

Short Communication

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Inherited Family Trauma Model and Its Application in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a polyvocal narrative that touches on death, institutional racism and multi-generational trauma. The novel explores the trials and tribulations of a broken Mississippi family through the perspective of a twelve year old boy named Jojo, his mother Leonie, and a ghost by the name of Richie. Inherited family trauma is at the forefront of this novel as it unveils the effects of slavery and how stress factors and behavioral responses translate across generations. The impermanence of trauma is discovered in multiple parts of the novel including the spirit of Richie who embodies the metaphor of "ghosts from the past" can linger if unresolved. Mark Wolynn's *It Didn't Start With You* affirms the festering of trauma and its ability to translate genetically across generations and create toxic cyclical behavioral responses. From River's killing of a twelve year old boy in Parchman Prison to Leonie's selfdestructive relationship with paraphernalia, there is unignorable evidence of inherited trauma and its stressors carrying from one generation to the next impacting vulnerable, adolescent characters like Jojo and Kayla. Both Wolynn and Ward's text create a conversation on the genetic stressors of ancestral, Black trauma and how figures from *Sing, Unburied, Sing* fit the inherited family trauma model.

Wolynn dissects the different forms of trauma stressors and how they become repressed, unconscious thoughts that become recurrent, subtle expressions of pain during day to day interactions with family and friends. Without the power of awareness, humans are bound to engage in toxic feedback loops of avoidance, anxiety, and overall, emotional distress. Characters presented in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* offer insightful observations of this paradigm. Specifically, characters like River offer exceptional case studies on the impacts of trauma in a racially charged environment like Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. A critical landmark of racial disparity post-Hurricane Katrina. River's responses throughout the novel exemplify the negative impacts of trauma repression and its interference in healing wounds from the generations past. And if previous research affirmed the detrimental genetic and behavioral effects of trauma in Holocaust survivors, what difference would that make for Black communities that are descendants of slavery in the United States? From Jim Crow laws in the deep South to the inequity in Black communities post-Hurricane Katrina, Ward's discourse on trauma transcendence can be analyzed in both a psychological and sociobiological lens.

Three generations, Wolynn states, is how far our emotional and behavioral preprogramming originates (Wolynn 25). By the time humans are conceived, one inherits the compounding cortisol levels of a grandparent (Wolynn 39). Simply, humans inherit the stress from at least three generations prior to their existence. Although DNA is inherited from ones' parents, human have the ability to "turn on" or "off" the expression of these genes dependent on their environment and its stressors. Thus, in environments of instability such as absent familial presence and/or stress factors derived from deficient support systems, a child has less of a possibility to divert from trauma response precursors. Based on the latest research on this topic, labeled epigenetics, Wolynn insightfully references Rachel Yehuda, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She confirms that epigenetics can account for one's inability to emotionally regulate and manage stress. This translates to the microcosm of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as she illustrates Jojo's reaction towards traumatic events as residuals of unhealed trauma from generations before him. In Chapter 3, Jojo's family is en route to pick up his father, Michael, from prison. In the car, it's Jojo's mother, his sister Kayla, and his mother's friend Misty. Misty remarks that the only way to pay for this trip is to make a pitstop at Carlotta and Fred's house to pick up methamphetamine and deliver it to Al, Michael's lawyer. Upon their arrival, Jojo observes the decrepit house and the unsanitary conditions. He notices the ironic nature of the family as the house is filled with boxes of brand new appliances; nonetheless, it is still a broken home with no values or moral framework. After witnessing the brutal beating of Carlotta's child by a bat, Jojo excuses himself to use a bathroom. With no functioning toilet, he uses the outdoor shed. As he crosses the back lawn, he comes across Fred cooking methamphetamine. Instantly, Jojo recognizes the set-up and confirms this moment with memories from the past. He recounts, "I've seen this before, know that smell because when Michael built his lean-to in the woods behind Mam and Pop's house, it looked and smelled like this. The reason he and Leonie fought, the reason he left, the reason he's in jail" (Ward 89). His memory affirms his suspicions and tells the reader in a matter of a few words, Jojo's early exposure to drugs and violence. More notably, it affirms his trauma response when he returns back to his mother and sister to the house: silence. Jojo's choice to be silent and "put away" this memory bears a very similar response to his grandfather, River. Anytime River recounts his past racial traumas at Parchman Prison, he never completes his tale. As his wife, Philomena, calls his memory "a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled

to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased” (Ward 67). His trauma stems from his merciful killing of a young twelve year old boy named Richie. Both River and Richie were placed in the same cell during their time at Parchman. They built a father-son relationship despite their small difference in age and after Richie is discovered to have ran away from the prison. River decides to run behind him and end Richie’s misery to avoid a gruesome death. His inability to recount what transpired at Parchman is what Wolynn labels as “nondeclarative memory”. He writes, “When an event becomes so overwhelming that we lose our words, we cannot... 'declare' the memory in story form... Fragments of the experience go unnamed... and become part of our unconscious” (Wolynn 55). This repressed, unconscious memory and it’s responses is said to be transgenerational inheritance. In consequence, this trauma repression became an innate, but reinforced learned behavior that descendants of River like Jojo effect his way of intaking and processing trauma. Wolynn confirms

this reflective form of behavior with trauma response across generations, he quotes from addictive psychologist Dr. David Sack: “The parent’s trauma... becomes the child’s own and [the child’s] behavioral and emotional issues can mirror those of the parent” (Wolynn 32).

Despite the setbacks presented by River’s characters, Jojo is a figure of resilience in the novel. By the end, he is able to relinquish the repression trauma responses modeled by his grandfather and become a maternal proxy for his little sister Kayla. Jojo is a testament that epigenetics are not a defining marker on one’s life, and through perseverance can a person change the course of their future and their descendants. Wolynn concurs with this phenomenon by writing “traumas inherited or experience[ed] firsthand can not only create a legacy of distress, but also forge a legacy of strength and resilience that can be felt for generations to come” (Wolynn 24) [1,2].

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