Spectres of Racial Oppression: Cultural Hauntings in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing and Louise Erdrich's The Night Watchman

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SPECTRES OF RACIAL OPPRESSION:

CULTURAL HAUNTINGS IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING* AND LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE NIGHT WATCHMAN*

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Introduction

The figure of the ghost materialised increasingly clearly in Black American literature in the 1980s. Novels such as Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), among many others, all engage with the spectres of slavery and oppression through representations of ghostliness. *Beloved,* especially, has had a profound impact on American culture and has inspired fiction writers and scholars alike to explore spectrality (Miller 7). In *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998), literary scholar Kathleen Brogan suggests that fictional ghosts, building on a long Gothic tradition, function "as plot device," "as source of the pleasurable thrill we derive from the uncanny," and "to illuminate the more shadowy or repressed aspects of characters" (2). However, the ghost in *Beloved* – like so many other ghosts in minority literatures – differs from the Gothic spectres of Victorian literature and American Romanticism. Brogan suggests that "the ghosts in recent African-American literature, while sharing these familiar literary functions, also serve another: they signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (2). Such ghosts, Brogan argues, belong in a separate category: the cultural haunting.

Stories of cultural haunting are concerned with "exploring the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche," Brogan argues, "but also of a people's historical consciousness" (5-6). These ghosts thus represent a collective history that has "in some way been threatened, erased or fragmented" – particularly the histories of ethnic minorities (6). According to Brogan, the cultural haunting is "a pan-ethnic phenomenon" (3). In *Cultural Haunting,* she foregrounds literary works by African American, Native American, and Cuban American writers, though she acknowledges the importance of many more novels by authors of different cultural backgrounds. Each of these minority literatures thus draws on the figure of the ghost to address "a widespread concern with questions of ethnic identity and cultural transmission" (3-4).

There are two central elements around which stories of cultural haunting are structured: possession and exorcism. Possession signifies the "failure of memory to organize history, to render it usable" and can occur both as a result of the repression of memory or the inability to release memory (9). This failure of memory can manifest itself as a haunting: "denied history reasserts itself, much like the return of the repressed" (9). Exorcism is found in resolving this haunting, frequently through "acts of narrative revision," which can reframe "cultural inheritance, rendering the past in the terms of the present" (11). The movement from traumatic memory or experience into language is thus presented as a means of bridging the gap between past and present, offering resolution of the haunting and the trauma which it represents.

This thesis seeks to take a comparative approach to two narratives of cultural haunting and the cultures that inform their ghosts: Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* (2020). *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a novel about a mixed-race family living in Mississippi whose long-repressed memories of their history in the Jim Crow South and experiences with the criminal justice system return to haunt them. *The Night Watchman* is set in the 1950s and follows a number of characters from the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota who are confronted with the prospect of forced assimilation and the erasure of their cultural history as they fight against federal termination. Even though the novels are shaped by distinct African American and Native American cultures respectively, they share a commonality: both cultures have long been marginalised within the hegemonic narrative of American history, albeit in wholly different ways. Therefore, this thesis is particularly interested in how both novels use spectrality to engage and reckon with these marginalised histories. By examining how *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* portray possession and exorcism, this thesis argues that cultural hauntings do not necessarily work toward the resolution of trauma – as Brogan suggests – but rather that they can contribute to the integration of cultural traumas into a national historical narrative. This integration can counteract the

erasure, repression, and forgetting of African American and Native American traumatic histories and address questions of accountability in causing individual and cultural traumas.

Literature Review

The term 'hauntology' was first used by Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993). Derrida applies the notion of ghostliness to a discussion of Marx and the communist ideology. He argues that adherents of the capitalist ideology tend to suggest that "not only is [communism] finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come back" (123). While Derrida thus does not consider hauntings in a literary context, his work was highly influential in making hauntology, or spectrality studies, a respectable and valid field of scholarship (Chassot 7).

Toni Morrison's work – fictional and non-fictional alike – has been highly influential in shaping this field. Especially her novel *Beloved*, one of the most important ghost stories of twentieth-century American literature, has inspired numerous studies on hauntings and the functioning of memory (Chassot 7). Speaking to Terry Gross in a 1987 *Fresh Air* Interview, Morrison suggested that the US is "a country which is based on the erasure of the past and the future, the pioneer, the territory, the immigrant who gets rid of the old country and the wicked past and cleans the slate. … [I]t makes it impossible for anybody to take seriously the history that is the country." The physical manifestation of the past in *Beloved,* embodied by the eponymous character, rejects this erasure of the past. Central to the novel is Morrison's concept of "rememory," which captures the "tension between a compulsive return to and return of historical traumas and a productive engagement with the past" (Chassot 27). This function of the ghost – the spectre as representation of a repressed, erased, or forgotten history – has informed many scholarly interpretations of cultural and literary hauntings.

One such interpretation is introduced by sociologist Avery F. Gordon. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) argues that hauntings form an important part of social life and that ghostly figures must be confronted to make sense of social life. As such, Gordon approaches the ghost as "a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8). A haunting, Gordon argues, can be defined as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (xvi). Following this, possession occurs "when the trouble [ghosts] represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view" (xvi). In Gordon's view, hauntings are thus inextricably entwined with the past, and must be examined as social figures to reveal the full scope of their cultural meaning.

In the past decades, scholarship on literary hauntings has expanded rapidly. Edited volumes like Blanco and Peeren's *The Spectralities Reader* (2013) and Christina Lee's *Spectral Spaces and Hauntings: The Affects of Absence* (2017) explore different understandings and uses of hauntings. Many works also focus on ghosts in a particular cultural or literary tradition. Hershini Bhana Young's *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body* (2006) is one such work, which examines African American hauntings. Young is primarily concerned with the notion of racial injury and Black bodies, whether they be physical or spectral, in relation to diasporic history and literature. Joanne Chassot's *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* (2018) similarly engages with the diasporic histories that shape African American culture and literature. This work argues that ghostly figures are too easily marginalised in literary studies, and cautions against that neglect: paying attention to the ghosts in diasporic literature, Chassot suggests, "compels us to re-vision our reading and interpretation of these texts" (33).

The proliferation of scholarship on African American literary hauntings has not quite been matched in the field of Native American literature. Relatively few studies have been

dedicated to hauntings in fiction by Native American authors. Boyd & Thrush's anthology, *Phantom Past, Indigenous Present: Native Ghosts in North American Culture & History* (2011), is an important work on ghosts in Native American culture and literature as well as Native American ghosts in works by white American authors. Renée L. Bergland's *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000) is another work dedicated to Native American ghosts. Bergland is primarily focused on identifying and interpreting the ambiguities constructed around Native American ghostliness, and examining how the Native American ghost is implicated in narratives of American nationalism as representations of both guilt and triumph (4). While *The National Uncanny* makes important arguments about the position of Native Americans and their spectrality in the construction of an American national identity, Bergland's assessment of Native American literature and culture is almost exclusively mediated by an emphasis on white perceptions of Native American spectrality. As such, this work prioritises the white American perspective over the Native American one, and misses an opportunity to offer a more thorough analysis of Native American hauntings. This thesis seeks to foreground Indigenous understandings of spectrality to prevent adopting a similarly white-centric perspective upon cultural hauntings.

In order to study how histories of racial oppression are conceptualised as hauntings, this thesis also draws on scholarship from the fields of trauma and memory studies. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) is an important work that foregrounds the role of history in shaping trauma. Caruth argues that "the crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives" is captured in the question: "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). Central to traumatic narratives, Caruth suggests, is a "double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*" (7). It is useful to build on this binary approach to trauma in the study of cultural haunting: to conceptualise trauma as something that occurs not only through death, but also

through survival and loss, helps to conceive of the ghost as the embodiment of the trauma of death and as a representation of the trauma of survival.

Not only the trauma of survival, but also the memory of survival is important to consider in this thesis. Within the context of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* a relevant concept from the field of memory studies is traumatic recall. Mieke Bal argues that traumatic recall is "the painful resurfacing of events of a traumatic nature" and typically resists integration into narrative form in two ways: repression and dissociation (viii). The former "results in ellipsis – the omission of important elements in the narrative," while the latter leads to paralepsis, which "doubles the strand of the narrative series of events by splitting off a sideline" (ix). Cultural hauntings, and particularly possessions, offer a means to both illustrate and challenge repression and dissociation; being haunted by the past symbolises the lack of integration and resolution of traumatic recall, but also forces individuals to confront the ghost as physical embodiment of their memories.

It is not only useful to consider how memory functions and shapes characters within the novels central to this thesis, but also to examine how these narratives are positioned within the framework of cultural memory. Therefore, this thesis will draw on cultural historian Jan Assmann's conception of cultural memory. In "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" (1995), Assmann argues that cultural memory is "maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)" (129). Through cultural memory, "the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" is preserved (130). Conversely, communicative memory draws on everyday communications (128-29). This thesis argues that cultural hauntings build on cultural and as well as communicative forms of memory. Cultural hauntings engage with and encompass cultural memories of historical traumas. However, they also fulfil a communicative function because the ghosts in stories of cultural haunting are able to narrate cultural memories. As such,

cultural hauntings do not only recall cultural memories, but also actively engage with these memories by narrating and communicating them, thereby underlining the enduring relevance of cultural history in a contemporary and everyday context.

In this analysis of cultural hauntings, it is useful to consider both the specific cultural contexts that inform the novels central to this thesis – African American and Native American cultural memory – as well as the national context in which both narratives are situated. In considering this national context, it is especially important to examine how histories of racial oppression are remembered, forgotten, or incorporated in American national identity. The politics of forgetting is especially important to consider in relation to the exorcism of a cultural haunting: if exorcism is found in a movement into language, how can a forgotten or erased experience be narrated? "Commemorative discourse constitutes a state of continuity," Chandra A. Maldonado argues, which "manifests within a nexus of experiences that rhetorically invoke, reclaim, and restore a past" (213). How the past is incorporated into the dominant narrative of American history – a narrative that draws on notions of American exceptionalism and the "conqueror role" of white, masculine superiority – can "affect the ways in which we embrace or reject identity" (Maldonado 213). The forgotten histories of racial oppression – the memories of which may be forcibly repressed through "a range of choices in institutional commemorative practice" – are frequently erased in the construction of an American national identity (214). This thesis thus takes into consideration how national practices of remembrance and forgetting have affected the position of African American and Native American cultures within the US, and particularly what this means for the exorcism of cultural hauntings.

Aside from these broader theories on trauma and memory, this thesis also draws on works that examine trauma and memory within a specifically African American and Native American context. Such works include Patricia San José Rico's *Creating Memory and Cultural Identity in African American Trauma Fiction* (2019) and Hillary N. Weaver's *Trauma and*

Resilience in the Lives of Contemporary Native Americans: Reclaiming our Balance, Restoring our Wellbeing (2019). These studies both consider questions of ethnicity and oppression in relation to memory and trauma, and are therefore valuable resources for this thesis.

While many scholars have thus written about literary hauntings and their relation to race, trauma, and memory, this thesis combines a number of their approaches to study the correlation between cultural hauntings as manifestations of individual and cultural trauma and the role spectrality plays in integrating these traumatic histories into a broader narrative of American history. By making a comparison between an African American novel and a Native American novel, this thesis seeks to underline that, despite the distinct cultures that inform the narratives, stories of cultural haunting offer an effective method of resisting cultural repression or silencing.

Methodology

Central to this thesis are two stories of cultural haunting: Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* (2020). These novels have been selected because they allow for a productive comparison between two works of contemporary literature that are part of the African American literary tradition and the Native American literary tradition respectively. Because both novels are concerned with histories of racial oppression – albeit in wholly distinct ways – and the hauntings that are derived from these traumas, they are well-suited for a textual analysis according to the possession-exorcism framework offered by Kathleen Brogan's theory of cultural hauntings. While Brogan's work engages with twentieth-century fiction, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Christina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), her theory continues to be of relevance in relation to contemporary literature. Therefore, this thesis uses Brogan's theory of cultural hauntings as a framework through which to analyse the various functions of possession and exorcism in stories of cultural haunting,

thereby seeking to expand upon the functions Brogan identifies to offer a more comprehensive view on the significance of cultural hauntings.

Outline

The following chapters delve deeper into the mechanisms of the cultural haunting and examine how *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* engage with the figure of the ghost. Chapter one studies spectrality in African American and Native American culture and literature, thereby taking into consideration how representations of ghosts have developed over time. In this analysis, two of the most important functions of the ghost in both an African American and a Native American context are centralised: the ghost as a manifestation of cultural continuity, and the ghost as a means of giving voice to historically marginalised or silenced people. Studying the significance of African American and Native American spectrality situates the analysis of the novels central to this thesis in a strong historical and cultural context.

Chapter two revolves around the first phase of cultural haunting: possession. This chapter offers a comparison between *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* and the ways in which they represent the cause and the manifestation of the various hauntings that appear in both narratives. This chapter argues that possession simultaneously functions as a projection of individual trauma and as a representation of broader, cultural traumas. As such, this chapter is concerned with examining the role of spectrality in portraying these two types of traumatic histories and understanding how these traumas are remembered.

Chapter three centralises the second phase of cultural haunting, exorcism, and its representation in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman*. This chapter argues that exorcism encompasses a release from possession and, in certain cases, the resolution of trauma. Exorcism is facilitated by integrating the individual and cultural traumas represented by possession, thereby situating these traumatic histories within a national narrative. This chapter

seeks to examine how exorcism shapes this national narrative by resisting erasure or forgetting, and how this allows stories of cultural haunting to effectively address questions of accountability in causing the individual and cultural traumas central to both novels.

1. Spectral Invisibility and Continuity in African American and Native American Culture

Because a cultural haunting is a manifestation of a collective, cultural trauma, it is useful to consider how the hauntings in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* are shaped by cultural conceptions of ghosts and spectrality. In studying cultural hauntings, Kathleen Brogan cautions against a "naive romanticizing of roots (hunting for the 'authentic' ethnic sources of every aspect of a literary work)" (12). One cultural object cannot represent an entire ethnicity or cultural tradition, nor is it ever solely informed by one ethnicity or cultural tradition. Still, Brogan contends: "Differences in cultural content [in stories of cultural haunting] exist, and they matter. These differences cannot be separated from the particular histories from which they arise and to which they continue to make reference; to understand ethnic differences *only* as boundary markers is to elide the importance of the specific histories they encode" (14). While stories of cultural haunting thus should not be seen as a direct representation of a specific culture or ethnicity, it is important to situate these narratives within a historical and cultural context. As such, this chapter is concerned with analysing the conceptualisation of African American and Native American ghosts in culture and literature.

1.1 African American Spectrality: Constructing Diasporic Identity and Revisioning History

In precolonial West African cultures, historian Stephanie Smallwood argues, death represented both disruption and continuity: "Through the soul's departure from the body and migration to the realm of the ancestors, death entailed a change that resulted not in disconnection or disappearance but rather in its antithesis: a new kind of connection in the form of ancestral involvement in the life of kin and community" (58). Physical death did not equate to spiritual death. Rather, spiritual ancestral connections were able to withstand the rupture of death and

reinforced a sense of cultural continuity. Honouring the dead through remembrance was of great importance: “Mourning and interment mitigated the disruptive threat that death posed, by channelling the sacral power of death into the renewal of life” (Smallwood 140). Furthermore, according to Joanne Chassot, forgetting the dead led to their disintegration into a “state of non-existence” (9). Keeping the memory of the deceased alive was thus understood as an affirmation of continued kinship and connection.

While the Middle Passage constituted an irreversible physical and social rupture for African captives, Smallwood argues that pre-colonial West African cultures did play a role in informing the emerging culture of the enslaved in the Americas. African cultural practices were adapted to contain and make sense of the Atlantic voyage and enslavement in the US. This cultural adaptation and re-invention was an important factor in retaining a sense of humanity in the face of the commodification and dehumanisation of the slave trade (190). According to Smallwood, “the connection Africans needed was a narrative continuity between past and present – an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience” (191). The Middle Passage, however, was not merely a transitionary episode: rather, it can be considered as a point of origin for many of the cultural hauntings that shape African American culture. According to literary scholar Rinaldo Walcott, the captives’ inability to perform proper burial rituals at sea prevented them from laying the dead to rest, which was “one of the most painful wounds of the Middle Passage” (60). This collective trauma of the Middle Passage endures and the unburied ghosts that haunt the memory of the Middle Passage have influenced the formation of African American culture (Walcott 60). As such, while African American culture is partially rooted in pre-colonial West African spirituality, it was primarily shaped by the diasporic culture that emerged during and after the Middle Passage.

African American engagement with spectrality illustrates this partial cultural continuity. Chassot argues that the enslaved conceived of the dead not only as helpful and comforting spirits, but also as a means to undermine the notion of 'natal alienation' (9). This concept, according to historian Orlando Patterson, signifies the alienation of the enslaved "from all 'rights' or claims of birth" and the complete disconnect "from the social heritage of his ancestors" (5). Spectrality offered a means of challenging this alienation; by sustaining spiritual connections with the dead, the enslaved were able to affirm the importance of kinship and ancestry in the formation of African American culture. Here, cultural conceptions of the ghost were representative of a cultural continuity that contested the natal alienation of the enslaved and the dehumanisation inherent in the institution of slavery. As such, ghostly figures "served not only a cultural and social function, but a political one" (Chassot 10). In resisting the repression and erasure of cultural practices, the cultural continuity that spectrality symbolises has been instrumental in sustaining African American culture.

Ghosts have not only played an important role in shaping the cultural memory of African American history, but also informs literary engagements with the past. Especially from the 1980s onwards, spectrality has played an important role in constructing African American narratives that engage with histories of slavery and racial oppression. According to literary scholar Trudier Harris, the authors of such texts do not treat history as "a static, immutable entity; it is a dynamic force that they can bend and shape at will to offer significantly revised ways of achieving African American literary creativity" (23). Part of this revisioning of history was a movement from wholly realistic representations of history to more imaginative and speculative narratives (Harris 20). Literary scholar Ruth Mayer suggests that, in the 1980s, an increasing number of African American authors did not intend to "reconstruct a lost history," but rather sought "to dismantle the established one and give scope to altogether different, highly fantastic scenarios" (566). These more speculative interpretations of the past allow these works

to challenge the "expected narrative of white enslaver/Black victim" that shapes much of African American history, and foreground African American agency instead (Harris 20).

Literary ghosts were central to the construction of such imaginative narratives. Repressed histories, like the history of American slavery, are often figured as a spectre that haunts the nation. Cultural studies scholar Christopher Freeburg suggests that "the US has failed to mourn slavery, and thus slavery maintains a haunting occult presence" (102). Spectrality, however, is not only used to represent repressed history; ghosts can also be used to uncover forgotten histories and give voice to those who have been erased from the national historical narrative. According to Brogan, hauntings offer a way to make an "unspeakable" or even "unimaginable" history or memory narratable (63). This does not only apply to the history of slavery; Chassot argues that African American literary ghosts can "blur the traditional dichotomy of natural and supernatural, rational and irrational, thereby throwing into question the very definitions and structural hierarchy of these categories and the oppressive and repressive structures and discourses they have served to justify" (12). As such, these ghosts have played a role in recovering and narrating histories of the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow segregation, but are also able to foreground and challenge the racial oppression and inequality that persists to this day.

The African American novel central to this thesis – Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* – is primarily concerned with the racial inequality inherent in the criminal justice system, both during the Jim Crow era and in the twenty-first century. In an interview with *BOMB Magazine*, Ward explains how the figure of the ghost allowed her to illuminate and narrate this history:

> One of the books I read in my research was about Parchman Prison, where twelve- and thirteen-year-old black boys were taken for petty crimes, vagrancy and stealing – very small things. At Parchman, they were tortured and beaten like slaves. They died like slaves. … I thought: I have to write this character. I wanted to give him agency. I wanted

him to be able to interact with the other characters. Because I wanted that to happen I knew that he had to be a ghost.

Here, ghostliness provides a means of recovering repressed history by giving voice to marginalised historical figures. The different ways in which the hauntings in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are conceptualised, and how they fit into African American cultural and literary traditions as discussed in this chapter, will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

1.2 Native American Spectrality: Culturally Generative Hauntings and Reclaiming the Indigenous Ghost

Ghosts are significant for many Native American cultures for a variety of reasons. Boyd and Thrush argue that "many contemporary practitioners of Indigenous religions continue to evoke the threads that bind humans to spirit – the living to the dead – through belief and ritual … Such beliefs and practices, far from being superstitious or antiquated, are in fact means by which Indigenous people maintain social order through practices of reverence and care" (xix). According to Brogan, in Ojibwe, or Chippewa, culture – the Native American culture that informs much of Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* – ancestral spirits have "powerful and positive connotations. For the Chippewa … the living and the dead participate in one integrated reality. The return of ancestor spirits ensures a continuity between present and past" (31). This spiritual continuity has been important in shaping Indigenous resistance against oppression by white colonisers and the US government. "In the case of cultures subject to near annihilation by more powerful groups," Brogan argues, "the invocation of the supernatural can be seen as a survival strategy, through which loss or absence becomes, by awful necessity, generative" (32). Calling on the spirits of tribal members thus becomes a means of strengthening opposition against the oppressor by reaffirming the enduring presence of Native American tribes. As such,

the Indigenous conception of spectrality reinforces the importance of cultural heritage in offering resistance against marginalisation and termination.

The Native American ghost has been subject to misconceptions and misrepresentations since the arrival of European colonists in North America. The colonists drew on their understanding of Indigenous spectrality to present Native Americans as antithetical to white Americans: they were portrayed as mystical and demonic, and were associated with darkness and immorality, as opposed to the Christian values of the colonisers. These representations thus firmly othered Native Americans, and framed them as a threat to the white American colonisers (Bergland 1). As embodiment of racial and spiritual other, the Native American ghost has been central to the construction of American national identity. One myth that shaped this identity was that of the Vanished Indian, which refers to the way in which the physical and cultural presence of Native Americans was marginalised as industrialisation and urbanisation became more widespread in the US. According to Suzanne Crawford, "the image of Native people became relegated to the past, a figment of historical nostalgia, while living Native communities vanished from people's consciousness" (73). Portraying Native Americans as ghosts, Renée Bergland suggests, constitutes a "discursive technique of Indian removal – describing them as insubstantial, disembodied, and finally spectral beings" (3). White Americans understood the myth of the Vanished Indian simultaneously as a lamentable tragedy and a colonial triumph; literary scholar Mita Banerjee argues that "the vanished Indian can successfully be turned into the vanishing Indian … this soon-to-be-achieved absence testifies to the victoriousness of white hegemony; colonialism is thus nostalgic for what it has killed off, or what it will soon succeed in killing off once again" (213). Spectral images have thus been used extensively by white Americans to marginalise Indigenous peoples.

Native American ghosts have figured prominently in literary works by both white American authors – who generally affirmed the Vanished Indian narrative – and Native

American authors. Bergland contends that "when Native Americans figured themselves as ghostly, they gained rhetorical power at the cost of relinquishing everything else. When Native people called on their forebears as vengeful ghosts, they acknowledged that the battles had already been lost, that the voices that inspired them were among the dead" (3-4). Here, Bergland interprets the invocation of ancestral spirits as a signifier of defeat, and does not consider the cultural significance of Native American spectrality. Conversely, Boyd and Thrush argue: "In telling ghost stories to the colonizer, Indigenous writers claim one of the most powerful North American narrative tropes and use it for their own ends … These ghosts are political, as ghosts almost always are" (xx). This conception of Native American literary ghosts emphasises Indigenous agency and foregrounds the revisioning of the Vanished Indian trope that has been so detrimental to Native American peoples in the US. Furthermore, according to Brogan, the Native American literary ghost functions simultaneously "as metaphor for cultural invisibility and cultural continuity" (31). This dual function comments on the historic marginalisation of Native American cultures while also foregrounding the cultural significance of spectrality for many Native American peoples. As such, different interpretations of Indigenous ghosts – either as sign of Native American absence, or as representation of a re-visioned and reclaimed cultural figure – can be used to highlight different aspects of Native American cultures.

Indigenous literary spectres thus have both a political and a cultural significance, which is also reflected in Erdrich's *The Night Watchman.* In this novel, ghostly figures have a number of different functions, illuminating both personal memories and cultural traumas. In an interview with *TIME Magazine*, when asked whether the narrative of *The Night Watchman* can be defined as magical realism, Erdrich states: "I don't feel like it's magical. I try to ground everything that I do in something that has actually happened. Even if it isn't quite, it's trending toward something that could happen." In a *Fresh Air* Interview, Erdrich expands upon this idea: "So many things happen to us that we immediately explain away, and so I'm just not explaining

away what's happening. That's all it is. It's not magical realism." Erdrich is not the only author to resist the 'magical realism' label; Toni Morrison argues that applying the word 'magical' to a narrative "dilutes the realism" of the story ("Interview with Toni Morrison" 143). Labelling *The Night Watchman* a magical realist novel is thus a reductive characterisation that dismisses the authenticity of the experiences captured in the narrative. Erdrich conceives of the ghosts in *The Night Watchman* as projections of individual and communal experiences and memories, rather than as a manifestation of the well-known Indian ghost trope. The portrayal of these spectres further challenges common depictions of Native American ghosts by centralising their role in the struggle against termination. These ghosts are not a sign of Indigenous absence or white colonial victory; instead, they are figured as integral to the survival and resistance of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. The following chapters will consider the different ways in which spectrality shapes the narrative of *The Night Watchman*.

1.3 Conclusion

The ghost has thus been an important cultural figure in African American and Native American traditions. Although these cultures conceive of ghosts in different ways, both understand the ghost as a manifestation of the dead, which can offer guidance and comfort through an affirmation of cultural continuity and ancestral connection. The significance of spectrality in Native American culture has frequently been misrepresented by white Americans. Especially the myth of the Vanished Indian, and its reliance on spectral depictions of Native Americans, has been harmful to Indigenous peoples by contributing to their marginalisation. While spectrality has thus been used to undermine especially Native American cultures, ghosts also fulfil a very different function in minority literatures. Literary interpretations of African American and Native American history and trauma often use hauntings as representations of resistance, subversion, or agency. Spectral figures have the ability to give voice to historically

marginalised groups. As such, reclaiming and revisioning the literary ghost as an empowering figure has been a way to contest the marginalisation and oppression of both African American and Native American cultures.

2. The Ghost as Product and Projection of Trauma: Possession in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman*

Kathleen Brogan identifies possession as "the dangerous incorporation of the dead," and argues that it is a representation of the way in which "denied history reasserts itself, much like the return of the repressed" (9). Similarly, cultural theorist Arthur Redding argues that the ghost "has a way of speaking that which cannot be spoken; it personifies and expresses those peoples, events, or aspects of one's own past that have been violently disappeared or repressed" (4). Furthermore, cultural studies scholar Christina Lee suggests: "Ghosts are seething presences resulting from historical exclusion and invisibility in which absencing them is an attempt to render something into nothing" (7). Literary possessions thus offer a way to make a cultural or historical absence visible or present by giving voice to a repressed or marginalised past.

Peeren and Blanco, however, argue that possession does not only "obsessively recall a fixed past"; instead, ghosts may also "reveal the insufficiency of the present moment, as well as the disconsolations and erasures of the past, and a tentative hopefulness for future resolutions" (16). As such, ghosts do not merely respond to historical traumas, but also bridge the divide between past and present to reflect on the ways in which these historical traumas continue to shape the present. The continuity represented by hauntings thus allows for a critical examination of both past and present injustice and suffering, and may be able to illuminate a means to resolve enduring trauma.

Sociologist Avery Gordon identifies an additional function of possession, and suggests that hauntings are a form of mediation. Here, mediation constitutes "the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography" (Gordon 19). Gordon argues that, through hauntings, "organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves" (19). Ghostly

possessions are thus able to illuminate social structures and the hierarchy, division, and oppression inherent in these structures. This illumination also allows for a critical assessment of the role such structures play in shaping and sustaining historical and cultural traumas.

This chapter examines the significance of possession in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* and seeks to uncover the traumas underlying these possessions. Following Gordon's argument that hauntings function as form of mediation and can reveal the larger structures that shape trauma, it is important to consider not only individual experiences and conceptions of trauma, but also to examine the broader cultural traumas that inform Ward and Erdrich's narratives. As such, this chapter argues that the ghosts in both novels are simultaneously products of cultural trauma *and* projections of individual memories, grief, and guilt related to these communal traumatic histories. Building on Mieke Bal's theory of traumatic recall, possession reveals how these individual and cultural traumas are remembered, repressed, or dissociated. This argument draws on a textual analysis of both novels, thereby first introducing the different ghosts that haunt these narratives and the historical context that shapes their haunting, followed by an analysis of what their possession reveals about individual trauma.

2.1 Hauntings of Racial Injustice and Violence in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

While writing *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward had to invent a "supernatural afterlife" within which the narrative's ghosts are situated (*BOMB Magazine*). In Ward's conception of an afterlife, ghosts are bound by a certain logic. While this logic remains ambiguous throughout the novel, some explanation is given for the existence of ghosts and the ways in which they interact with living beings. It is revealed that people return as ghosts only "when the dying's unexpected. Or violent" (160). Suffering and trauma are thus inherent in possession, and the presence of ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* signals a lack of fulfilment or a lack of resolution.

The ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* only appear to a select few. This is in part determined through familial relationships. Jojo, the thirteen-year old boy who narrates much of the novel, grows up under the care of his Black grandparents, whom he calls Mam and Pop. His father Michael, a white man, is incarcerated in Parchman penitentiary on a three-year sentence, while his drug-addicted mother Leonie, lacking a "mothering instinct," struggles to take care of Jojo and his younger sister, three-year old Kayla (158). As a child, Leonie is told by Mam that the gift of "seeing" and "hearing" ghosts, animals, or other humans "runs in the blood" (34). This generational gift also allows Jojo and Kayla to see and interact with ghosts. In Ward's conception of the afterlife, family ties thus determine whether someone is able to engage with spectres. This association between family and spectrality is reflective of the cultural significance of ghosts: as established in the previous chapter, ghosts have long been representative of cultural continuity in African American culture. Both familial kinship and spectrality offer ways of maintaining a connection with the past. "Without this connection and the continuity with the past that the ghosts enable, the living cannot understand, deal with, or work through their present situations," Joanne Chassot argues (9). As such, the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* carry a deep cultural significance and are able to move beyond the separation of past and present.

Within the spectral framework of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, two ghosts are foregrounded. The first is Given, Leonie's older brother, who was shot by one of Michael's cousins in what was claimed to be a hunting accident. The killer was only sentenced to three years in prison, in part because Michael's father, Big Joseph, is a former sheriff and used his position of authority to prevent a higher sentence. Given's spectrality thus forms a persistent reminder of the circumstances of his death. Even if his killer claimed Given's death was a hunting accident, the incident was clearly racially motivated: when asking Big Joseph for help, the killer's father tells him, "*This fucking hothead shot the n— for beating him*." The killer himself adds that Given

"*was supposed to lose"* the bet they had made (40). Furthermore, the fact that Big Joseph refuses to call the police and instead handles the situation by himself is a clear miscarriage of justice, again motivated by racist ideologies. As such, Given embodies the cultural trauma of racial violence and the failings of the criminal justice system. This trauma spans centuries; as historian Elizabeth Hinton argues, "government authorities and the police had long been complicit in violence against marginalized groups" as white perpetrators of racial violence faced little consequence for their crimes (73). Given's spectre thus represents the enduring failure of the criminal justice system to protect Black Americans from racial violence – not only in the twenty-first century, but throughout African American history.

Given's haunting is thus a product of the cultural trauma of structural racial injustice. As the embodiment of these traumas, Given also functions as a projection of individual guilt, grief, and memory. Especially his possession of Leonie reveals the trauma she suffered in the aftermath of Given's death. For most of the narrative, Leonie is the only one who sees Given's ghostly apparitions – or, as she refers to him, "Given-not-Given" (30). Given has been dead for fifteen years when he begins appearing to Leonie every time she is under the influence of drugs. Leonie believes Given to be a drug-induced "chemical figment," who disappears when she sobers up (30). At times, Leonie tries to ignore him and hopes that he will go "back to wherever he stays when he's not haunting me, back to whatever weird corner of my brain calls him up when I'm high" (103). Thus, initially, Leonie does not conceive of Given-not-Given as a ghost, but rather as a projection of her own thoughts and memories of him.

Given's presence simultaneously soothes and unsettles Leonie. One night, when Given appears across the table from Leonie and she acknowledges his presence, she recalls that Given looked like "he wanted to support me. Like he could be flesh and blood. Like he could grab my hand and lead me out of there. Like we could go home" (31). Despite the comfort his apparition offers Leonie here, she is also disturbed by Given's presence. In part, this is due to the marked

difference between his apparition and Leonie's memories of him when he was still alive. She observes that "Given-not-Given didn't breathe right. He never breathed at all" (30). The discrepancy between Leonie's memories of Given and his ghostly presence evokes a sense of the uncanny, which is further emphasised by Leonie calling him 'Given-not-Given'. According to David Punter, the uncanny – as theorized by Sigmund Freud in his essay "Das Unheimlich" (1919) – signifies that "the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse" (130). The tension between Given and Given-not-Given thus draws on the familiar-unfamiliar binary that, to Leonie, foregrounds the disturbing unreality of her brother's phantom presence and adds to her discomfort at his haunting. The evocation of the uncanny does not only reflect on Leonie's individual conception of Given's ghost, but also comments on a broader cultural context. Punter uses the term "diasporic uncanny" to refer to the experience of having "no place of one's own, to be part of an 'effect of history'" (133). This "uncanny absence of origin … forbids entirely any attempt at a convincing and unitary notion of origins" (134). As such, Given-not-Given's evocation of the uncanny illuminates not only his own ghostliness, but also the cultural anxieties that exist about African American history and the cultural continuity that is central to the construction of a communal identity.

Further complicating Leonie's connection with the spectre of Given is their inability to communicate effectively. Leonie recalls the first time she saw Given: "I ground my gums sore staring at Given. I ate him with my eyes. He tried to talk to me but I couldn't hear him, and he just got more and more frustrated" (41). This failure to communicate invites Leonie to draw her own conclusions about the message Given intends to convey. At the time when he first appeared, Leonie recalls, "every other day, I was bending over a table, sifting powder into lines, inhaling. I knew I shouldn't have: I was pregnant" (41). She connects Given's appearance to her drug usage; he follows her when she tries to get away, and ultimately she attempts to appease him by telling him, "*I quit … I swear I won't do it no more*" (42). Because Leonie considers

Given to be a figment of her imagination, she projects the guilt she feels over her addiction onto Given.

Given's ghost thus becomes strongly associated with Leonie's shame and guilt – not just in relation to her substance abuse, but also over Leonie's complicated relationship with race. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that Leonie feels a deep sense of guilt over her relationship with Michael and his connection to Given's murder. As mentioned before, Michael's cousin killed Given and was offered protection by Michael's father, Big Joseph. In the early stages of his relationship with Leonie, Michael acknowledges his father's racism, but insists he does not share his father's beliefs. Leonie tries to accept this, but struggles to see Michael and his father as wholly separate: "the father was not the son, I thought. Because when I looked at Michael in the piecemeal dark underneath the gazebo at the end of the pier, I could see a shadow of Big Joseph in him. … I had to remind myself: They are not the same" (43). While Leonie strongly dislikes Michael's parents and feels uncomfortable in their company, she still allows them to play a role – however marginal – in her life and in that of her children, and even asks her mother-in-law for help when she needs a job (28). This reluctant acceptance of Michael's family occurs in spite of the role they played in Given's death. Here, Leonie's memories appear to have been dissociated, which leads to paralepsis in the narrative she constructs around Given's death and her role in Michael's family (Bal ix). Memories of the involvement of Michael's family in Given's death have been separated from the family into which she has partially integrated. The ghostly presence of Given, however, forces Leonie to confront her guilt over her connection to Michael's family and erases the separation between the two strands of memory. As such, Given's ghost functions as the embodiment of Leonie's individual trauma and the grief, guilt, and shame she feels over Given's death, and illuminates the enduring cultural race-related traumas that inform Leonie's response and continue to shape African American culture.

The second ghost to play a central role in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a twelve-year-old boy called Richie, who – decades before the present-day narrative takes place – was sentenced to three years in Parchman penitentiary for stealing food for his family. Richie was incarcerated at the same time as Pop, who was taken to Parchman as a fifteen-year-old boy because his brother had wounded a white man in a fight. Richie arrives at Parchman shortly after Pop and, being the youngest prisoner at Parchman, is especially vulnerable among the other prisoners and the guards. Pop becomes deeply protective of Richie and develops a close relationship with him. As Jojo grows up, he often asks Pop to tell him about his time at Parchman. Richie features in most of the stories Pop tells, but Pop refuses to tell Jojo how his and Richie's story ends. It later becomes clear that Richie also does not know how his own story ends. Richie's ghost appears to Jojo when Leonie, Jojo and Kayla travel to Parchman penitentiary to pick up Michael, who is being released from prison after completing his sentence. Jojo immediately knows who Richie is, based on Pop's stories, and is able to communicate with Richie. Richie reveals he does not know how he died, and is determined to see Pop and hear the end of his story. He tells Jojo: "'I guess I didn't make it. … But I don't know how. I need to know how. … It's how I get home'" (124). To this end, Richie possesses Jojo: he gets into the car with Jojo and his family to follow them home. This literal possession mirrors the more abstract possession that both Jojo and Pop suffer, which comes forth from both cultural and individual traumas.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Parchman penitentiary plays a central role in shaping these cultural traumas and becomes representative of the criminalisation of Black Americans and the failings of the criminal justice system. According to literary scholar Megan Ashley Swartzfager, "southern plantation-style prisons" like Parchman "continued slavery by forcing imprisoned Black people to labor without wages under harsh conditions, and many of those who were incarcerated suffered lynchings and other forms of racialized violence" (320). The ghost, Avery Gordon argues, is well-suited to represent the endurance of racial oppression in various

iterations throughout the centuries: “Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on … Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about” (139). Richie’s ghost thus embodies the cultural trauma of racialised mass incarceration and the exploitative and oppressive nature of the criminal justice system.

It is through Richie’s spectral ability to bridge the separation between past, present, and future that these cultural traumas are foregrounded. In the time that passes between Richie’s death and Jojo’s arrival, Richie witnesses different eras at Parchman. He realises that “Parchman was past, present, and future all at once” and that “everything is happening at once” (127). His ability to move through time, into the past as well as into the future, enables Richie to see “the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth,” as well as present-day Parchman, with “men who wore their hair long and braided to their scalps, who sat for hours in small, windowless rooms staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams” (128). Richie realises that although decades pass, Parchman has always been and continues to be a site of trauma for its prisoners: “Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain’t changed none” (117). Richie’s ability to see the development of Parchman in different eras underlines his function as a representative of cultural continuity. However, whereas cultural continuity often refers to maintaining valuable connections with the past, here continuity constitutes the endurance of a traumatic environment. Richie, whose ghostly nature leaves him unbound by time, is able to foreground both of these forms of cultural continuity – the former as a valuable affirmation of cultural heritage, the latter as an indictment of the unresolved, deep-rooted problems in the criminal justice system.

Richie’s observations about the enduring cultural traumas related to Parchman and the criminal justice system are reinforced by the experiences of other characters in the novel. Writing to Leonie from Parchman, Michael tells her about “the guards beating an eighteen-year-old boy …. They heard him screaming and then nothing, and then got word he bleed to

death like a pig in the room" (70). Furthermore, on the drive back home from Parchman, the car is pulled over by police officers who handcuff Leonie, Michael and Jojo, hold them at gunpoint, and search the car. The officers ultimately allow them to resume their journey, and back in the car, Jojo tries to process the experience: "Even though [the gun] reminded me of so much cold, I think it would have been hot to touch. So hot it would have burned my fingerprints off" (118). Here, a connection is made between law enforcement and its dehumanising effects: Jojo imagines having his fingerprints burned off – being stripped of his identity – by the police officer's gun. As such, Michael and Jojo's experiences with law enforcement confirm Richie's observations that Parchman penitentiary and, by extension, the criminal justice system, continue to be a source of trauma.

Riche's spectrality not only illuminates these traumatic histories and their enduring impact upon contemporary society, but also reveals the ways in which these cultural traumas encompass individual traumas. Central to these individual traumas is the oppressive nature of memory. As Richie narrates his experiences as a ghost, he tells Jojo: "'How could I know that after I died … Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let me go?'" (127). Richie is thus unable to leave Parchman; he theorises that this may be because "it was a sort of home to me: terrible and formative" (130). Even in death, Richie remains bound to Parchman and is unable to escape from memories of the suffering he was subjected to in life. Shortly after his death, when Richie is still coming to terms with his own spectrality, he tries to no avail to repress these memories: he burrows into the earth, needing "to be blind to the men above. To memory. It came anyway" (95). Richie's memories thus appear to have a physical hold over him: Richie is unable to move on from the site of his trauma and is forced to suffer the traumatic recall of his memories.

Not only does Richie himself feel the restraints of his memory, which keep him bound to Parchman long after his death, but his presence also reveals the hold memory has on Pop.

For a long time, Pop is unable to tell Jojo how Richie's story ends; this ellipsis signifies the repression of Pop's memories of Richie, and indicates that these memories are traumatic in nature (Bal ix). This repression is further illustrated when Richie, alongside Jojo and his family, arrives at Pop and Mom's home. He quickly realises that Pop cannot see or hear him and, disillusioned, Richie asks Jojo: "'Why can't he see me?'" (150). Later, growing increasingly desperate, he addresses Pop directly: "'My wounds were here. Right here. From Black Annie. And you healed them. But you left and now you won't see me'" (151). Pop does not intentionally ignore Richie and the traumas he embodies – only Jojo and Kayla are able to see Richie – but the one-sided exchange between them is representative of Pop's inability to engage with his traumatic memories. Pop's repression keeps his past – and especially the memories of Richie – at bay, even as he remains possessed by the trauma which Richie represents.

While the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* thus exist largely separate from each other – Given and Richie do not interact, nor do their spectres appear to the same people – they both serve similar functions. Their presence forces Leonie and Pop to confront the traumatic recall of repressed or dissociated memories, thereby illuminating the depth of Leonie and Pop's individual traumas and their associated sense of guilt. Additionally, the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* represent cultural traumas related to the criminal justice system and racial violence. Especially Richie's ability to bridge the separation between past and present foregrounds the fact that these are not only historical traumas but that they also continue to affect the present. Richie's spectrality thus forms a physical reminder of the fact that the individual traumas in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and the cultural traumas in which they are rooted remain unresolved.

2.2 Spectres of Forced Assimilation and Displacement in *The Night Watchman*

Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* features a varied array of characters from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, nearly all of whom have heard, seen, or engaged with spirits of different kinds. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that many of the characters have different interpretations of spectrality. Some understand ghosts as the enduring presence of the dead, others perceive spectres as projections of their own thoughts and memories, and yet others seek scientific explanations for the apparitions they see (116, 329, 435). This thesis is especially interested in the role of spectrality in relation to one of the novel's primary narrators, Thomas Wazhashk. As tribal chairman, Thomas holds an important position within the reservation and becomes instrumental in the community's fight against a federal termination bill. Working as night watchman at the reservation's jewel bearing plant, Thomas comes into contact with a number of spectral figures.

Central among these ghosts is the apparition of Roderick. Roderick, Thomas' cousin with whom he grew up on the Turtle Mountain reservation, went to the Fort Totten boarding school with Thomas and their cousin LaBatte. Roderick died at Fort Totten as a result of mistreatment by the white teaching staff. Throughout the narrative, it is revealed that Roderick was locked up in the school's cellar twice as punishment: once after taking the blame for something LaBatte had done, and once for stealing food from the school bakery to quell his hunger. The severe cold in this cellar had detrimental effects on Roderick's health, and despite being sent to a sanatorium to receive treatment for tuberculosis, Roderick never recovered and passed away shortly afterwards (163). Roderick's death is thus the direct result of the abuse of power of the Fort Totten boarding school staff. As such, Roderick's ghost is a representation and reminder of this fatal and traumatic injustice.

Roderick's trauma does not stand alone. Historian and trauma studies scholar Teresa Evans-Campbell argues that Indigenous cultures are shaped by historical trauma, which she

defines as “the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events” (320). In the case of Native American cultures, these historical traumas include “community massacres, genocidal policies, pandemics from the introduction of new diseases, forced relocation, forced removal of children through Indian boarding school policies, and prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices” (Evans-Campbell 316). These cultural traumas all inform Erdrich’s narrative, whether directly or indirectly. Even traumas inflicted centuries ago continue to affect Indigenous communities, Evans-Campbell argues, through the “intergenerational transmission of historical trauma” (328). However, as exemplified by Roderick’s presence, it is the traumatic history related to boarding school policies determined by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs that shapes *The Night Watchman* most extensively. The boarding school experience encompasses a number of specific cultural traumas: it involved the displacement of children, who were removed not only from their families but also from their communities, and led to enforced assimilation which resulted in the loss of cultural and spiritual practices (Evans-Campbell 327). Roderick’s ghost is thus not only representative of his own traumatic experience at the Fort Totten boarding school, but also of the intergenerational cultural trauma that continues to shape the Turtle Mountain Band. Aside from illuminating this cultural trauma, Roderick’s ghost also works to reveal the ways in which other characters respond to this trauma. This analysis is particularly interested in Roderick’s significance in relation to Thomas and LaBatte, who are most closely connected to Roderick throughout the narrative.

Initially, Thomas believes the spirits he encounters to be figments of his own imagination (116). This belief is challenged when Thomas is confronted with the apparition of Roderick. During a night shift at the jewel bearing plant, Thomas sees the apparition of a “frowsty-headed little boy crouched on top of the band saw … wearing the same yellow-brown canvas vest and pants that Thomas had worn as a third-grade student at the government boarding

school in Fort Totten" (15). Thomas notes that "the boy looked like somebody" but does not identify him by name, and stares "at the spike-haired boy until he turned back into a motor" (15). When Thomas mentions this occurrence to LaBatte, who works as janitor at the jewel bearing plant and is said to be "intensely superstitious," LaBatte immediately suggests the apparition could have been Roderick. He tells Thomas, "He's been following me around, Roderick," but Thomas dismisses LaBatte's suggestions, and says: "No, it was just the motor" (19). Evidently Thomas is convinced he merely imagined the boy, even if the mention of the apparition's school uniform suggests the ghost strongly resembled Roderick.

As this ghostly figure continues to appear, Thomas eventually acknowledges it as the spectre of Roderick. One night, when Thomas asks Roderick how he can appear out of nowhere, Roderick tells him: "I had a talk with your brain. The part that's sleeping" (162). Thomas thus continues to consider Roderick a product of his own imagination, but this belief is challenged when Roderick tells Thomas things he cannot know himself. Roderick, for instance, informs Thomas that LaBatte is stealing from the jewel bearing plant. Thomas insists Roderick is making these allegations up, and they have the following exchange about the issue: "'You don't know everything, Thomas. Why else would I be here? Ask yourself that question.' 'But you're not here,' said Thomas, looking at the crust of a sandwich in his hand, a sandwich he did not remember eating" (164). Sleep-deprived as he is, Thomas begins to doubt himself and his ability to distinguish between reality and imagination. His perception of Roderick is further challenged when he confronts LaBatte about Roderick's accusation, and LaBatte confesses – Roderick indeed knows things that Thomas has no way of knowing. Thomas asks himself: "How could it be that someone who was a fiction of his own brain told him something that was true?" (165). As such, Thomas is forced to confront the fact that Roderick is not merely a figment of his own imagination. However, even if Thomas ultimately understands Roderick as an autonomous entity, it is important to consider the implications of Thomas' initial understanding of Roderick

as a projection of his own thoughts. If Roderick had been conjured in Thomas' mind, rather than appearing of his own volition, then his presence would be an indication of Thomas' enduring preoccupation with Roderick and his death. As such, Thomas' initial belief that Roderick is a projection of his own grief reveals that memories of Roderick possessed Thomas even before he manifested to Thomas as a ghost.

As Thomas begins to accept that Roderick's apparition is not merely a projection of his own thoughts, it becomes clear that he feels burdened by Roderick's presence. One night, he asks: "'Why do you want to come around and bug me, Roderick?'" (162). Throughout the narrative, Thomas is reminded of Roderick and his death multiple times. As these memories surface, Thomas is primarily concerned with what he perceives as his own inadequacy in protecting or saving Roderick from his punishment at Fort Totten. He remembers "teasing Roderick, daring him, even getting him in trouble" before Roderick suffered his final two punishments (274). He also recalls the way in which, while Roderick was locked up in the cellar, Thomas secretly threw down a coat and some food, and then "called down to Roderick that he'd been seen, which wasn't true, but he had to get away. Roderick was sobbing so bad. Thomas hated that sound of sobbing in the dark" (224). Thomas is haunted by these memories: "For the rest of his life," Thomas states, he will regret that he "had gone silent and let Roderick take the blame" (403). The memory of watching Roderick being "brought up the stairs, blinking, terrified, shaking, coughing, haunted," and later seeing him "barely breathing in the bloody sheets" in their dormitory, has Thomas lament: "Oh, Roderick. Would these electric shocks of memory ever quit?" (274). Thomas is thus possessed by Roderick's ghost and the traumas he embodies to Thomas. He carries his grief and guilt over Roderick's death as a heavy burden, and being confronted with the apparition of Roderick triggers the traumatic recall of the memories he has attempted to repress.

LaBatte has a different understanding of spectrality and a different relationship with Roderick's ghost than Thomas. He does not only believe that Roderick is an autonomous spirit, but also that Roderick holds certain powers. Informed by his guilt over the past – Roderick was locked up in Fort Totten's cellar because he took LaBatte's punishment – LaBatte conceives of Roderick simultaneously as a helpful and fearful entity. When LaBatte is frightened or uncertain, he privately appeals to Roderick for help (97). Furthermore, when Thomas confronts LaBatte about his habit of stealing, LaBatte believes Roderick has intervened to protect him and expresses his gratitude to Roderick: "'I was going down a bad path, me. But I knew Roderick would help me'" (166). As such, LaBatte's conception of ghosts, and particularly Roderick's ghost, awards these spirits with a degree of power. According to LaBatte's beliefs, however, Roderick's powers enable him not only to help LaBatte, but also to harm him. This becomes clear when Thomas tells another member of the tribe that the apparition of Roderick "puts the fear of god in LaBatte" (428). LaBatte's fear of Roderick stems from the guilt he feels over their shared past. One night, Thomas tells Roderick: "'You took LaBatte's punishment. He never wanted you to die for it. He felt bad all his life'" (163). It is thus evident to Thomas and other members of the community that LaBatte feels responsible for Roderick's death, and has been possessed by guilt since this traumatic incident occurred. LaBatte's trauma is not only defined by what Cathy Caruth refers to as the "crisis of death" – specifically Roderick's death – but also the "correlative crisis of life" (7). His trauma thus encompasses not only his grief over the loss of Roderick, but also the guilt of having survived the abusive and destructive environment of Fort Totten while, as LaBatte understands it, Roderick died in LaBatte's stead.

Throughout the narrative, LaBatte only narrates a very brief passage and never shares his own perspective on what occurred at Fort Totten. While it is therefore difficult to determine how exactly LaBatte copes with Roderick's presence, his narratological silence in *The Night Watchman* is significant in itself. LaBatte's absence as narrator in the narrative indicates his

inability to narrate his own traumatic memories related to his memories of Fort Totten and Roderick's death. Following Mieke Bal's understanding of traumatic recall and its resistance to integration into narrative form, LaBatte's inability to narrate his memories suggests that he has repressed this traumatic past and the associated guilt and grief (viii). As such, LaBatte's life is shaped even more extensively by Roderick's possession than Thomas. Whereas Thomas feels burdened by Roderick's presence, and is plagued by the involuntary resurfacing of painful memories, he remains capable of narrating his shared history with Roderick. LaBatte, conversely, is deeply preoccupied by Roderick's spectral presence – as evidenced by his unwavering belief in Roderick's spiritual powers – but is unable to narrate his traumatic past and the role he played in Roderick's death. LaBatte, like Thomas, is thus possessed by Roderick's spirits and the traumas that his ghost represents.

While Roderick's primary function is thus to illuminate the different emotional responses Thomas and LaBatte have when confronted with their traumatic memories, his secondary function is to foreground the lack of resolution of his own trauma. Throughout the novel, Roderick narrates a number of passages which make clear that he is deeply restless and unsettled. He explains that sometimes he "found a place to sleep for a year or two. But when he woke up he was always a ghost, still a ghost, and it was getting old" (362). Furthermore, Roderick reveals the reason he turned into a ghost after his death: because he died in the sanatorium in Sac and Fox country, away from the reservation on which he grew up, he was "too far away to meet the deadline for Chippewa heaven" (372). Roderick's haunting is thus a result of his displacement, enforced by the federal government and its boarding schools. As such, his ghostly presence is a physical representation of the broader cultural trauma of displacement and forced assimilation that not only Roderick suffered from, but that had widespread consequences for all Chippewa and Native American peoples. The fact that

Roderick continues to haunt the reservation signifies the lack of resolution to this enduring historical and cultural trauma.

Thus, the spectre of Roderick serves a dual purpose in *The Night Watchman.* First, he embodies the cultural trauma of forced displacement and assimilation, related to the Indigenous boarding school policies of the US government. Roderick's possession highlights the fact that this trauma remains unresolved and continues to haunt the reservation. Second, he illuminates LaBatte and Thomas' individual, personal traumas related to Roderick's death. Through Roderick's apparition, LaBatte and Thomas are confronted with their deep-rooted sense of guilt over their involvement in their friend's passing, and project their own memories and grief upon Roderick's apparition. Roderick's presence in *The Night Watchman* thus signals a need to address both these cultural and individual traumas.

2.3 Conclusion

As this chapter has foregrounded, possession in stories of cultural haunting can manifest in different ways and to different effects. In both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* ghosts are simultaneously presented as projections of personal memories and emotions, thereby illuminating individual trauma, but also as representations of cultural trauma, embodying a shared history and emphasising the unresolved nature of these traumas. Spectral figures thus play an important role in identifying and giving voice to both past and present trauma. However, by functioning as a projection of individual trauma and illuminating the guilt frequently associated with these traumas, ghosts can also offer a distorted view as to who or what is the root cause of these traumas. The guilt and responsibility some of the characters in these novels feel is largely misplaced. Not the actions of individuals, but the failings of the federal government and their oppressive racial policies are to blame for each of the hauntings in these novels. This distortion is further addressed by both novels through the exorcism of the cultural

hauntings. As such, the following chapter will examine how the role of the government in shaping cultural traumas is portrayed through exorcism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman.*

3. Bringing the Past into the Present: Exorcism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman*

The exorcism of a cultural haunting, Kathleen Brogan suggests, is representative of the resolution of the trauma underlying the haunting; through exorcism, "the cycle of doom is broken and the past is digested" (11). The key to exorcising such hauntings, Brogan argues, is "a movement from traumatic silence into language," which allows for the reframing of "cultural inheritance, rendering the past in the terms of the present" (11). This understanding of exorcism is in line with the theory of traumatic recall: as Mieke Bal contends, traumatic memories cannot be narrated, "either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who 'masters' them, or because they remain 'outside' the subject" (viii). As such, if traumatic recall is caused because it resists integration into narrative form — both through the repression and dissociation of memory — then, as Brogan also argues, making traumatic memories narratable is central to the resolution of trauma (Bal ix).

Cultural studies scholar Arthur Redding nuances Brogan's understanding of exorcism by positing that certain ghosts resist exorcism. According to Redding, many scholars argue that "the ghosts that haunt the American project must be fully reckoned with … but only, eventually, to be appeased, to be exorcised." This overlooks the fact, Redding contends, that the ghosts in stories of cultural haunting "speak for a justice that beggars any act of cultural recovery" (75). Their resistance to exorcism underlines the continued relevance of the traumas represented by these ghosts. As such, the exorcism of hauntings – or the reintegration of traumatic memory – should not be understood as the primary or sole objective. In fact, the enduring presence of ghosts is representative of the way in which traumatic memory and history reasserts itself – not as something to be resolved, but as something that can be allowed to exist independently and which should be addressed and understood properly. As such, it is debatable whether exorcism

in stories of cultural haunting should be considered a desirable form of liberation, or if should be understood as another way of repressing or erasing traumatic histories.

Sociologist Avery F. Gordon bridges Brogan and Redding's perspectives on exorcism. Gordon suggests that hauntings should be considered as a representation of "unfulfilled possibility" that demands a "something to be done" – "not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present" (183). Fulfilling this 'something to be done' can thus function as exorcism; it is a resolution of trauma, not through reintegration of memories, but by addressing the root cause of the trauma and affecting positive social change to resolve the injustice or oppression that shaped the trauma. According to Gordon, it is important to recognise that "the ghost cannot be simply tracked back to an individual loss or trauma" but is instead representative of a "complicated sociality of a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced" (183). Exorcism thus needs to address trauma not only within a personal context, but also within a cultural and national context.

It is this final understanding of exorcism that informs much of the following analysis of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman.* This thesis understands exorcism as a phenomenon that can encompass a release from possession and the resolution of trauma. These are two distinct elements. The release from possession frees characters from the individual traumas that haunt them, but does not exorcise the ghost and does not resolve the broader cultural trauma that the ghost embodies. In some cases, exorcism can also involve a more complete form of resolution – both on an individual and a cultural scale. This chapter argues that exorcism is facilitated by situating individual trauma within broader cultural traumas, and by integrating these cultural traumas into a national narrative. Through this contextualisation, exorcism absolves the protagonists in both novels of guilt and recognises the responsibility of the US government and its perpetuation of systemic racism in causing these individual and

cultural traumas. As such, this chapter will consider how both novels represent the relation between individual trauma and cultural trauma and examine how, and to what extent, the narrative's cultural hauntings are exorcised. Following these analyses, this chapter examines the ways in which exorcisms can contribute to the resolution of trauma and to examine how exorcism can reframe individual and cultural traumas within a broader national narrative.

3.1 Narrating and Revising the Past in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

The previous chapter examined the relation between possession and individual trauma, and between possession and cultural trauma. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the ghostly spectres of Given and Richie comment on the enduring cultural traumas related to the criminal justice system. Simultaneously, they exist as projections of Leonie and Pop's individual trauma and confront them with what they perceive to be their own failings. For much of the narrative, these two functions remain largely separate. As a result, the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* offer a distorted view as to who or what is the root cause of these traumas; neither Leonie nor Pop are responsible for the deaths of Given or Richie. Instead, both Given and Richie are victims of institutionalised racial policies that span generations and have shaped the lives of many Black Americans. It is through exorcism that the distortion of possession is corrected: in exorcising Given and Richie, their individual traumas – and, by extension, the individual traumas of Leonie and Pop – are situated within a broader cultural context, thereby also addressing questions of guilt, responsibility, and accountability.

Given and Richie are exorcised separately. Shortly before Mam, who has been ill for a long time, passes away, Given appears one last time to Leonie. She is startled and disturbed by his presence — she is sober, and cannot write his apparition off as a drug-induced figment. Leonie watches Given closely, and suddenly sees him bleed: "I don't see wounds, but he bleeds anyway, from his neck, from his chest. Where he was shot" (175). This re-enactment of Given's

death is representative of traumatic memory, which Brogan characterises as "rigidly inflexible, marked by pure repetition" (9). No narrative revision has taken place here: Leonie involuntarily relives her brother's murder, the source of her trauma, and is unable to integrate these memories into a more constructive narrative. It is thus not a movement into narration that exorcises Given; rather, it is Mam's death that finally takes Given away. Leonie watches on as Given appears to Mam, who, in her final moments, is at last able to see Given. Leonie makes sense of much of what she sees through imagery of water and the sea. She imagines her mother still has "the silky feel of salt water on her," and when she tries to comfort her mother and touches her arm, she imagines: "Mama is bleeding under the skin. Everywhere my hands touch, there is blood. Trenches in the sand filling with seawater" (176, 177). Given also underlines the significance of water: he tells Mam, "*I come for you, Mama … I come with the boat*" (181). His words suggest that dying is conceptualised as a crossing of water, which recalls and reverses the history of the Middle Passage. Rather than making the transatlantic journey as a forced migration to a life of enslavement, this voyage is figured as a liberation. Mam dies moments after Given speaks to her, and Given disappears. In this instance his purpose is to guide Mam across the water and into death, and having fulfilled this purpose, Given is exorcised.

Richie's exorcism is more complicated. As mentioned before, Richie believes that hearing the end of his and Pop's story will allow him to go home – to be exorcised. Pop has never been able to tell Jojo, or anyone else, the end of this story. Jojo notes that "Pop's told me parts of Richie's story over and over again. I've heard the beginning at least too many times to count. … I ain't never heard the end" (54). Upon Richie's urging, however, Jojo manages to persuade Pop to finish the story. Pop finally tells Jojo about how Richie attempted to escape from Parchman, and how Pop was made to lead the dogs who were sent out to chase after Richie. Ultimately, it is Pop who kills Richie in a protective act, preventing Richie from inevitably falling into the hands of the angry mob searching the area. Pop says: "'I washed my

hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out'" (173). Upon hearing this, Richie "roars" in anguish and "goes darker and darker, until he's a black hole in the middle of the yard, like he done sucked all the light and darkness over them miles, over them years, into him, until he's burning black, and then he isn't" (173). Momentarily, it seems like Pop narrating his traumatic memories has exorcised Richie. Richie, however, continues to linger: after Mam's death, Jojo sees Richie in their yard, burrowed into the earth underneath a big tree. In the conversation that follows, Richie says: "'I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could … become something else'" (187). Here it becomes apparent that Richie, like Given, Leonie, and Mam, also understands death and his own spectrality in terms of water. Richie imagined that, in being exorcised by Pop's story, he would be able to cross the water, similar to the way Given and Mam did. Crossing the water thus constitutes a complete resolution — one that appears to be out of reach to Richie.

This meeting, however, initiates the novel's final exorcism. Richie reveals he is not the only ghost who lingers, unable to cross the water. Jojo realises that the tree before him is full of ghosts, "women and men and boys and girls," who look down onto Jojo and convey to him the circumstances of their deaths (188). They "speak with their eyes" and share their traumas as one:

> He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said she an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put her under the water and I couldn't breathe. (188)

These recollections are grounded in traumas of slavery, incarceration, and racial violence. From the ghosts' appearances – Jojo notes they are dressed in "rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies" – it becomes clear that these traumas span multiple eras (189). All of these individual traumas are symptomatic of cultural traumas, caused by institutionalised racial oppression. Incorporating these traumatic memories into the narrative helps to situate Pop's trauma within a broader context. Based on Pop's recollection of Richie's death, it is evident that Pop is plagued by guilt for killing Richie. Within the context of the cultural trauma embodied by the spirits, however, Pop's blamelessness is emphasised: Richie was a victim of systemic racism, against which Pop was powerless. By foregrounding the fact that Richie's death and Pop's trauma are only one part of a broader cultural trauma, Pop is absolved of guilt. The ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and the traumas they represent are an indictment of the national structures and systems of racial oppression that shape government policies and inform racist beliefs within American society. Situating Pop's individual trauma within the context of a cultural trauma thus addresses the question of responsibility, reinforcing Pop's blamelessness and holding the US government and the nation at large accountable for their role in perpetuating racial inequality.

Ultimately, it is Kayla who exorcises Richie and all the other spirits gathered in the tree through a song. The novel's title refers to this song: the unburied – the ghosts representative of unresolved trauma, marked by their cultural invisibility – are encouraged to sing and, consequently, to be heard. As Kayla sings, it becomes clear that the act of singing is a form of resolution in itself. Jojo observes: "Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand" (189). As she sings, Kayla moves her hand in a way that Jojo recognises: "[I] know the movement, know it's how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla's back, when we were frightened of the world." Jojo associates Kayla's gestures with his own memories of comfort and protection. This association is shared by the ghosts: they are

soothed by Kayla's song and movements, and "smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (190). The song thus evokes memories of family, kinship, and maternal love, for Jojo and the spirits alike. Furthermore, the song echoes the sound of water: Kayla "says *shhh* like she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie's womb, the sound of all water, and now she sings it" (190). The spirits respond to Kayla's song only by saying: "*Home"* (190). As was the case in Mam's death and Given's exorcism, water-related imagery holds much significance in this final exorcism. For the ghosts, a connection exists between the sound of water and their conception of home. Again, this connection evokes a reversal of the Middle Passage: returning home by crossing the sea appears to be a way of undoing all suffering and finding resolution. According to literary scholar Jennifer Terry, the Middle Passage has been envisaged as "a site of potential mythic or historical recuperation" (478). By recalling and reframing the Middle Passage as part of the exorcism, the African American history of slavery and racial inequality is recuperated: the Middle Passage, which marked the beginning of a life of violent oppression, is reversed and comes to represent the possibility of liberation and resolution instead.

The song's power thus lies not in narration – Jojo is unable to understand the words Kayla sings – but in evoking cultural continuity. Kayla's unintelligible song encapsulates simultaneously the remembrance of family and kinship and the reversal of the Middle Passage. Whereas the ghosts are representative of the cultural continuity of trauma, their exorcism draws on the cultural continuity of a shared history and the memory of familial lineage. "Reaffirming this continuity," Chassot argues, "contradict[s] the very logic of the institution of slavery and its disruptive effects on all aspects of the lives of the slaves as much as their descendants" (10). The invocation of cultural continuity thus serves as an act of resistance against the cultural fragmentation resulting from a long history of racial oppression. This reassertion of cultural continuity enables a movement toward the resolution of trauma; memories of suffering and

trauma are counterbalanced by memories of community and kinship, and it is the promise of a spiritual homecoming that ultimately enables their exorcism.

In the wake of both Given and Richie's exorcisms, it becomes clear that these exorcisms have not resolved all trauma. Especially Leonie is conflicted – she wants to get high in the hopes of seeing Given again, but realises that "he won't come. That wherever he has gone with Mama is final" (184). Acknowledging this does not help Leonie confront or resolve her trauma. Instead, she attempts to repress it. Leonie convinces Michael to leave home the day of Mam's death because she feels suffocated in the presence of her family: "I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe." As Leonie and Michael drive away, they "hold hands and pretend at forgetting" (184). Evidently, exorcism does not equate to the resolution of trauma. In Leonie's case, exorcism does not even equate to a release from possession; Given's exorcism has not eased her guilt, and she continues to feel burdened by her traumatic past. Richie's exorcism has a different effect on Pop: even if the trauma of racial oppression is not resolved, the recognition of Pop's blamelessness releases him from Richie's possession and works toward resolving his individual trauma. Furthermore, the final exorcism of Richie and the other spirits illuminates the key to the resolution of cultural trauma: the affirmation of cultural continuity and kinship. The fact that the various individual and cultural traumas central to the novel are not wholly resolved by the end of the narrative foregrounds the enduring nature of these traumas and signals that the 'something to be done' remains.

3.2 The Release of Trauma and the Resistance to Resolution in *The Night Watchman*

Exorcism is a more ambiguous process in *The Night Watchman.* The central possession in *The Night Watchman,* as examined in the previous chapter, is embodied by the ghost of Roderick. In contrast to the spectres in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Roderick resists complete exorcism. This

resistance does not equate to failure; rather, Roderick's enduring presence is an important and valuable manifestation of cultural continuity. As Kathleen Brogan argues, in "cultures subject to near annihilation by more powerful groups, the invocation of the supernatural can be seen as a survival strategy, through which loss or absence becomes, by awful necessity, generative" (32). Such is also the case in Native American cultures and, in the case of *The Night Watchman,* Chippewa culture specifically. Roderick's function as representative of cultural survival and continuity is encompassed in his declaration that, "You can't assimilate Indian ghosts" (372). His resistance to exorcism does not mean that Roderick remains unchanged; throughout the narrative, Roderick's position in the narrative undergoes a shift that contributes to the resolution of the individual traumas of Thomas and LaBatte, even as Roderick – the embodiment of a broader, cultural trauma – resists exorcism and continues to linger. Thus, while Thomas and LaBatte are free from the possession of the trauma and guilt that Roderick symbolises, the absence of a complete exorcism in *The Night Watchman* signals that the cultural trauma remains unresolved.

For much of the narrative, Thomas and LaBatte experience Roderick's presence as a reminder of their personal trauma and guilt related to Roderick's death. LaBatte responds to this haunting with a sense of paranoia; to him, Roderick is the manifestation of a traumatic past that LaBatte cannot escape from. Thomas, too, finds his initial meetings with Roderick unpleasant and feels burdened by his presence. However, Thomas slowly revises his perception of Roderick, especially as a hearing with Senator Arthur V. Watkins – a chance for the reservation to voice their protest against the termination bill – draws closer. While Thomas becomes increasingly preoccupied with preparing his case for the hearing, he starts to feel comforted by the presence of his old friend. He refers to Roderick as "'my ghost'," and tells his wife Rose: "'We've gotten reacquainted pretty good since the old days'" (359). In approaching

Roderick as a friend rather than a tormentor, Thomas is able to see beyond his traumatic memories of Roderick's death.

Roderick's changing position in the narrative, especially in relation to Thomas, eventually sees him become a helpful figure in the fight against termination. During the hearing with Watkins, Thomas communicates with Roderick twice. Roderick first appears when Thomas starts feeling aggravated by Watkins' line of questioning and his mischaracterisation of Native Americans. Thomas acknowledges his presence by asking: "'Is that you, Roderick?'" Roderick answers: "'Yes, it's me. Hold out. Don't get mad. They don't like an Indian to have brains. Ignore old Mr. Pantywaist and put your sentences together'" (402). The practical advice Roderick offers encourages Thomas to remain patient and to continue presenting his case. Later, when the hearing appears to be coming to a demoralising ending, Roderick tells Thomas: "'Remember how you buttered that white teacher up to the teeth? Called him sir, sir this, sir that, thanked him constantly, asked his advice. Then stole the keys from his suit pocket? Then you let me out and slipped back the keys.'" Thomas replies, "'Should I try it?'" (405). Thomas follows Roderick's advice and thanks Watkins effusively for his time. Ultimately it is revealed that the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa is not terminated. It is not made clear whether Thomas' performative gratitude successfully swayed Watkins in his decision. Regardless, Roderick actively contributes to the tribe's fight against termination.

In this instance, Roderick recalls their shared past – a source of guilt for Thomas – in a constructive way. Reframing these memories allows Thomas "to press this new version of the past into the service of the present," which Brogan considers to be part of the exorcism of a cultural haunting (4). Roderick contributes to Thomas' ability to recall the past in a productive manner, thereby moving beyond the disabling impact of his traumatic memories. More specifically, within the context of the hearing, these memories of a traumatic history now work toward protecting the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa from further trauma. Roderick's

efforts to protect the continued existence of the reservation underline the fact that he is not only a ghostly symbol of cultural continuity, but he actively preserves and advances this cultural continuity. Thus, while Thomas is the literal embodiment of the titular night watchman, Roderick can also be identified as such: his spectral vigilance over the reservation and the members of his community offers them much-needed protection against the threat of termination and the loss of their cultural identity. Roderick's transition into a figure of comfort and support to Thomas and other tribal members signals Thomas' release from Roderick's possession. Roderick is no longer solely the embodiment of Thomas and LaBatte's guilt and trauma; instead, he has become an important contributor to the tribe's fight against termination and is reframed as a representation of an enduring Indigenous cultural identity.

Concurrent to Thomas' shifting perception of Roderick is Thomas' recognition of the one who is truly responsible for Roderick's death. As the narrative develops, Senator Arthur V. Watkins is increasingly identified as the embodiment of the termination bill and the abuses suffered at the Indigenous boarding schools. During the hearing, when Roderick first sees Watkins, "he knew exactly who he was. Watkins was the teacher who'd taught the Palmer Method, the little man who'd whacked his hands with the ruler's edge, … who'd punished him for talking Indian" (400). This recognition appears to be symbolic: from the biographical information the narrative provides on Watkins, it becomes evident that Watkins never taught at any school. Still, Watkins is likened to the teachers whose job it was to forcibly assimilate their Indigenous students. By conflating the two, Watkins in his role as US senator is held accountable for the traumas Roderick, and his fellow students, suffered at boarding school. Roderick further identifies Watkins as "the man who'd dragged Roderick to the cellar stairs and said to Thomas, 'Would you care to join your friend?'" (400). Again, Watkins becomes a stand-in for the teacher who actually enforced this punishment. By connecting Watkins directly to his death, Roderick recognises that Watkins' policies bear responsibility for the traumas suffered

by the Indigenous students in boarding school. Consequently, Thomas is absolved of his guilt: not Thomas, but the racially abusive policies of the Fort Totten boarding school and the US government in general are to blame for Roderick's death. Holding Watkins and, by extension, the US government accountable for the suffering they caused Thomas and the other members of the Turtle Mountain Band contributes to Thomas' release from possession. As in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the recognition that Thomas' individual trauma is part of a broader cultural trauma is key to the resolution of Thomas' individual trauma.

The scope of the cultural trauma is further illuminated in Roderick's final appearance in the narrative. After the hearing has taken place and the Turtle Mountain Band delegation returns to the reservation, Roderick lingers in Washington: "Again, he missed the train. But there were so many Indian ghosts in Washington that he decided to stay" (440). Roderick is drawn to an unnamed building – presumably a museum – where he finds "Drawers and cabinets of his own kind of people! Indian ghosts stuck to their bones or scalp locks or pieces of skin" (440). Their ghostly presence is representative of the cultural traumas that shape Native American histories. Roderick realises that these spectres are

> Indians brought from the top or bottom of the world as living exhibits, then immediately turned to ghosts. For centuries, Indians had gone to Washington for the same reasons as the little party from the Turtle Mountains. They had gone in order to protect their families and their land. It was a hazard of travel for Indians to be lynched from streetlamps as a drunken joke. Ghosts with rope necklaces. It turned out the city was packed with ghosts, lively with ghosts. (440)

Here, the cultural context is expanded to comment not only on Chippewa history, but on Native American history in general. As such, the cultural traumas of forced assimilation, displacement, and termination are situated within a national narrative, thereby acknowledging that the scope

of these cultural traumas extends beyond the history of the Turtle Mountain Band and concerns all Native American peoples.

Roderick chooses to stay in this ghostly community because he "had never had so much company. And they were glad for somebody new. Glad he stayed behind. They argued with him. Why go back there? Who's waiting for you?" (440). Arguably, this constitutes a form of exorcism: to confront his traumas of forced assimilation, displacement and isolation, Roderick seeks a sense of belonging, cultural identity, and kinship. The spirits Roderick encounters in Washington offer him this, thereby providing a degree of resolution to the traumas that caused Roderick's haunting. Ultimately, however, Roderick resists complete exorcism: even if he no longer haunts the Turtle Mountain Band, and Thomas is released from Roderick's possession, Roderick continues to linger – albeit in Washington instead of on the reservation.

Roderick's resistance to exorcism does not only communicate a commitment to Native American cultural continuity, but also indicates that the cultural trauma he represents is not yet resolved. As such, Roderick continues to embody what Avery Gordon refers to as the "something to be done," which "is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present" (183). Roderick's resistance to exorcism signals an enduring confrontation with a traumatic and forgotten, or repressed, history. Roderick thus remains representative of "the double role of the ghost as metaphor for cultural invisibility and cultural continuity" (Brogan 31). Roderick's presence, along with the presence of the other Indigenous spirits in Washington, forms a physical reminder of a traumatic national history that still needs to be addressed and represents the much-needed cultural continuity that protects Indigenous cultural heritage against the threat of racial oppression and forced assimilation. Simultaneously, Roderick's ghostliness remains representative of the cultural invisibility that lies at the root of much of this traumatic history. Roderick's resistance to exorcism thus at once foregrounds the importance of

cultural continuity and illuminates the cultural trauma, not only of the Turtle Mountain Band, but of Native Americans across the country.

3.3 America's Haunted History: Exorcism and the Silencing of Traumatic Histories

Exorcism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* thus constitutes the integration of individual trauma into a broader cultural, or national, context. This integration indicates a shift from an individual, or isolated, perception of trauma to a cultural, or shared, understanding of trauma. In both novels, exorcism signals a release from the possession of a traumatic past. This does not mean, however, that these exorcisms represent the complete resolution of the cultural trauma underlying this possession. As mentioned before, Arthur Redding argues that ghosts in stories of cultural haunting often "speak for a justice that beggars any act of cultural recovery" and should not, or cannot, be exorcised (75). The exorcisms in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* do not suggest that exorcism equates to resolution or appeasement; rather, they serve two other important functions.

First, exorcism illuminates the expansive reach of the traumas central to both novels — traumas that are the result of deeply pervasive racial oppression and discrimination. Through exorcism, it becomes evident that numerous individuals are affected by these traumas in myriad ways. As such, exorcism foregrounds the cultural, or national, character of these traumas and demonstrates the fact that these traumas are not the result of isolated incidents but part of a pattern. In both novels, this pattern is grounded in the systemic racism that has long informed, and continues to shape, US politics and society. Exorcism thus works to recognise that systemic racial injustice is the root cause for both the individual and cultural traumas explored in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman.*

Second, exorcism offers a means of resisting the forgetting, erasure, or repression of African American and Indigenous history. As Toni Morrison argues in "The Site of Memory,"

there has long been a tendency by victims of oppression – for instance in narratives written by the (formerly) enslaved – to make traumatic histories "palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it" by making a "careful selection of the instances" that were chosen to be remembered and other memories that were 'forgotten' (91). This curation of memory takes place on many different levels and for many different reasons, cultural theorist Paul Connerton argues. One type of curation that Connerton identifies is "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity" (63). This approach to memory suggests that to forget is not a loss; rather, it focuses on "the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes. … What is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects" (63). Similarly, Manuel Cruz contends: "We are not only what we tell ourselves about ourselves but also what we remember, what we dare to recall" (5). This not only applies to the formation of an individual identity, but also to the formation of a national American identity.

According to Chandra A. Maldonado, the politics of forgetting works to "preserve the 'ideal' characteristics of 'American exceptionalism'," which she argues is constructed around notions of whiteness and masculinity (214). Maldonado interprets the erasure of repressed histories – like the history of slavery and Indigenous histories – in commemorative practices as "a form of conquering nonexceptional Americanness" (220). Any history that challenges or does not reinforce the notion of American exceptionalism is erased through commemorative practices, or the lack thereof. As such, the recollection of national history is mediated through the notion of American exceptionalism. The fact that African American and Native American history do not comply with the idealised version of American history means that the erasure of these histories is constitutive to the construction of an American identity based on exceptionalism.

Exorcism is able to offer resistance against this erasure in two different ways. First, exorcism makes traumatic memory narratable; being released from the possession of individual trauma allows for a movement from traumatic silence into narration. Narrating memories of a traumatic history resists the silencing of the past and can contribute to the integration of individual trauma into a cultural or national historical narrative. This integration plays an important role in resisting the dismissal of 'nonexceptional' histories within the construction of American national identity. The release from possession allows for a more productive remembrance of history, unencumbered by the limitations of traumatic recall. However, as Cruz argues, "remembering is not – cannot be – an end in itself…. The mere exercise of memory still guarantees us nothing, however much some people persist in arguing that it is an unambiguously progressive activity on the sole grounds that it guarantees that we shall not fall again into the errors of the past" (ix). Still, being able to access and narrate memory constitutes the first step towards contesting the silencing of repressed histories: exorcism signals a movement from traumatic silence into narration, as illustrated by Pop finally being able to narrate his memories of Richie's death and Thomas speaking out against Senator Watkins on behalf of the reservation.

Especially in *The Night Watchman,* this movement into narration is used to great effect: through the hearing, Thomas and the other Turtle Mountain Band delegates demand to be heard and pressure Watkins – and, by extension, the US government – to address their history of forced assimilation and displacement. This act of narration proves to be productive, as the reservation is ultimately spared from termination. Narrating traumatic memories brings the past into the present, making visible a forgotten or repressed history and thereby resisting the denial or dismissal of these traumas. As such, *The Night Watchman* moves beyond merely remembering traumatic histories and makes active use of these memories to address injustices in the past and present to affect positive social change. Exorcism and its enabling movement

into narration thus allow for a resistance against the repression and invisibility of traumatic history and forces the past into the service of the present.

The second way in which exorcism works to resist the erasure of repressed histories is through centralising the importance of cultural continuity. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* the final exorcism of Richie and the other spirits indicates that the remembrance of cultural heritage is central to the potential resolution of cultural trauma. Specifically the history of the Middle Passage, which has been deeply formative to the emergence of African American culture, plays an important role in the promise of resolution. In *The Night Watchman,* the centrality of cultural continuity is primarily represented by Roderick's resistance to exorcism. Roderick's enduring spectrality signals a refusal to be dismissed and reinforces the cultural continuity that is instrumental in ensuring the survival of the Turtle Mountain Band and, by extension, the survival of Native American cultures.

Through exorcism, the cultural hauntings of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* cement their position within an American national historical narrative. By withstanding efforts to erase or repress the histories central to both novels, these cultural hauntings are able to address questions of accountability. Recognising the role of systemic racial oppression in shaping the individual and cultural traumas represented by possession allows for a movement toward the resolution of these traumas – a resolution that seeks to redress the injustices in African American and Native American histories, without erasing or dismissing the past and the cultures that have been shaped by these traumas.

3.4 Conclusion

Exorcism thus takes shape in different ways in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman.* In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* exorcism draws on the affirmation of cultural continuity and the enduring comfort of family and kinship. The invocation of the Middle Passage, and specifically

its reversal, suggests that the promise of a spiritual homecoming allows for a release of traumatic suffering. In the case of *The Night Watchman,* it is more accurate to speak of a release from possession than exorcism, because the ghost central to the narrative is ultimately not expelled. Roderick's continued presence speaks to the importance of cultural continuity and survival when faced with the threat of termination. Furthermore, the release from possession marks the shifting role of memory: a movement from traumatic silence into narration allows the Turtle Mountain Band to speak up for Indigenous rights and to demand national attention and accountability for past and present injustices. In both novels, exorcism is not absolute: neither the individual nor the cultural traumas with which they engage are fully resolved. Incomplete exorcism, however, is not indicative of failure. Through exorcism, the national scope of individual and cultural traumas is illuminated, thereby helping to integrate traumatic African American and Indigenous histories into a national narrative and resisting the repression or silencing of these histories.

Conclusion

Across the United States, physical reminders of the country's traumatic histories scar the land – some more visible than others. As historic preservation scholar Randall Mason argues, "trauma leaves permanent indelible marks, metaphorically and materially" (159). Amongst these sites of traumatic heritage are the buildings that recall oppressive and abusive histories. One function of such places, Mason contends, is archival: traumatic heritage sites have the "capacity to materially bear witness and serve as literal texts representing the past" (159). Both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* draw on the archival capacity of physical sites of heritage to shape their narratives: Parchman penitentiary and Fort Totten boarding school, respectively. While Parchman is still a functioning prison and can therefore not be considered a commemorative heritage site, it is a physical reminder and representation of a past that must be remembered.

Parchman looms over the narrative of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* like a spectre that haunts three generations for different reasons – Pop's years as teenaged inmate in Parchman traumatised him severely, Leonie experiences Parchman's destabilising and violent nature during Michael's three-year-sentence, and it is through Parchman that Jojo is confronted with the realities of the racialised criminal justice system. The cultural significance of Parchman penitentiary lies in its long and painful history, revealed throughout the novel by Richie's timeless spectrality. The likeness between the terms 'Parchman' and 'parchment' strengthens the suggestion of Parchman penitentiary functioning as a palimpsest; the histories bound to Parchman are layered and encompass centuries of trauma. According to historian David Oshinsky, when Parchman penitentiary was established in 1901, it "resembled an antebellum plantation with convicts in place of slaves" (114). In the years that followed, Parchman became a profitable state-run institution that came to represent a continuation of Mississippi's plantation history. Oshinsky argues that "it would remain this way … until the civil rights movement

methodically swept it away" (125-26). To this day, Parchman's history remains entwined with traumas of racial violence and oppression. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Richie describes Parchman as "a sort of home … terrible and formative" – the deeply traumatic experience and memory of Parchman penitentiary has incontrovertibly shaped Richie and many more individuals like him (130).

Richie's description of Parchman as a 'terrible and formative' home also applies to Roderick, Thomas and LaBatte's conception of the Fort Totten boarding school in *The Night Watchman*. Each of them is traumatised by the memory of the abuse they suffered at Fort Totten under the guise of the US government's assimilationist policies. Like Parchman penitentiary, Fort Totten functions as an archive of traumatic histories. The site was originally established in 1867 as a military post to oversee the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation, populated by the Dakota and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. In 1891, Fort Totten became a boarding school, run by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, which sought to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children ("Fort Totten State Historic Site"). Thus, as sociologists Hansen & Duffy argue, Fort Totten has functioned to enforce the "twin federal policies of westward expansion and 'Americanization' of the Indians" (67). In both of these iterations – as military post and as boarding school – Fort Totten contributed to the erasure of Native American cultures through forced assimilation and dispossession. As such, like Parchman penitentiary, Fort Totten is representative of the far-reaching consequences of systemic oppression and has been formative in shaping individual lives and cultural communities.

Parchman and Fort Totten should thus not be understood as the archetypal 'haunted house': they do not function only as containers of hauntings, but rather take on spectral qualities themselves. Their influence reaches beyond their physical location and they each encompass a long and painful history. This spatial spectrality is made explicitly clear in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* when Jojo invokes the ghost of Parchman as he wonders "who that parched man was, that man

dying for water, that they named the town and the jail after" (48). In *The Night Watchman,* too, Fort Totten haunts the narrative as a debilitating and menacing presence – even when none of the characters venture close to its location at any point in the narrative. The ghostliness inherent in sites of heritage like Parchman and Fort Totten reinforce their position as silent and atemporal witnesses to centuries of traumatic history.

Despite these ghost-like qualities, Parchman and Fort Totten can only be figured as immovable spectators of history. The ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* by contrast, are not only able to witness history, but are also able to remember, narrate, and reframe traumatic histories. Their spectral agency and function as representatives of cultural continuity allow these ghosts to unravel and comprehend the palimpsest of traumatic histories like those encapsulated in sites like Parchman and Fort Totten. Consequently, as Avery Gordon argues, ghosts are able to reveal the social structures and hierarchies that underlie these traumatic histories (19). Furthermore, spectral figures can give voice to historically marginalised groups and individuals and make visible erased, repressed, or forgotten histories. As Arthur Redding contends, the ghost "has a way of speaking that which cannot be spoken; it personifies and expresses those peoples, events, or aspects of one's own past that have been violently disappeared or repressed" (4). As such, the ghosts in stories of cultural haunting, like *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* are able to narrate the histories, memories, and traumas bound up in sites like Parchman and Fort Totten.

These primary functions of the ghost – as figures that represent cultural continuity and give voice to those who have been silenced – are not only important in shaping the cultural memory of traumatic histories, but are also significant in the construction of a national American identity. This thesis has argued that cultural hauntings contribute to the integration of the traumas of systemic racial injustice and oppression into a national historical narrative, thereby counteracting the erasure, repression, and forgetting of African American and Native

American histories and addressing the question of accountability in causing individual and cultural trauma. Drawing on Kathleen Brogan's framework of the cultural haunting, this thesis has examined both possession and exorcism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman.*

In both novels, possession is figured as a product of cultural trauma and the projection of individual trauma. As mentioned before, the ghosts that enact this possession are able to illuminate traumatic histories by emphasising cultural continuity – as an affirmation of cultural identity and kinship, but also as an indictment of the enduring traumas that plague the US – and by giving voice to historically marginalised groups and individuals. However, possession is also representative of an unproductive remembrance of trauma; this traumatic recall resists narration and therefore prevents those afflicted by trauma from fully addressing the injustices they have suffered. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* possession offers a distorted view on the question of accountability: the guilt associated with individual traumas keeps the characters in both novels from recognising who or what is truly responsible for causing the cultural and individual traumas central in the narratives.

This distortion is corrected through exorcism. Both novels analysed in this thesis facilitate exorcism by situating individual traumas within a broader cultural or national context, thereby identifying systemic racism and its various manifestations as the root cause of these traumatic histories. As such, larger social and federal structures are held accountable for shaping cultural and individual traumas, thereby absolving individuals in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* from guilt. Despite the similarities in this approach, the two novels conceptualise exorcism in different ways. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* exorcism draws on the affirmation of cultural continuity and the promise of a spiritual homecoming to offer a sense of resolution to the individual traumas suffered by Pop, Richie, and the other spirits that are at last being heard. Leonie's unresolved trauma and guilt signal the fact that the broader cultural traumas of racial oppression, injustice, and violence endures and must still be addressed. In *The*

Night Watchman, rather than a complete exorcism, it is the release from possession that communicates a sense of resolution. As Thomas, with Roderick's help, is able to make productive use of his memory, thereby bringing the past into the service of the present, he is released from the possession of his individual trauma. Roderick's resistance to exorcism both signals the importance of cultural survival in the face of continued efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples, and represents the unresolved nature of the cultural trauma of forced assimilation and dispossession.

One important effect of exorcism is a movement toward integrating these erased, repressed, and forgotten histories into a national narrative. This integration, enabled by the release from possession, prevents African American and Native American histories from being overlooked or dismissed within the construction of an American national identity. Incorporating these histories more effectively into the national historical narrative can allow for a movement toward redressing the injustices of the past and affect positive change in present-day society. Cultural hauntings bring to life the ghosts of traumatic American histories that refuse to be silenced any longer, and it is this resistance that can contribute to a more complete and fulfilling resolution of cultural trauma.

Stories of cultural haunting are thus able to illuminate and narrate the individual and cultural traumas that haunt Ward and Erdrich's narratives. The ghosts that embody these traumas demand to be heard and thereby work toward realising social change – while simultaneously protecting the cultural continuity that has long been under threat. Like sites of traumatic heritage, ghosts function as archives of traumatic histories. In contrast to Parchman and Fort Totten, however, the ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman* – most notably Richie and Roderick – are not merely silent witnesses. Instead, they are able to narrate these traumatic histories and can therefore contribute to the resolution of these traumas. In a Fresh Air interview, Toni Morrison suggests that by using the figure of the ghost in *Beloved*,

she “made history, or the past, flesh — palpable.” With *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Night Watchman,* Jesmyn Ward and Louise Erdrich similarly work towards making African American and Native American histories, which have long been marginalised, visible once again.

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