

Article

# Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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**Abstract:** In 2016 and 2017, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* both won the National Book Award for fiction, the first time that two African-American writers have won the award in consecutive years. This article argues that both novels invoke African-based spirituality in order to create literary sites of resistance both within the narrative of the respective novels, but also within American culture at large. By drawing on a tradition of authors using African-based spiritual practices, particularly Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork, Whitehead and Ward enter and engage in a tradition of African American protest literature based on African spiritual traditions, and use these traditions variously, both as a tie to an originary African identity, but also as protection and a locus of resistance to an oppressive society. That the characters within the novels engage in African spiritual traditions as a means of locating a sense of "home" within an oppressive white world, despite the novels being set centuries apart, shows that these traditions provide a possibility for empowerment and protest and can act as a means for contemporary readers to address their own political and social concerns.

**Keywords:** voodoo; conjure; African-American literature; protest literature; African American culture; Whitehead; Ward; American literature; popular culture

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And we are walking together, cause we love one another

There are ghosts at our table, they are feasting tonight.

–Alexandra Scott, *Stranger*

Future scholars of African-American literature will surely note that 2016 and 2017 marked an unusual moment in American life and letters: in consecutive years, two novels by younger African-American writers were met with extraordinary critical and commercial success, including but not limited to winning the National Book Award for Fiction. Those two works were Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017). In being awarded the National Book Award for Fiction, Whitehead and Ward join the ranks of notable African-American authors Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*, 1953), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*, 1983), and Charles Johnson (*Middle Passage*, 1991).<sup>1</sup> In addition to the National Book Award, Whitehead's fantastical tale of the escaped slave Cora's harrowing journey northward and Ward's road trip-cum meditation on the reaping of generational violence and racism were both showered with other, innumerable accolades. For instance, *The Underground Railroad* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, was named to *The New York*

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<sup>1</sup> Ward previously won the National Book Award for her 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, making her the first African-American author to win the award twice.

*Times* Best Books List, was selected for Oprah's Book Club, won The Arthur C. Clarke Award, and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was shortlisted for the Women's Prize in Fiction, named as one of Barack Obama's Best Books, and selected as a Book of the Year by *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Book Review*, among other honors.

An additional facet of these novels' importance to African-American cultural and literary history, beyond their many accolades and "crossover appeal", is recognizing that both authors draw on a long tradition of African-based spiritual traditions in African-American literature.<sup>2</sup> Set centuries apart, these works are nevertheless similar in that they both explore the legacy and repercussions of the African diaspora and its effects, although in very different ways. In these explorations, both authors mine their own imaginations as well as practices of African-based spiritual and religious traditions as manifest in both works by earlier African-American authors and the historical record, and in doing so perpetuate a discrete tradition within African-American life and literature. They do this not only to propel their respective plots and characterizations, but also to interrogate what it means to be black in America both historically and in the present. While doing so, the novels examine the ways in which African-based spirituality and supernaturalism can serve as a locus for power, protection and protest in a racially oppressive society.

Of course, there is a long and storied tradition of African-American authors using their work to protest oppression in America. From the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, to the slave narratives of Oudallah Eqiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and others, through the abolitionist essays and speeches of David Walker, Sojourner Truth and Henry Highland Garnet to the sociological work of W.E.B. Du Bois and the fiction, speeches, plays and poetry of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance to James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Jr., Amiri Baraka and June Jordan to the more recent work of Ta-Nehisi Coates and beyond, African-American authors have used their writing to overtly advocate, agitate, beg, demand and scream for equality. A close examination of African-American literature over the last two hundred and fifty years will show that, within this tradition of "protest" literature, there exists a second tradition of authors invoking African-based spiritual traditions variously: as a literary trope, a tie to originary African identity, and most importantly for this essay, as a means of empowerment for characters to control or punish, or as protection from and resistance to a racially oppressive society. As such, Colson Whitehead and Jesmyn Ward are some of the most recent African-American writers whose work draws on African-based spiritual traditions resulting in literary and political sites of resistance to an oppressive, hegemonic-driven white cultural impulse. In doing so, these novels speak to a new generation looking for historical and literary models in which political and cultural resistance can be found.

Many critics, and even Whitehead and Ward themselves, perhaps thinking of the fantastical elements of the two novels, have tended to refer to *The Underground Railroad* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as works of "magical realism". In a *New York Times* profile of Whitehead, for example, Jennifer Schuessler prompts Whitehead to claim, "I went back and reread [Gabriel Garcia Marquez's] *100 Years of Solitude* and it made me think about what it would be like if I didn't turn the dial up to 10, but kept the fantasy much more matter-of-fact" (Schuessler 2016). This reflection indicates Whitehead's conscious decision to create the novel in the "magical realist" genre with the addition of elements and language of conjure and hoodoo that are interspersed throughout the novel. Additionally, in an interview in *Nylon*, Jesmyn Ward is asked, "*Sing* was your first foray into magical realism, how did you go about

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<sup>2</sup> "African-based spiritual traditions" refer to the practices of Voodoo, conjure, rootwork and hoodoo as practiced in the United States. Based on western African religions, these practices have been defined variously by different practitioners and scholars as they adapted from African practice to life in the Caribbean and the North American mainland, evolving into different regional and cultural practices. See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Yvonne Chireau, *Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic* and Jeffrey E. Anderson, *The Voodoo Encyclopedia: Magic, Ritual and Religion, Conjure in African-American Society and Hoodoo, Voodoo and Conjure: A Handbook* for more detailed definitions of the terms and how they have evolved practically and linguistically in the Americas.

approaching that world? Was it intimidating?" She replies, "It was definitely intimidating. I did a lot of reading about voodoo and hoodoo, and I did a lot of reading about that spiritual tradition because that's what Mam practices. And some of that is informing Richie's experience of the afterlife" (Bryant 2017). This response indicates that Ward, while asserting the importance of Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork in the novel, is nevertheless subsuming these beliefs and practices within the generic characterization of magical realism put forth by the interviewer, an impulse shared by Whitehead in interviews about *The Underground Railroad*.

I argue, then, that these characterizations of both novels lack nuance and are incomplete. Rather, it is more accurate to recognize and characterize both novels as part of the body of African-based spiritualist fiction, rather than as works of magical realism. For while "magical realism" has certainly broken free of geographical constraints and is used by authors worldwide, it is generally associated with Latin American authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, Alejo Carpentier, Jorge Amado and Jorge Luis Borges, though African American authors like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Charles Johnson have also written within the genre. African-based spiritual fiction is defined here as African-American realist fiction with African-based spiritual and religious elements (particularly Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork) incorporated into the universe of the work. This genre deserves recognition as a distinctly African-American literary tradition whose origins in the Americas predate the founding of the United States.

Using the aforementioned spiritual traditions as a means and model for resisting physical and psychological violence, cultural annihilation and institutional racism in the Americas has been present since the first slaves were transported to the New World via the Middle Passage.<sup>3</sup> These beliefs and practices were an important part of both slaves' lived experience and of the African-American literary tradition they initiated soon after their forced arrival. Both *The Underground Railroad* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* clearly draw on earlier works by African-American authors who themselves reference African-based spiritual practices and, in doing so, consciously continue a tradition that reaches back hundreds of years. In perpetuating this tradition, Whitehead and Ward provide differing perspectives and prescriptions for ways that African-based spiritualism, emerging from an historic context requiring urgent and collective resistance to institutionalized racism, can lead to black liberation, albeit in very different ways.

One indicator of *The Underground Railroad's* place within this tradition can be found in a series of interviews that Colson Whitehead gave surrounding the release of *The Underground Railroad*. In them, many interviewers, and Whitehead himself, highlight the research that he conducted in preparation for writing the novel. For example, Whitehead explains to Jason Parham from *Fader*:

The actual slave narratives served as the foundation for the book, some of the most famous ones being Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Jacobs's. Harriet Jacobs was a slave in North Carolina and hid seven years in an attic until she could get safe passage out. That was the inspiration for the North Carolina section [of the book]. The U.S. government paid writers to interview former slaves in the 1930s. These were people who had been on the plantation when they were kids or teenagers. Writers collected these oral testimonies—some of them are a paragraph long, some are ten pages—and they gave me a real foundation with regard to the variety of slave life. (Parham 2016)

Similarly, in conversing with Oprah Winfrey after *The Underground Railroad* was selected to be part of her eponymous book club, Whitehead responds to Winfrey's assertion of, "you took a lot of that detail from the slave narratives you read in the Library of Congress" with "Yes, and I didn't exaggerate. In the 1930s, the government paid writers to interview 80- and 90-year-old former slaves, and I read those accounts. I came away realizing—not surprisingly—that many slave masters were

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<sup>3</sup> See (Rucker 2001).

sadists who spent a lot of time thinking up creative ways of hurting people.” (Winfrey 2016). These are only two assertions (of many) attesting to the historical accuracy regarding the portrayals of slavery that Whitehead and his interviewers make about the novel. In fact, on the Acknowledgments page of *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead thanks: “Franklin D. Roosevelt for funding the Federal Writer’s Project, which collected the life stories of slaves in the 1930s, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, obviously” as well as “The work of [historians] Nathan Huggins, Stephen Jay Gould, Edward E. Baptiste, Eric Foner, Fergus Bordewich and James H. Jones was very helpful” (Whitehead 2016). The concerted efforts to meld the historical accuracy of descriptions in the novel with the fantastical idea of a literal underground railroad that carries the teenaged Cora from the Randall plantation in Georgia through the horrors of Whitehead’s imagined America is indicated by both photographs of enslaved people, and of plantations that were published as part of his interview with Oprah Winfrey. Additionally, each chapter of the novel begins with a facsimile of a notice for a runaway slave, which lends additional verisimilitude to the novel. As a metaphor, Cora’s underground transit allows Whitehead to show “that the story of slavery is fundamentally the story of America, and he uses Cora’s journey to observe our nation” (Schulz 2016). And this observation is terrifying, for as the railroad conductor Lumbly tells Cora, “If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, you’ll find the true face of America’ [however] ... There was only darkness outside the windows on her journey, and only ever would be darkness” (Whitehead 2016, pp. 262–63). One question the novel asks then is if all is “darkness” for people of African descent in the America, how can resistance and light be found?

It is interesting to note that in the published interviews that Whitehead has given about the novel, African-based religious and spiritual practices are barely mentioned, though both he and some interviewers make direct connections with both past and current civil rights protests, which do touch on African-based spiritual practices.<sup>4</sup> For all of the literary and historical references that showcase his deep research into the antebellum south on which incidents and characterizations in the novel are based, the lack of public discussion around African-based spiritualism in the novel is a curious and glaring omission. While seemingly neither central to the plot nor necessary for the operation of the metaphor-cum-machinery of the railroad itself, strands of African-based spiritual beliefs and practices are nevertheless important elements to both the story of *The Underground Railroad* and in the stories and lives of the figures, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, that Whitehead points to as inspirations for the novel.

In Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic: Religion and the African-American Conjuring Tradition*, she notes, “[Despite] African religious heritage [being] dramatically attenuated ... the gods did not die. While Africans were unable to replicate their religious institutions, they usually created new, sometimes clandestine traditions that served their collective needs” (p. 41). In *The Underground Railroad*, these traditions, based on Whitehead’s acknowledged research, are apparent and pervasive both on the Randall plantation and in Cora’s consciousness, though Whitehead makes their efficacy ambiguous. As the novel opens, Cora is a teenaged motherless slave on the Randall plantation in Georgia. Her mother, it is believed, escaped shortly after Cora’s birth and disappeared into legend as the only slave to have successfully escaped the Randall plantation despite the efforts of the notorious slavecatcher Ridgeway, who later obsessively pursues Cora during her own escape. Though we are told that “Randall forbade religion on his plantation to eliminate the distraction of deliverance” (p. 130), African-based spirituality and practices are nevertheless present and practiced amongst the enslaved population. In the description of the harsh life on the Randall plantation, the first mention of the

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<sup>4</sup> In a *New York Magazine* interview with Whitehead by Kachka (2016), Whitehead is asked, “You must have been starting your research just as Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson. Did that, and subsequent shootings, fuel the story in any way?” to which Whitehead reminisces about the killings of Yusaf Hawkins, Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpers while growing up in New York City.

supernatural is a casual allusion to a dispute between two women in “The Hob”, the slave cabin where the mentally, physically and psychically damaged slaves are exiled, and in which Cora resides:

The Hob women were seven that year. Mary was the oldest. She was in Hob because she was prone to fits. Foaming at the mouth like a mad dog, writhing in the dirt with wild eyes. She had feuded for years with another picker named Bertha, who finally put a curse on her. Old Abraham complained that Mary’s affliction dated back to when she was a pickaninny, but no one listened to him. By any reckoning, these were nothing like those she had suffered in her youth. (Whitehead 2016, p. 35)

This curse, while not particularly relevant to Cora’s later journey, is important in that it establishes African supernaturalism as an everyday part of Randall plantation life. And Bertha’s curse of Mary, the effectiveness of which is doubted by Old Abraham, demonstrates that African-based spiritual practices at times “articulated hostilities within black Americans’ own communities” (Chireau 2003, p. 57). This is significant because it establishes a separate belief system from that of the white power structure on the plantation which “forbade” religion. The enslaved population nevertheless rebelliously persist in their spiritual practices as a way of life outside of the parameters set by the Randalls. Old Abraham’s doubts about the curse are dismissed as the community concludes that, despite Mary’s previous physical afflictions, Bertha’s curse certainly had the effect of making it worse. In this episode, Whitehead is drawing, despite the ambiguity made present by Old Abraham’s doubts, on the tradition of what Yvonne Chireau calls “harming magic.” She writes, “The use of the supernatural for causing affliction ... was well known among African American slaves and, later, among their descendants” (p. 60). Indeed, a perusal of slave narratives and WPA interviews will bear out the pervasive belief and practice of both “harming magic” as well as the use of African-based supernaturalism as a means of protection and healing within plantation communities. And, as Whitehead indicates, it is not only the enslaved population or free blacks who utilized these “harming” practices.

In the wake of Cora’s mother, Mabel’s escape, some years before the novel begins (“Cora fell asleep nestled against her mother’s stomach and never saw her again”) (Whitehead 2016, p. 40), no effort is spared in her retrieval: “The bills and fliers circulated for hundreds of miles. Free negroes who supplanted their living catching runaways combed through the woods ... Patrollers and posses of low whites harassed and bullied ... But the hounds came up empty, as did their masters” (p. 40). In addition to these secular methods of attempting to recapture his property, Old Randall attempts to appropriate and make use of African American magic to prevent the escape of any additional slaves:

Randall retained the services of a witch to goofer his property so that no one with African blood could escape without being stricken with hideous palsy. The witch woman buried fetishes in secret places, took her payment, and departed in her mule cart. There was a hearty debate in the village over the spirit of the goofer. Did the conjure apply only to those who had an intention to run or to all colored persons who stepped over the line? A week passed before the slaves hunted and scavenged in the swamp again. That’s where the food was.<sup>5</sup> (p. 41)

First, it is important to note here that the witch woman, presumably black, is hired and reimbursed for her “fetishes” by the white plantation owner Randall. The novel doesn’t indicate if Randall is a true believer in “goofering” or is instead counting on the belief of his slaves to help prevent their

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<sup>5</sup> According to Jeffrey Anderson in *Conjure in African American Society*: “Conjure terminology with African origins was rare outside of the Latin cultural area. *Goopher*, used in such combinations as *goopher doctor* or *goopher dust*, was the exception to the rule. Employed in coastal Georgia and the Carolinas to designate items derived from the dead or persons dealing with them, it most likely developed from the Kongo word *kufwa*, meaning “to die” (p. 28). In addition, from Chireau in *Black Magic*: “Remarkably, as late as the 1890s, some black American Conjurors were conducting African-based rituals such as animal sacrifice. Even the lexicon that came to be associated with conjuring in the United States included terms like ‘toby,’ ‘goopher,’ and ‘mojo,’ which emanated from West and Central African linguistic antecedents” (p. 55).

escape, but that the curse would affect only those with “African blood” would indicate the while the latter is probable, the former is possible.<sup>6</sup> That the slaves on Randall plantation debate whether the goofer will afflict only those who leave the property in attempting to escape, or for any reason whatsoever, speaks to Randall’s and by extension, all slave owners’ attempts to control their enslaved populations physically, mentally and psychologically. However, that the fear only lasted a week before the Randall slaves ventured into the swamps to supplement their meagre portions indicates that the physical impulse towards survival overcomes any fear they may have of the witch woman’s curse and, by extension, the law of the plantation and all of the white institutional social, cultural and legal powers it represents. In this case, the white power structure’s attempts at appropriating African American spiritual beliefs and using them for their own ends (seen later in the example of Ridgeway and his father) is defeated by the oppressed population’s drive for survival. This is exemplified not only by the escape of Cora, Caesar and Lovey from Randall plantation, but also by the earlier escape attempt of Big Anthony who “braved the witch woman’s goofer without incident and made it twenty-six miles before he was discovered snoozing in a hayloft” (p. 44). Although eventually caught, that Big Anthony was not intimidated by the goofer, nor struck with palsy, would seem to indicate that Whitehead views the efficacy of the goofer with some suspicion. Though the goofer’s lack of power might be also explained by it originally emanating from a white source—the witch woman hired by Old Randall, acting as his proxy.

Whitehead’s use of the term “gopher” and the appearance of a witch woman hired to protect the economic health of the Randall plantation is an obvious echo of Charles Chesnutt’s conjure stories, particularly “The Goophered Grapevine.” In Chesnutt’s story, first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1887, the ex-slave Uncle Julius attempts to prevent John and Annie, northern carpetbaggers coming south to invest after the Civil War, from purchasing and cultivating a vineyard on the former McAdoo plantation in North Carolina. Uncle Julius does this, in part, by telling them a tale of “The Goophered Grapevine.” As he tells it, the slaves on the McAdoo plantation were so fond of the scuppernong grapes grown there that “ole Mars Dugal’ fix’ up a plan ter stop it” by hiring Aunt Peggy who “could wuk de mos’ powerfuller’ kin’ er gopher-could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make ‘em des dwinel away en die ...” (Chesnutt 2012, pp. 7–8). The ritual performed by Aunt Peggy has the desired effect of the slaves leaving the vines alone, except for the unfortunate Henry, who eats the cursed grapes and waxes and wanes in season as the vineyard ripens and withers. Robert Stepto writes that, “‘The Goophered Grapevine’ establishes the point that whites and blacks both may seek the services of the conjure woman” (Stepto xii), pointing to a literary precedent for Whitehead’s witch-woman. Unlike Aunt Peggy’s curse, however, Uncle Julius’ story is not effective, and John and Annie purchase the McAdoo plantation, discovering that Uncle Julius had been living on the property, and “derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines ... though whether it inspired the gopher story I am unable to state” (Chesnutt 2012, p. 14). Although not mentioned by Whitehead in any interviews or on the Acknowledgements page as inspiration, the similarities between “Aunt Peggy” of “The Goophered Grapevine” and the “witch woman” of *The Underground Railroad* are striking. Additionally, both texts have white plantation owners attempt to use African-based religious belief to their own benefit, only to have these attempts ultimately fail. Like the witch woman’s curse in *The Underground Railroad*, Uncle Julius’ relation of the curse also fails to have the desired effect, bringing into question the efficacy of these beliefs in these two stories. This indicates that when spirituality, whether African-based or not, is used against an oppressed black population, the drive for survival and self-sufficiency are more powerful, and rejecting the appropriation of spirituality when used as a means of repression by a white power structure can be a driving impulse towards physical and psychological liberation.

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<sup>6</sup> Chireau notes that though “...belief in the power of black Conjure practitioners transcended racial boundaries. This would not be strange. Given that similar traditions had also circulated among segments of the Anglo American population...Fears of malevolent spiritual harming were still prevalent among whites in the antebellum era” (p. 19).

This notion is repeated in the second mention of “goofer” in the novel, which occurs when Cora is at the utopian Valentine Farm in Indiana. There, finally beginning to feel free, Cora attends school and spends time reading in Valentine’s library. In describing two “eager runaways more ignorant than she was ... [who] ran their fingers over the books as if the things were goofered, hopping with magic” (p. 240), Whitehead again references African spiritual beliefs, while seemingly questioning their veracity. Here, the belief is positively associated with literacy and education, rather than sickness and punishment, and comes immediately after a discussion Cora has with her teacher about the Declaration of Independence and the promise it holds. The reverent handling and wonderment of the books by the two unnamed runaway slaves is reminiscent of the trope of the “talking book” initiated by James Gronniosaw in *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770) and repeated by Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* as well as in other slave narratives. The respect for education and realization of its vital importance to liberation in this scene seems to be a reference to Frederick Douglass, who, on Valentine Farm, appears thinly veiled as the abolitionist speaker Elijah Lander. According to historian Manisha Sinha, however, Lander represents not merely Douglass, but an amalgam of abolitionists:

The figure of Elijah Lander, whose lecture at Valentine’s farm is a highpoint, does not just represent the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, as many reviewers have speculated, but the entire interracial abolitionist movement ... Lander like the abolition movement is interracial, like David Walker he has published an *Appeal*, like William Lloyd Garrison he has authored a “Declaration of the Rights of the American Negro”, run afoul of Maryland law, and been nearly lynched in the streets of Boston, and like Douglass, whom he most resembles, he is a skillful orator famous on the abolitionist lecture circuit. (Sinha 2016)

If, for all intents and purposes, Lander “most represents” Douglass, it should be noted that the fictional biography that Whitehead gives Lander is absent of any African-based supernaturalism. This is important because in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, one of the most important scenes in the autobiography, indeed in Douglass’ own mythos, is the young Douglass’ physical altercation with the slave-breaker Edward Covey. As Douglass tells it, he is given a talisman by Sandy, an older slave who tells Douglass that if he keeps the talisman, a “certain root” (Douglass 1999, p. 66), on his right side, no harm will come to him. As Douglass recounts, he returns to battle with Covey and defeats the slave-breaker, predicating the momentous victory by telling his audience, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (p. 63). In this instance, African supernaturalism is a key factor is not only Douglass’ physical victory, but also his sense of identity, as he is liberated from his identity of “slave”, and embraces the role of “man”, helped along by the wisdom and power bestowed by the old conjurer Sandy.

The dichotomy presented on the Valentine Farm, that of African-based spirituality being subsumed within the American impulse presented in the novel (a complicated admixture of belief in Manifest Destiny, thrift, self-sufficiency, meritocracy, racism, the promise of “liberty” and the reality of slavery) is foreshadowed by the removal of any allusion to Douglass’ African magically-based battle with Covey, that is so central to Douglass’ legacy. In Whitehead’s fictional account of Lander’s youth, he is a precocious scholar, a musical prodigy, and no mention is made of any African-based education, religious or otherwise. Therefore, yet again, Whitehead provides a somewhat ambiguous take on African-based spirituality on the Valentine Farm. Here, it seems, while allusions to African spiritual beliefs exist as a frame of reference for Cora and other runaway slaves from the south; a way to perceive and make sense of a foreign item, true “magic” lies in the promise of an educated, interracial society living in harmony. However, Whitehead shows that, in America, this dream is temporary and seemingly futile. Through the ultimate destruction of Valentine Farm by a group of white farmers (possibly tipped off by Mingo, an upwardly mobile member of the community who preaches a Booker T. Washington-like gospel of thrift and economic advancement), who murder Elijah Lander and Cora’s almost-lover Royal,

Whitehead shows that the dream of equality predicated on the promises of the Founding Fathers in America is a futile one, undone time and again by racism and its associated violence.

This subsumption of African spirituality into the “American imperative” is exemplified in the novel by the slavecatcher Ridgeway, who pursues Cora throughout her escape. Described as hulking and six-and-a-half feet tall, Ridgeway is given a brief biography that describes his evolution from blacksmith’s son to patroller to slave-catcher extraordinaire. In his example, Whitehead transposes attributes of African spirituality into the elder Ridgeway’s forge, appropriating the language and imagery of Voodoo and conjure into a distinctly American iteration. For example, we are told of Ridgeway’s father, “the sunset glow of molten iron bewitched him, the way the color emerged in the stock slow and then fast, overtaking it like an emotion, the sudden pliability and restless writhing of the thing as it waited for its purpose. His forge was a window into the primitive energies of the world” (Whitehead 2016, p. 73). The descriptive language of the forge here could easily be a description of Damballah, the most important of the Vodoun loa who in Vodou theology is usually rendered as serpent-like and is the primordial giver of life. Instead of his “fire god” being used towards beneficial ends, however, the elder Ridgeway worships the utility of the metal that comes from the earth, rather than the material itself: “blacker than an African devil [from soot] ... It was his mission to upset, mash, and draw out the metal into the useful things that made society operate: nails, horseshoes, plows, knives, guns. Chains. Working the spirit, he called it” (Whitehead 2016, p. 73). The appropriation of the term “working the spirit” by the elder Ridgeway (who takes and reimagines it from the Native American idea of a “Great Spirit” he picked up from a “half-breed”) is telling here. It cannot be coincidental that this term shares the title of Joseph Murphy’s 1994 book-length study of African diasporic religions that considers Haitian Vodou, Candomble in Brazil, Santeria, Revival Zion and the Black Church in the US, and is very close to Houston Baker’s 1991 study of Afro-American women’s writing, *Workings of the Spirit* (the second chapter of which is entitled: “Working of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black Women’s Creativity”).

By having the Irish-American Ridgeway take the language and imagery from African spirituality and repurpose them to make knives, guns and chains, and promise his son, the budding slave-catcher, that he, too, would one day, “find his spirit”, Whitehead is indicating that the power of African spirituality in America is being actively “repurposed” into oppressive anti-black ends. This repurposing, it would seem, necessitates the eradication of African-based spiritual beliefs. Ridgeway tells Cora: “I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription—the American imperative” to which Cora replies, “I have to visit the outhouse” (p. 222), an utterance in of itself a minor rebellion against white appropriation of an African-based spiritual heritage.

However, this neither means that all is lost for people of African descent in America nor that African-based spirituality has no redemptive value as a source of political and social resistance. For despite Cora’s journey through an American hell-scape full of betrayal and death, she ultimately does escape and we learn that her mother did not abandon her to her fate on the Randall plantation. The next-to-last chapter of the novel, “Mabel”, in which we learn that Cora’s mother had planned to return to her daughter on the Randall plantation but was killed by a snake in the swamps, is followed by an imitation-runaway notice for Cora that resembles the authentic ones that appear elsewhere in the novel. This bulletin asserts that Cora “RAN AWAY from her legal but not rightful master ... She has stopped running ... SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY” (p. 298). After the massacre at Valentine Farm, Cora is captured by Ridgeway. In the final chapter, however, she manages not only to escape, but also to severely injure the slave-catcher in the process. As she powers her way “into northness” down a final tunnel in a handcar, leaving a dying Ridgeway asking his underling to “Let me start again”, Cora leaves Ridgeway’s “American imperative” behind (p. 303). Ultimately, the track ends and Cora emerges from the underground and is picked up by Ollie, an “older -negro man” (p. 306) with kind eyes who is part of a wagon train going first to St. Louis, and then to California.

The novel ends with Cora wondering, “where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him” (p. 306). Here, then, is Whitehead’s view of liberation in *The Underground Railroad*. Like Cora, Ollie is a former slave and that he picked her up while the previous wagons driven by whites did not speak to a message of community and racial solidarity that would seem to lean towards Whitehead’s model of resisting racism in America. While African-based spirituality may be weakened through appropriation and mis-used as a liberationist theology in *The Underground Railroad*, there is a sense that no matter how it is utilized, it is part of a shared history. And this historic community (indicated by Ollie’s horseshoe-shaped brand on his neck and the revelation that Mabel didn’t escape and abandon Cora but was instead killed in the swamp by a snake), can overcome oppression if it stays together. As Ollie and Cora head to St. Louis, “or, perhaps, Ferguson, MO., present-minded readers might find themselves thinking” (Schuessler 2016), the ability to resist and even retain hope, partially informed by African-based spirituality, remains possible. Or, perhaps, we can look at the words of the author himself who, “when accepting the National Book Award, [encouraged] his audience to, ““be kind to everybody, make art, and fight the power”—a phrase he said could be remembered with a mnemonic device: B.M.F., or bad motherfucker” (Da Costa 2016).

For characters in *The Underground Railroad*, the potency of Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork on their own terms is questionable, but are nevertheless part of a liberation based on shared experience. However, for the family of Ward (2017) *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, there is no doubt of the reality and power of these practices. In presenting Mam, Pop, Jojo, Kayla and Leonie, Ward shows how African-based supernaturalism can serve to protect and heal even the most traumatized and dysfunctional communities. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* tells the story of Leonie, her children Jojo and Kayla and her white friend Misty as they travel from Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, to Parchman prison in the northern part of the state to pick up Michael, Jojo and Kayla’s white father, upon his release for drug-related crimes.

As they journey, the family literally faces its past, as the ghosts of Ritchie, a young boy whom Pap knew (and mercifully killed before he could be horrifically tortured during an attempted escape) at Parchman years earlier, and Given, Leonie’s murdered brother, appear and interact with Leonie, Jojo and Kayla. The story of Richie and Given being helped “across the waters” to their eternal “home” is one thread of the supernatural narrative in the novel: one used extensively by Ward and is related to the strands of Voodoo, conjure, rootwork and hoodoo that are presented in the rest of the novel.<sup>7</sup> For as they journey to pick up Michael, the family comes face to face with racism, police brutality and their past, and reveal how African-based spiritual practices can empower them in a racist society and help create and maintain familial ties, fostering a sense, for most of the characters, of communal belonging.

Based upon on their names (Mam’s given name is Philoméne, for example) and some of their worship, readers can surmise that the family is partially of Haitian French or Creole backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Despite living in contemporary Mississippi, and being very much of their distinctly American time and place, there are multiple African-based spiritual traditions presented throughout the course of the novel. Leonie, for example, the daughter of Mam and Pop and mother of Jojo and Kayla, is physically and emotionally abusive to her children and abuses drugs. Despite her struggles, her early education in African-based religious and healing traditions never leave her, and when she practices them, she “becomes” a part of the family. In an early scene between Leonie and Mam, who is cancer-stricken and bed-ridden, Mam recounts a childhood memory of midwife Marie-Therese telling Mam that she, “had the seed of a gift. With my mama panting in the other room, Marie-Therese took her time, put her

<sup>7</sup> In “Hoodoo in America,” Zora Neale Hurston writes: “At present time there is another influence which is evident in Negro hoodoo in certain districts. This is spiritualism. The dead, and communication with the dead, play traditionally a large part in Negro religions. Wherever West African beliefs have survived in the New World, this place of the dead has been maintained ... and is often closely combined with hoodoo practices” (Hurston 1931, p. 319).

<sup>8</sup> The names Philoméne, Marie-Therese, and references to Marie Laveau, Loko (the loa of healing and plants in Haitian Vodou) and the “*mystère*,” all indicate that Mam is practicing a form of Haitian Vodou, most likely emanating from New Orleans and practiced in Mississippi and the Gulf South.

hand on my heart, and prayed to the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, that I would live long enough to see whatever it was I was meant to see" (Ward 2017, p. 40). In this example, the syncretic worship of an African female water deity with the Catholic Virgin Mary speaks to the duality of the central characters who are themselves struggling between two worlds: black and white, impoverished and affluent, imprisoned and free, leaving and remaining home. Ultimately, Ward suggests, African-spiritual practices offer characters in the novel protection, relief and the key to discovering a sense of identity through their usage. Mam tells Leonie that the ability to "see" and "hear" what most do not, including the thoughts of animals and internal voices of both people and ghosts, "runs in the blood, like silt in river water ... Rises up over the water in generations ... it skips from sister to child to cousin. To be seen. And used" [emphasis mine] (p. 40). For Mam, Pop, Jojo and Kayla, the use of their supernatural abilities and African-based spiritual practices to protect their loved ones and create a space for healing and homecoming is vital in sustaining them amidst poverty and heartbreak. For Leonie, riven by anger and loss, these practices are powerful enough to draw her back into her spiritual heritage in order to perform the deathbed ritual for Mam, but are not strong enough to keep her there, as, immediately following Mam's death, she absconds with Michael, leaving Jojo and Kayla in Pop's care.

One facet of protection (and indicator of Leonie's tense relationship with her spiritual heritage) in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is found in the use of the natural world to heal. As Chireau writes, "Many African Americans saw the roles of 'natural' healers and supernatural doctors as overlapping, even as they drew a distinction between natural and supernatural forms of illness" (Chireau 2003, p. 96). The "overlapping" role of healer is tested as the family drives to Parchman to pick up Michael. As Leonie, Misty, Jojo and Kayla drive north, the toddler Kayla becomes sick and vomits repeatedly. For Leonie, despite her struggles with drugs, her violence towards her children and troubled relationship with Michael, her early education in the healing power of rootwork remains. After pulling their car over after a vomiting spell, Leonie muses that, "Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world" (p. 102). A rendering of her education complements this memory: Starting when I was seven, Mama would lead me out in the woods around the house for walks, and she'd point out plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt ... *That right there is cow parsnip...You can make a decoction for cold and flu. And if you make them into a poultice, you can ease and heal bruises, arthritis, and boils...On our way back to the house with the day's haul, she quizzed me*" (pp. 102–3).

Leonie's recollection here is followed by her searching for milkweed, only coming away with less effective wild blackberries to ease Kayla's upset stomach. Leonie concludes, "This is the kind of world it is. The kind of world that gives you a blackberry plant, a doughy memory, and a child that can't keep nothing down" (p. 105). The bitterness and disappointment articulated by Leonie in the "world" and the lack of healing offered by it is later redeemed at Mam's deathbed. However, this episode does show that the tradition of rootwork is both contemporaneously used and, while not perfect, is nevertheless remains. And if this tradition, existing outside of the modern medical world, can't solve every problem, there is no denying its potency and power.

If Mam has instructed Leonie in rootwork as a way of both passing on traditions and giving her a way to protect and heal in the modern world, Pap serves as a similar mentor to Jojo. Early in their journey, as Jojo is searching for a dry shirt in his bag after being caught in a downpour, he finds, "a small bag, so small two could fit in the palm of my hand ... it's smooth, and warm, soft to my touch. Feels like leather, and it's tied together with a sinewy leather strip." Inside the bag, he discovers: a white feather smaller than my pinkie finger, tipped with blue and a slash of black. Something that at first looks like a small chip of white candy, but when I pick it up and hold it close to my face, it's some kind of animal tooth, lined with black in the chewing grooves, sharp like a canine. Whatever animal it came from knew blood, knew how to tear knotty muscle. Then I see a small gray river rock, a perfect little dome. I swirl my pointer finger into the dark of the sack, searching, and pull out a piece of paper, rolled thin as fingernail. In slanted, shaky script, in blue ink: *Keep this close* (pp. 70–71).

This gris-gris bag, given to Jojo by Pop, has its first trial when Leonie and Misty decide to visit a drug dealer and buy methamphetamine on their way to pick up Michael. When they arrive, a barking dog in the yard unnerves Jojo, and as he wanders the property, he “fingers” the bag in his pocket, “wondering if that tooth is a raccoon’s. If it makes me so quiet and quick that even the dog won’t hear me when I circle around to the front of the house and ease inside” (p. 89). Here, Jojo channels the power of the objects inside the gris-gris bag for protection, and, in this instance, it works and he is not molested by the dog.

The power of the gris-gris bag is tested a second time in a scene that speaks to the high-visibility instances of police brutality that have occurred against black people in recent years. After picking Michael up from prison, the group’s car is pulled over by a white police officer. In a panic, Leonie swallows the bag of methamphetamine that they had purchased earlier before the officer can search the car. The officer makes everyone get out the car and Leonie watches: It’s easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer ... he’s just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain’t nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can’t ... I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. I shake. When I open my eyes again, Jojo’s still whole. Now on his knees, the gun pointing at his head” (pp. 163–64).

While this is happening, Jojo is thinking:

The man telling me sit, like I’m a dog. “Sit”. So I do, but then feel guilty for not fighting, for not doing what Kayla is, but then I think about Richie and then I feel Pop’s bag in my shorts, and I reach for it. Figure if I could feel the tooth, the feather, the note, maybe I could feel those things running through me. Maybe I wouldn’t cry. Maybe my heart wouldn’t feel like it’s a bird, ricocheted off a car midflight, stunned and reeling. (p. 170)

This terrifying encounter with the police is reminiscent of the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile and dozens of other young black men killed by police officers in high-profile incidents in recent years, and that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement. In this scene, however, Jojo is uninjured, saved perhaps by the power of the ghosts that haunt the family and the gris-gris bag. The tense encounter ends when Kayla, after silently communing with Given-not-Given, the ghost of her deceased uncle, vomits on the police officer while the apparition looks on applauding. Afterwards, “Michaela crawls to Jojo, and the officer yanks at Jojo’s pocket, pulls out a small bag Jojo had, and looks within it before shoving it back in Jojo’s face like it’s a rotten banana peel ... ‘Go home’, he says ... ‘Boy had a damn rock in his pocket’” (p. 166). The drastic misunderstanding displayed here, reminiscent of so many real-life encounters, thankfully ends with no physical violence. However, that Jojo is not only unarmed, but that his protective talisman is regarded as a “damn rock” by the potentially deadly agent of the state, speaks to the wide cultural differences between Jojo, Pop, Leonie, Kayla and the deadly white power structure they must survive within, here embodied by the young police officer. Later, after they return home, Pop asks Jojo if he found the bag and asks, “Did it work? It’s a gris-gris bag.” Jojo’s response of “I think so. We made it. Got stopped by the police though” speaks to the efficacy of the bag. Like with Frederick Douglass’ example, Jojo’s gris-gris bag, coupled with, or perhaps inspiring his bravery and defiance in the face of a deadly white entity, prevents physical injury and even death. In addition, Pop adds, “it’s the only way I could send a little of me with ya’ll” (p. 221), indicating, like with Mam’s earlier instruction to Leonie, Pop’s African-based spiritual traditions are not mere metaphors, but a way to protect, resist and survive in a hostile world.

One of the culminating and most heart-wrenching scenes in the novel is the death of Mam. After returning from Parchman, and a violent altercation with Michael’s racist and disapproving father, the family returns home to find Mam near death from her cancer. She tells Leonie that, despite all her efforts; “Brewed all the herbs and medicines. Opened myself up to the *mystère*. For Saint Jude, for Marie Laveau, for Loko” (p. 214), she is dying and wants to leave this world while there is still

something left of her. Leonie asks to be allowed to try to save her, but is told she cannot as, “I didn’t teach you enough. You won’t be able to appease them” (p. 215). And while Mam knows that Leonie can’t save her from death, she does allow that Leonie can help her die, “like I drew the veil back so you could walk into this life, you’ll help me draw it back so I can walk into the next” (p. 216), and meet “the last *mystère*. Maman Brigitte. Let her come into me. Possess me. She is the mother of the dead. The judge. If she come, maybe she take me with her” (p. 215).<sup>9</sup> She instructs Leonie to help her die by building an altar of cemetery rocks, cotton, cornmeal and rum. As Mam struggles with her last breath and the ghosts of Given and Ritchie descend on the house, Ward combines elements of voodoo and “magical realist” spiritualism into a syncretic and chaotic explosion or sound and fury:

“Say it,” Mama says. She lets her hands fall. “The litany,” she says again, and her breath rattles in her throat ... There’s no time. The moment done ate it all up: the past, the future. Do I say the words? ...“Mama, I choke, and it’s as weak and wanting as a baby’s. “Mommy.” My crying and Mama’s entreaties and Michaela’s wailing and Given’s shouting fill the room like a flood”. (p. 267)

Despite Jojo’s doubts, Leonie performs the litany: “Grande Brigitte, Judge. This altar of stones is for you. Accept our offerings,” I say. Mama’s eyes are steady rolling, steady rolling to the ceiling, where the boy with smooth face hovered, needy and balled up like a baby. “Shut up. Leonie. Please,” Jojo says. “You don’t see”. Mama’s eyes steady rolling to the wall where Given has stopped thrashing. They turn to me, beseeching. “Enter,” I say (p. 268).

As Mam dies, the family is reunited in grief (“We cry in chorus”), bonded by their shared loss, but also by their love. Jojo is angry with Leonie, but she rationalizes, “He doesn’t understand what it means, to have the first thing you ever done right by your mama be to usher in her gods” (p. 270). And, in performing this ritual, Leonie re-enters into an old tradition, one that she’s lost through the haze of drugs and blinded by her love of Michael, realizing “I want to tell Jojo, *We a family*” (p. 272), though the loss of Mam is too much for her and she reacts violently, attacking Jojo before fleeing with Michael.

Ultimately, there isn’t a perfect resolution in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, but there is a sense of redemption for Leonie in performing the ritual accompanying Mam’s death, and, with it, a sense of relief for the family as a communal body. Despite Mam’s death and Leonie’s flight, the final scene in the novel is one of release, as Michaela sings the ghosts haunting the family away to a final rest. One day, after Mam has died, Jojo and Kayla are walking the property and encounter both the ghost-child Ritchie and a tree full of ghosts. “Go home” Kayla orders as she begins to sing, “...and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease ...*Home*, they say. *Home* (pp. 284–85).

The concept of “home” here, invoking a sense of rest and comfort facilitated by ancestral knowledge and a sense of community, informs my concerns in both novels. For a population brought to America in chains, treated as second-class citizens after emancipation, and forced to navigate a society where racism is built into the very institutions that uphold it, the notion of a stable and peaceful “home” where one can feel “something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease” is fraught and complex. In *Conjure in African American Society*, Jeffrey Anderson points out that, “Since reconstruction, interest in conjure has generally followed a wavelike pattern of increasing and decreasing interest”. Noting upsurges of interest in the mid-1880s, the 1920s and the 1970s (Anderson 2005, p. 4). These “waves” that Anderson notes, coinciding with Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, indicate that, when significant social and political trends are affecting African Americans, there is a cultural turn to African spiritual traditions.

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<sup>9</sup> Maman Brigitte is the loa of death in Haitian Vodou.

It would seem that American culture is in the midst of another wave of interest in African-based supernaturalism. The cultural milieu of the United States has frayed in the first decades of the twenty-first century, having witnessed the very public rise of white ethno-nationalism from both individuals and emanating from centers of power in Washington. The public protests by Black Lives Matter activists and high profile athletes like Colin Kaepernick, roughly coincided with the rise and election Donald Trump and the accompanying nativism, xenophobia, racism and seeming embrace of white nationalism by prominent administration officials, advisors, hangers-on and some sitting congressmen. The rise of “Trumpism” speaks to the (temporary and retrospectively naïve) dashed hope that the election of Barack Obama in 2008 may have ushered in a society more accepting of racial and ethnic diversity and open to increased power-sharing amongst its populace.<sup>10</sup> The thinly-veiled-to-open racism, seemingly encouraged and embraced by the President himself and embodied by his long dreamt-of symbolic wall on the southern border and attempts to ban Muslims and people from African “shithole countries” from entering the United States, has helped to foster a climate of anger and fear for many people of color in America. It is within this crucible of deferred dreams and protestations that Whitehead and Ward are adding their work. With the way paved by popular television shows like HBO’s “True Blood” and “American Horror Story”, and sobered by the reality that young black men, particularly, are at risk of having their lives taken by police and broadcast across the internet, African-Americans seem to be turning to traditional African spirituality and traditions as a means of both protection, power and identity.<sup>11</sup>

This phenomena is certainly recognized by the National Book Foundation. In the Judge’s Citation for *The Underground Railroad*, they note that, “He has given us an electrifying narrative of the past, profoundly resonant with the present” (National Book Foundation 2016) Likewise, the citation for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* praises the novel as “mov[ing] beyond the road into the bigger story of what it means to be an American in the rural South both now and decades before this moment” (National Book Foundation 2017). It appears that the reach of these works will continue to expand, as Amazon is planning a Barry Jenkins-directed limited television series based on *The Underground Railroad*, and Ward’s literary star continues to rise with a novel about the slave trade in New Orleans and a children’s book in progress in fulfillment of a newly signed two-book deal with Scribner. Finally, both novels offer readers who are looking for a way to negotiate and survive an often hostile and violent world a means to do so. The popularity and praise of both works at this particular cultural moment speak to the desperate desire for healing, hope, and, ultimately, a safe haven to call home, and indicate that, perhaps, for those looking for healing and community in America, the way forward may be to look to and embrace the past.

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<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps best exemplified (though there are sadly many possibilities in recent years) by the Unite the Right white nationalist march in August 2017 in Charlottesville, VA. After initial refusing to condemn the march, President Trump tepidly condemned the neo-Nazi organizers, and subsequently walked back criticism of the white nationalist marchers by asserting there was “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” and that there were “very fine people on both sides” (Thrush and Haberman 2017).

<sup>11</sup> In “The Witches of Baltimore” by Sigal Samuel (Samuel 2018) writing for *The Atlantic*, the author reports on the third annual Black Witch Convention in Baltimore, where the celebrants, “the hundreds of young black women who are leaving Christianity in favor of their ancestors’ African spiritual traditions, and finding a sense of power in the process,” call out as part of their ritual, “No one’s going to protect us but who?” “Us!”

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