversation at that gap.

III. Leonie and the Failure of Single-Axis Reading

Leonie is not built for easy sympathy. Ward seems to have decided this early. She is inattentive, addicted, and in a relationship with a white man whose family would rather she did not exist at all. Readers expecting a recognizable black female protagonist — enduring, dignified, holding things

together — will not find her here. That discomfort is deliberate. It is where the novel's real argument starts.

Ward makes this visible from the novel's opening pages. Jojo, Leonie's thirteen-year-old son, has effectively raised himself and his toddler sister Kayla because, as Ward shows us bluntly, "most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's Mostly Gone" (23). It is a single line, but it carries the weight of everything the novel is going to say about Leonie. She is not occasionally absent. She is structurally absent — a mother whose failures are so routine that her children have reorganized their entire emotional lives around them.

And yet Ward refuses to let this stand as simple condemnation. When Leonie snorts cocaine at a party, the novel makes the cause plain:

I bent to the table. Sniffed. A clean burning shot through my bones, and then i forgot. The shoes I didn't buy, the melted cake, the phone call. The toddler sleeping in my bed at home while my son slept on the floor. (35)

The drugs do not make Leonie irresponsible. They make her forget that she already is — and the novel insists on the distinction. There is poverty in those shoes she cannot buy, racial grief in the phone call she cannot make to Michael's white family, and gendered isolation in the silence that surrounds her. The cocaine is not a character flaw. It is a response to a life under compounding pressure.

A reading of Leonie that centers race alone produces a partial figure — a black woman damaged by a racist society, which is true but insufficient. It cannot account for the specific texture of her failure as a mother, or for the way her gender shapes how her community receives her addiction differently than it would a man's. A reading centered on gender alone fares no

better — it recovers her vulnerability to patriarchal violence but loses the specific weight of Mississippi's racial history on her body and her choices. A reading organized around class illuminates her poverty but cannot explain why she is seen the way she is by both black and white characters in the novel.

Crenshaw's Intersectionality does not simply add these readings together. It asks instead what is produced at their crossing — what kind of subject emerges when race, gender, and class arrive simultaneously rather than sequentially. What emerges in Leonie's case is a woman who is legible to almost no one in the novel, including herself. Her relationship with Rick, her white boyfriend whose world was never built to include her. She is not simply a black woman in a relationship with a white man — she is a poor black woman who gets nothing from that relationship, not acceptance from his world, not belonging in her own. In a moment of desperate social navigation, Ward shows Leonie contemplating calling Michael's parents, only to shrink from it: she does not want to be received as merely "his son's black Babymama" (50). She falls between categories because she lives between categories, which is precisely Crenshaw's point.

Ward makes the racial hostility Leonie faces from Michael's family shockingly visible. When Leonie drives past Big Joseph's house hoping for some smallest gesture of acceptance for Michael's children, what she encounters instead is a man who reaches for his rifle. She drives away raising her middle finger, thinking of given: "his arms are crossed on his chest, his smile white in his dark face. We are all laughing" (53). The memory of given — whole, alive, laughing — comes precisely at the moment of Big Joseph's violence. Ward places these two images side by side deliberately. The white man with a rifle and the dead black brother are not separate moments. They are the same story told twice.

The confrontation at big Joseph's house later sharpens this further. When Michael brings Leonie and the children to his parents' home, big Joseph does not bother with subtlety. He calls Leonie a "nigger bitch" and tells Michael he "told you never to sleep" with her (169). What strikes the reader is not the racism itself — that is expected — but the way Leonie processes it. She thinks: "I would throw up everything. All of it out: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs all, bones and muscle, until all that was left was skin. And then maybe that could turn inside out, and I wouldn't be nothing no more" (168). The desire for self-erasure is not weakness. It is the body's honest response to being told, by the family of the man she loves, in front of her children, that she should not exist. No single framework — race, gender, or class alone — can hold the full weight of that moment.

Ward refuses to resolve this. She does not redeem Leonie cheaply, nor does she condemn her. When Pop, her father, looks at her struggling on the road trip, he watches her "like he looks at one of his animals when something's wrong with them" (39) — a look of diagnosis without tenderness, of a man who sees the problem but has long since stopped knowing how to address it. The novel insists that its reader sit with a black woman who cannot be rescued by any single political or critical framework — and that insistence is itself a feminist act.

IV. Bell Hooks and the Architecture of Domination

If Crenshaw gives this paper its diagnostic lens, hooks provides its structural explanation. The question Crenshaw's framework raises — why does Leonie's intersectional position produce such particular devastation — is the question Hooks's politics of domination answers. Domination, for hooks, is not a set of prejudices held by individuals but a self-reproducing architecture, built across centuries and maintained across

generations through institutions, culture, and the internalization of inferiority by the dominated themselves.

Mississippi in Ward's novel is not a backdrop. It is this architecture made visible. Parchman farm — the Mississippi state penitentiary — sits at the center of the novel's geography, and Ward's description of it through rivers' memory is precise: "Parchman the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls" (25). The absence of walls is not freedom. It is a more sophisticated form of containment — the kind that makes the imprisoned internalize the boundaries that trains them to surveil themselves. Hooks would recognize this immediately as domination's most efficient mode: not the violence that marks the body but the conditioning that disciplines the spirit.

River survived Parchman. The novel treats this as both remarkable and quietly gendered. He carries his trauma with a coherence the narrative grants him but withholds from Leonie — and Ward is precise about why. Hooks argued in *Ain't I A Woman* that black men, despite racial oppression, have historically held gender privilege within black communities. That privilege determines who gets to be read as a survivor and who gets read as a wreckage. River endures and is respected. Leonie unravels and is abandoned. Same community, same history, different verdicts. The variable is gender.

Ward is especially alert to how racial violence reproduces itself across generations through black women's bodies. Given, Leonie's brother, is shot dead by a white man who faces no serious consequence: "hunting accident, big joseph told them" (48), and the law collapses into whiteness, as it always has. But the burden of this murder does not fall equally across the family. River grieves with the contained dignity of a patriarch. Philomena plants a tree every year, her grief organized and

ceremonial. Leonie falls apart. She becomes, in the eyes of everyone around her, a cautionary tale rather than a victim — and that reclassification is itself a form of racial and gendered violence. As hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin To Center*, the dominant culture consistently reads black women's responses to oppression as personal pathology rather than political symptom (70).

Philomena adds another layer. she is the family's quiet center — the woman who raises Jojo because Leonie cannot, who tends her garden, who prays to Oya and saint Teresa, and whose endurance is the novel's most familiar figure of black womanhood. But Ward does not romanticize this. Philomena endures because the architecture of her world has left her no other option. Hooks's insight that the myth of the strong black woman is itself a form of domination — a way of naturalizing black women's suffering as strength rather than addressing its causes — resonates here with particular force.

V. Haunting As Feminist Argument

The most formally distinctive element of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is its ghosts. Leonie sees her dead brother given. Jojo encounters Richie, a child who died at Parchman decades before Jojo was born. Ward treats them with the full weight of realist fiction — they speak, they remember, they want things. Understanding why requires stepping outside the gothic tradition and into Avery Gordon's sociological understanding of haunting.

Gordon argues in *Ghostly Matters* that haunting is how societies live with what they have done but will not acknowledge. The ghost is not a remnant of the past — it is the past's insistence on remaining present, on not being filed away into history. "to be haunted," Gordon writes, "is to be tied to historical and social effects" (190). In Ward's Mississippi, the effects in question are specific: the violence of Parchman farm,

the murder of black men and boys who were "supposed to lose" (48), the slow destruction of black families through poverty, incarceration, and grief passed down like inheritance. These are not ancient injuries. They are ongoing ones wearing historical costume.

Richie's ghost is central to this paper's argument. Pop's account of him at Parchman is devastating in its precision: "Richie was the youngest boy I ever saw up in Parchman. There was a couple thousand men separated into work farms over all them acres" (25). He was twelve years old, imprisoned 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" (25). He did not end up at Parchman because he was dangerous. He ended up there because the economic and racial structure of Mississippi made his hunger a crime. His haunting of Jojo is Ward's insistence that this history is not over. Richie himself confirms this when he tells Jojo: "sometimes I think it done changed. And then i sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none. It's like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same" (140).

The tree at the end of the novel, full of ghosts who speak with their eyes, carries the weight of every unanswered atrocity. Ward lists their deaths without softening: "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" (225). These are not metaphors. They are the accumulated dead of American racial and gendered violence, each one unnamed, each one still present. Ward's tree is her most direct feminist argument: that the violence done to black women and black children in America is not individual tragedy but collective and continuing crime.

What makes Richie's haunting particularly precise as a feminist argument is the way it connects individual deaths to structural continuity. When Richie reveals himself to Jojo at the Parchman fields, he speaks with a voice that carries both childhood and historical weight: "i'm going home" (110). He says this repeatedly throughout the novel — to river at Parchman, to Jojo decades later — and each time the words carry a different impossibility. Richie has no home to go to. Parchman took it. The racial and economic structure of Mississippi put him there at twelve years old for stealing food, and the violence inside Parchman ensured he never left. When he appears, and Jojo sees "a dark skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck" leaning into the car window (110), Ward is doing something precise: making the past physically present, refusing the comfortable distance that historical narrative usually provides. Richie is not a symbol. He is a twelve-year-old boy who cannot find his way home, and the reason he cannot is the same Jojo's grandfather spent years at Parchman and the same reason Leonie's brother was shot with no one held to account. The machinery does not change. Only the faces do.

Leonie's haunting by given works differently but makes the same argument. Given appears to her only when she uses drugs — "this given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill" (35) — and Ward's formal insistence here is unmistakable: trauma and its chemical management are inseparable for this woman. The first time given appeared, she was "at a party in the kill, and my brother walked through there with no bullet holes in his chest or in his neck, whole and long-limbed, like always" (49). She is not chasing a high. She is chasing her brother. She is trying to live in a world where given is still alive, because the one where he is dead has given her nothing to survive with.

There is something else worth saying about given's ghost. He appears to Leonie but not to anyone else in the family until the

very end of the novel. That loneliness is deliberate. Leonie carries her grief privately, chemically, invisibly — the way black women have always been expected to carry things. Nobody asks her what she lost when given died. Nobody sits with her in it. The ghost is Ward's way of insisting that Leonie's grief is real, that it has a face and a name, even if the world around her has moved on. A woman whose grief is invisible to everyone except herself is not suffering a personal tragedy. That is a social one. Gordon's framework clarifies why Ward needs ghosts at all. A realist novel about Leonie's life might produce sympathy or condemnation. A haunted one produces something harder to dismiss — the sense that what happened to given, to Richie, to every black person the Mississippi soil holds, is not finished. The ghosts are Ward's refusal to let structural violence stay buried — which is, this paper argues, a profoundly feminist refusal.

VI. Beyond Victimhood — Resistance and Refusal

A paper organized around oppression risks leaving its subjects without agency. Ward does not make this mistake, and this reading should not either.

Jojo is the novel's most sustained figure of refusal. He is thirteen, caught between a mother who cannot mother him and a grandfather who loves him with a ferocity that is partly guilt. He has every reason, by the novel's logic, to be broken. He is not. Ward shows us the texture of his resistance in small, specific moments — the way he holds Kayla through the long car journey, the way he makes her vomit up Leonie's poorly-made medicine because "I knew what Kayla was saying. I knew" (100). He hears the toddler's voice in his head — "I love you, Jojo. Why you make me, Jojo?" (100) — and acts on what he hears, not on what Leonie wants him to do. This is not

heroism. It is a thirteen-year-old boy deciding, quietly, that he will not become what the world around him expects.

River too refuses — not dramatically but persistently. He survived Parchman by holding onto what Parchman could not reach. Pop tells Jojo:

I forgot it all and bent and stood and bent and stood and only thought of my mother. Her long neck, her steady hands, the way she braided her hair forward to cover her crooked hairline. The dream of her was the glow of a spent fire on a cold night: warm and welcoming. It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields. (26)

What Parchman could not take was his knowledge of who he was before it. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), describes this as the capacity of oppressed people to maintain an inner life that domination cannot fully colonize. Collins writes that "oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language of the dominant group" (xii). Ward's characters resist even this — they speak to each other in registers the dominant world cannot hear or will not bother to learn.

Even Leonie, the novel's most damaged figure, carries within her a stubborn refusal to disappear entirely. At the moment of her mother's death, she whispers an invocation — "enter. Dance with us" (215) — calling the old gods into the room to ease Philomena's passage. She does something she has never done before in the novel: she acts as her mother's daughter, drawing on a tradition of black feminine spiritual knowledge passed down through the women in her family across generations. It does not redeem her failures. But it is hers, and it matters. These moments of refusal do not lighten the novel's darkness. Ward is not consoling anyone. But she is insisting,

firmly, that black life is not exhausted by what presses against it.

This is true of Philomena too. Her final days offer the novel's most quietly devastating image of black women's resistance. Dying, in pain, unable to lift herself from the bed, she still insists on agency — on choosing the terms of her own departure. She tells Leonie: "like i drew the veil back so you could walk in this life, you'll help me draw it back so i can walk in the next" (175). The language of the veil is not accidental. it connects Philomena's dying to a tradition of black women's spiritual knowledge — the *mystères*, *oya*, *maman brigitte* — passed down through the women of this family across generations, surviving slavery, Parchman, poverty, and loss. Philomena's final act is not resignation. It is a claim. She is refusing to let her death be something that happens to her, making it instead something she does, on her own terms, drawing on resources that the dominant culture cannot see, cannot tax, and cannot take. That Ward gives Philomena this moment — and makes Leonie the one who helps her through it — is the novel's most intimate feminist statement. Two black women, one dying and one broken, holding a knowledge between them that no amount of domination has managed to erase.

VII. Conclusion

Malcolm X said it in 1962. Ward proves it is still true in 2017. That gap — fifty-five years — is not progress. It is the same wound, still open, still waiting to be addressed. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a novel that knows the structure of black women's oppression from the inside. It does not explain it from a distance. It lives inside it and refuses to pretend that any single framework — racial, feminist, economic — is adequate to what it finds there.

This paper has argued that Leonie is the figure intersectional criticism was built to see — a black woman whose experience of oppression is compounded rather than categorical, and whose literary representation demands a criticism willing to hold multiple frameworks simultaneously without forcing their resolution. Crenshaw names what is at stake. Hooks explains why it persists across generations. Gordon illuminates why Ward needs ghosts to tell this story — because the violence at its center is the kind that realism, left to itself, is tempted to put behind it. the tree full of ghosts at the novel's end — women and men and boys and girls, each one killed by a violence the dominant culture reclassified as accident, or justice, or nothing at all — is Ward's final insistence on this point. They are still there. They are still speaking. The question the novel poses to its reader, and to the critical tradition that has for too long read black women in fragments, is whether anyone is listening.

What Ward's novel ultimately offers African American feminist criticism is not a new answer but a more honest question: not what oppresses black women, which we already know, but what it actually feels like to live at the crossing — where race and gender and class do not take turns but arrive together, every day, without apology. Leonie is Ward's answer to that question. She is not easy to love. She was never meant to be. She was meant to be seen.

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